



From one shore to the other: Enrique Leff's teachings on the defense of life

De uma margem à outra: os ensinamentos de Enrique Leff sobre a defesa da vida

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Dimas FLORIANI¹*

¹ Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR), Curitiba, PR, Brasil.

* E-mail of contact: floriani@ufpr.br

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While commenting on this work of Enrique Leff is a challenge, at the same time it is a highly pleasurable excursion along the pathways of knowledge so well traced out by his profound questioning of the origins of the great adventure that classical Greek thinking first brought to the fore. In his Dialogues, Plato registered the shock and surprise human beings experience in regard to the world; shock that is at the root of philosophizing, of thinking questioningly about the mysteries of the world and about the human condition. Thus philosophy could be considered the undeferrable emergence of answers to the mysteries of the world and the destinies of life.

Enrique Leff invites us to visit an unusual construction of a gnoseological project which has its roots in the theoretical matrices of our time, riddled as it is by paradigmatic ruptures, but a project that does not start and end with itself. On reading Leff's work we are left with the impression of having effectively grasped the full meaning of his theoretical elaboration and we may mistakenly presume that his future work will only lead us back to his previous work.

Nothing could be further from the truth than that perception, given that his reflections have immense capacity for creative resilience and what

might have been mere repetition transforms itself into a point of mutation, in the recursive form of a spiral that never falls back on itself unless it be to exercise the *clinamen* that Epicure referred to, the unpredictable swerve that enables the opening up of other clear spaces for thought.

That can be said of the main works he has produced, including *Ecologia e Capital; Racionalidade Ambiental - a reapropriação social da natureza* (Ecology and Capital- the social reappropriation of nature); *A Aposta pela vida- imaginação sociológica e imaginários sociais nos territórios ambientais do Sul* (Betting on life- sociological imagination and social collective imageries in the environments of the South); *O Fogo da Vida* (The Fire of Life); and now the present work, *Ecologia Política* (Political Ecology).

Far be it from us to attempt, here, to present all the richness of argument to be found in the book's 14 chapters, a task that would defeat the capacity of a single, simple mortal. Such a task would require an in-depth seminar conducted over a long period with the presence of various specialists in different knowledge domains, ecology and life sciences, economics, sociology, anthropology, geography, and, above all, philosophy.

We must therefore limit our comments on the newly launched book to general aspects and just a few of the themes the author enunciates which are nevertheless intensely proficuous and challenging for the continuity of the respective reflections.

Justifying Deleuze's affirmation that the thinker's mission is to produce concepts, we could say that the range of them that Leff offers us, with his ample, solid production, enables us to construct this intricate puzzle of meanings and 'questionings'. Indeed the latter term is dear to that author insofar

as he refers to and uses questionings that emerge from the intellectual 'foundry' or 'forge', suggesting that the act of constructing concepts is that of the blacksmith, who molds tools with fire and the material is modeled with the know how of one who has mastery of the instruments of production and the design conferred by his creative imagination as an author.

It is therefore possible to identify various epistemic matrices forming a kind of rhizome, modeling and connecting roots in multiple ways, for we can safely state that Leff's theoretical project is inscribed in the field of complex thinking on environmental issues, and as the author himself has acknowledged on several occasions, with visible points of origin in Eco-Marxism as an initial pillar. However, he expands the scope of political economics to political ecology, but not merely restricted to its domain of origin in the aspect of historical and dialectic materialism. Quite the contrary, he broadens the analytical scope to go well beyond those approaches.

What is interesting is that we can cast an eye on the strategies the author uses to deconstruct and reconstitute themes and dialogues by means of a permanent and intense dialogue with those thinkers who place modernity in check, together with the thought systems that support it, through the logocentrism of science and the material practices that render that very modernity unsustainable.

To engender his epistemic project, Leff presents us with an opportunity to identify the theoretical pathway in chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 in which he makes a critical reconstitution of the bases of Eco-Marxism, enriching them with a creative meshwork of new concepts. Outstanding among them are environmental rationality, dialogue of

knowledges, the ontology of diversity, being and time, the cultural appropriation of nature, ethnic, political and territorial identities of place and difference, cultural rights and the collective being, hetero-reproductive-evolution of biological and cultural diversity, democracy as autonomy and self-management, among a myriad of other concepts that emerge from the interweaving of territories that pervade environmental knowledge.

As if that powerful analytic arsenal were not sufficient, his incursions in the domains of environmental knowledge open up avenues for incorporating life territories, collective rights, the symbolic existence of the human conditions and the culture of taking care of nature, as addressed in chapter 4. Thus the book opens the way for the ancestrally re-signified knowledge of Latin America's autochthonous peoples and traditional populations as presented in chapters 11,12 and 13. Indeed, those three chapters concentrate the main approaches to the field of Political Ecology. The theme constitutes the book's principal focus and is one which we will get back to at the end of this small review of some of the main aspects of his long work.

On the other hand, that epistemic strategy does not limit itself to verifying that the knowledge matrix based on techno-sciences, and the rationality legitimizing the hegemonic development model that stems from it, are tested by critical, but not sufficiently critical, theories such as those of the ecological currents of economics and the sustainability proposals that still operate within the dominant systemic rationality of the mode of production. The debate on the limits of sustainability theories and on degrowth are symptoms of that inability to

overcome the said rationality and are addressed in the first and tenth chapters, respectively.

This might be an appropriate moment to raise some questions regarding the contestations associated to sustainability and ask about those forms, the author refers to as limited, of criticizing the system's limitations in its critical, theoretical and practical aspects, but incapable of freeing themselves from a rationality imprisoned by repetition and unable to overcome it themselves. We would ask whether those endeavors to overcome the limitations could not also be interpreted as ways of undermining the system itself, understanding them to be aspects of the contradiction even though they may not be the main one.

Hence the incessant toil of deconstruction and reconstitution of analytical categories that could found a new continent for thinking the environmental problems of modernity. That continent is not an apparent, static unit, nor does it shelter homogeneous phenomena susceptible to being quantified, classified and explained by the scientific disciplines inscribed in the positivist cartography. There is a strong reason for that, namely that the action which the instrumental rationality that the system of production and appropriation of nature imposes is achieved precisely by its blind spot, that is, by the very action of forgetting about nature, by the *logos* of science which does not acknowledge what it cannot manage to see or is not interested in knowing.

That 'forgetfulness' can be interpreted in many ways and reports back to some thinkers who inspire and dialogue with Leff such as Nietzsche, Weber, Heidegger, Levinas and

Lacan who have identified the emptiness and plural incompleteness of the human condition that impel the author to go much further, or to free from the cage of modernity, those ecological, cultural and human potentialities that capitalism's hegemonic economic logic has sequestered. Hence stems the imperious need to free what the author describes as "life that has been dominated and undermined by the force of an antinature rationality". So much so that the overriding interest is in defending life and for that it is necessary to liberate the *physis* that supports its sustainability; liberating the *physis* means discerning the possibility of reencountering the *logos* in the dialogue of the knowledge fields with the peoples of the Earth that *A Aposta pela Vida* (p. 300) (Betting on life) clamors for.

Given the current stage of human existence, it is not just probable but almost inexorable that we are drawing near to the end of a dangerous era that threatens the human species and all the other forms of life. The author's analysis reveals the exacerbation of a process that is unable to reproduce itself without violating the second law of thermodynamics, involving the incessant exploitation of nature, of material, of energy and of biodiversity, thereby placing the conditions for the reproduction of life on the planet at risk.

To get beyond this deadlock there is an urgent need for a new production paradigm rooted in eco-technological-cultural production processes and environmental rationality principles; a mode of production based on life's negentropic potential in the management of ecological processes that produce life and also

of the biosphere, and based on ethical responsibility, in a world made up of many worlds just as the biodiversity of life is.

The author further points out that the transition to the new paradigm will depend on a long process of historical transformations guided by an ontology of diversity, a policy of difference and an ethics of otherness, with thinking being open to other voices, other languages and other reasons. For that to happen, the social reappropriation of nature must conduct a complete reversion of the process of capitalization of the world that biodiversity geopolitics dictates, a process that chapter five analyzes.

In any event, the transition to other possible worlds, different from the one we know and in which we experience life and suffer its consequences, is a long battle within the domain of socioenvironmental conflicts, a theme which receives due references in the aforementioned chapters 11, 12 and 13 of the book.

In short, we can locate some passages that present the nucleus of issues pertaining to the field of Political Ecology which explore the power relations between nature and society within hierarchized social and class structures in the process of production and the appropriation of nature. Political Ecology comes into being in response to the environmental crisis impelled by winds from the south, including peasant and indigenous peoples, resistance movements, and activism in the reconstruction of the life territories, rooted in those peoples' cultural and ecological conditions, their emancipation strategies for the decolonization of knowledge, the reinvention of their life territo-

ries and the reappropriation of their biocultural assets.

We believe that approaching the structural socioenvironmental crisis from the perspective of Political Ecology is essential not only to the quest for an understanding of the great division that is being operated today by the extant actors in the domain of strategies, of the heroic resistances that are operated among the hegemonic power structures in their aspect as operators of the order and disorder of capital but also to endeavor to identify some of the probable pathways to overcoming that great transformation. Here dissension strategies will speak louder than those of consensus in the bid to reestablish some political alliances in the system's subaltern fields. The indigenous peoples' resistance is there to show us some of those pathways.

As a final point we would like to register a small mention of the problem of knowledge, taking advantage of the opportunity the book offers in regard to addressing the question of socioenvironmental problems from the Political Ecology perspective. In this particular case of the conflicts that are inherent to the production of knowledge regarding complex present-day problems, it might be possible, who knows, for us to understand this debate beyond the aspect that some Mexican Spanish and North Amer-

ican philosophers have designated as *Science and its subjects*. I would question whether it would not be possible to treat those problems of Science's in the domain of a Political Epistemology to think through and problematize what science represents for the contemporary world and about its uses by society. Similarly to the capitalization of nature, we could consider the capitalization of techno-sciences and to what extent they can be used by necro-politics when they are applied to nature or rather, against nature, but which can also be used to the benefit of life. In that way, the scientific field could be transformed into an arena for the disputes of power and meanings. One could ask whether it would not be possible for scientific rationality to be inflated from another perspective rather than that of a science exclusively of and for the market, enabling the advent of an opening for dialogue with other knowledges and practices committed to that which cannot be visualized within the narrow scope of *logos*.

Here Maturana and Varela's comment on the question of ethics in, and of science is appropriate, namely that the unknowing of knowledge is at the heart of the human being's current difficulties: it is not just knowing that the bomb kills but of knowing what we want to do with it that will determine whether we want to explode it or not.