

Abram, S., Acciaoli, G., Baviskar, A., Kopnina, H., Nonini, D., Strang, V. (2016) 'Special Module: Plenary Debate from the IUAES World Congress 2013: Evolving Humanity, Emerging Worlds, 5–10 August 2013'. Involving anthropology: debating anthropology's assumptions, relevance and future. *Anthropological Forum*, 26(1): 74-95.

"Justice for people must come before justice for the environment"

The IUAES World Congress 2015 was held at Manchester University. The International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) as its name suggests, brings together scholars from all regions of the world and all fields of anthropology. Every five years, it holds a World Congress, with inter-congresses held in the intervening years. One of the features of the IUAES is that it can be seen as a counterweight to the predominance of Anglo-American conferences, attracting significant participation from Asia and SE Asia, in particular, and South America. Previous world congresses have been held in Russia, Mexico, Japan, India and China, as well as in European and North American cities. The World Congress in Manchester attracted a significant participation from Asia and South East Asia, notably India and Japan (where the subsequent Intercongress was held in 2014). Despite some very problematic obstacles, notably the unwillingness of the UK Border Agency to grant visas to visiting academics from several countries, there was broad ranging participation in the Manchester congress.

Given the cross-field interests in the IUAES, the organizing committee of the Manchester World Congress were keen to promote opportunities for discussion between different anthropological fields as well as within them. At the same time, a key goal was to promote the kinds of important questions that anthropologists are in a position to comment on, to encourage British media attention, as well as generating participation in the congress. One way to achieve both goals was to organize plenaries in the form of debates, a form that is well established at Manchester University's Anthropology department (via GDAT, the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory¹). In organizing the debates, the committee were attentive to the nationality, gender, anthropological field and ethnographic field of the speakers.

Three debates were held in the plenary hall. The second of these explicitly intended to generate discussion on one of the primary political issues of our day, the question of environmental justice. At a time when global talks were pitting economic benefits against climate risks, the question of justice

¹ <http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/subjects/social-anthropology/our-research/group-debates-in-anthropological-theory/> and see Critique of Anthropology http://coa.sagepub.com/search/results?fulltext=GDAT&x=0&y=0&submit=yes&journal_set=spcoa&src=selected&andorexactfulltext=and

was one the organizers wished to see from different perspectives. The second of the three plenary debates addressed the motion: "*Justice for people must come before justice for the environment*". Amita Baviskar (Delhi University) proposed the motion, seconded by Don Nonini (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). Helen Kopnina (The Hague University of Applied Science) opposed the motion, seconded by Veronica Strang (Durham University). The debate was chaired by John Gledhill (Manchester University).

The format of the debate pitches two pairs of speakers to argue for and against the motion, in turn. Members of the audience are then invited to pose questions to the speakers, and each speaker, again in turn, then presents their concluding comments in the light of the questions and the other speakers' discourse. After all of the concluding comments, the audience are invited to vote either for or against the motion. It should be noted that in devising the motion itself, the organizers sought to give the speakers an opportunity to fill out the arguments, raise issues related to the main theme, and explore the nuances that the motion pointed towards. The debate, with its parliamentary format, is one that offers an opportunity to elaborate on theoretical and practical implications of the motion. In the context of the Congress, there were no material consequences to consider (ie the outcome of the vote has no implementation in policy or practice), but the debate is a vehicle to elaborate in a way that might appeal to a broad audience.

We present here a text of the arguments made by each speaker for and against the motion (with the exception of Veronica Strang, whose presentation has been published elsewhere – see Strang in press). We then include a summary of the comments and questions subsequently invited from the floor of the hall, and the responses of the presenters. The debate was funded by the University of Manchester's Hallsworth Conference Fund.

A live stream of the debate can be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oldnYTYMx-k>

"Justice for people must come before justice for the environment"

For the motion: Amita Baviskar

Between 1868 and 1888, the British government drove out the Baiga, a tribe of shifting cultivators in central India, from the forests that they had lived in for generations and herded them onto a reservation. Here, they were forced to settle down and take up farming with ploughs (fig 1). The Baiga believed that to plough the land was to wound mother earth, a violation of their most sacred principle, a betrayal of what it meant to *be* Baiga. Forced into an alien occupation, the Baiga suffered what Verrier Elwin (2007/1939) described as 'a loss of nerve' – a profound and debilitating erosion of morale. From being shamans and healers, a tribe with knowledge and power, the Baiga became a broken people, joining the ranks of the wretched of the earth. It took more than 40 years for another

generation of Baiga to rise up in rebellion against colonial forest policies and demand the right to cultivate freely once again.

[insert fig 1 about here]

The displacement and dispossession of the Baiga contain echoes of events that took place in other parts of the colonial world, including Britain. The woods and pastures of England had already been placed off-limits by private landowners between 1760 and 1820, impoverishing subsistence farmers who depended on them for their fuel, fodder, and other modest needs. Karl Polanyi (1944) called this enclosure of the commons ‘a revolution of the rich against the poor’, a revolution where the armed might of the law, the repressive power of capital punishment, prison and deportment, was wielded as a weapon to commit what E. P. Thompson (1975) called ‘a plain enough case of class robbery’. Though poor and desperate peasants fought fiercely to hold on to the ancient customary rights that they valued, they were dispossessed. In Africa and Asia and Australia, as in Americas, colonial conquest meant that land was acquired by force, native populations decimated and subjugated, in order to make resources available to the imperial enterprise.

But the displacement of the Baiga was not justified as brute force – the power of the conqueror to call the shots, to plunder and possess at will. The colonial government took pains to explain that the Baiga practice of shifting cultivation was environmentally harmful. It was in order to protect the forests, to better conserve them, that the Baiga had to be confined to a reservation. The Baiga, who had lived in the forests for centuries without noticeably depleting them, were now blamed as destroyers of the forest, a problem for the new regime of ‘scientific forestry’, the technique of replacing diverse tropical forests with simplified monocultures of teak and sandalwood that fetched the highest revenue. Dietrich Brandis, the first Inspector General of Forests in India, institutionalised a calculus for maximising timber growth, with all other living aspects of the forest seen as unimportant, at best, and problematic, at worst (fig 2.). With the authority of German forestry experts backing colonial ideas of ‘environmental protection’, the displacement of the Baiga became a ‘scientific solution’. It was, in fact, argued that their transformation into farmers with settled, steady habits would be morally and economically good for them.

[insert fig 2 around here]

Now this is the point that I want to stress: the colonial government believed that it was doing the right thing. As Richard Drayton pointed out in his book *Nature's Government*, (2000), the idea that Empire was about improvement, husbanding resources, controlling lands and peoples for the purpose of conservation, better management for more efficient utilisation, was an intrinsic part of colonial enterprise. Empire was justified as an instrument of development, of ‘fostering and leading new races of subjects and allies in the career of improvement’ (Ibid.: 94). Managing places and people for their material and moral upliftment, the paternalistic presumption of ‘allow us to know you better than

yourself’, was the conceit that colonialism maintained even as it wreaked havoc on landscapes and lives around the world. This paternalistic condescension continues to pervade most Northern campaigns for saving the planet.

In east Africa, too, environmental conservation was a coercive business, with customary hunting and grazing practices forcibly curtailed by the colonial government. Rod Neumann points out the injustice that, even after independence, local populations in Tanzania and Kenya still don’t have control over vast tracts of land. And while they are forbidden to hunt for meat or even to kill predators that menace their livestock, wealthy tourists from the West are licensed to kill animals as trophy on privately managed reserves. Double standards and doublespeak have been remarkably consistent features of saving the environment. Lending legitimacy to such ploys is the narrative of environmental *crisis*. Of catastrophic consequences if the population explodes, if the rains fail, if we run out of food or oil, if the oceans rise (fig. 3). Without dismissing or diminishing the real and serious challenges that these pose, one must wonder how the urgent goal of saving the earth invariably translates into business-as-usual, with the usual suspects – international conservation organisations funded by corporate donors, governments backed by national elites, the World Bank and the ADB – providing all the answers on behalf of the global North.

[insert fig 3 about here]

If utilitarian ideas of protecting the environment for the greater glory of empire or capitalism or the nation, have dispossessed people and destroyed culturally distinct ways of living with nature, poor people today have another, even heavier, burden to bear. This is the so-called bio-centric view which claims that all forms of life have a right to exist, and that environmental conservation is a transcendental goal, one that must rise above the petty squabbling of social groups about who bears the costs of conservation. Justice for the environment means respecting the rights of all species, not just humans (see fig. 4). Now this is a noble sentiment, but logically specious. What do they mean when they want to respect the rights of all species? Do they believe that the smallpox and polio virus have as much right to exist as the tiger and the blue whale? How about the AIDS virus or *Plasmodium falciparum*? Humans make choices about species all the time: this is a good plant to grow; this is a weed, let’s pull it out. These choices have shifted with time: for instance, in India, leopards and tigers have gone from being vermin to being trophy animals to nationally protected species within a space of a 100 years. These shifts reflect the varying cultural perspectives through which nature is everywhere evaluated. The environmental good is a moving target, a fact that should make one question even more closely the sacrifices that poor people are asked to make for it.

[insert fig 4 about here]

Biocentrism is not a soft-hearted romantic view of respecting the earth. As Ram Guha (1989) points out, if you look at who its proponents are and what they actually do, you will find a pernicious

exercise of Northern privilege. Speaking on behalf of those voiceless species, Northern biocentrism has supported the creation of large conservation areas, driving out forest-dwellers and extinguishing their rights to subsistence. An even larger, even obscene, injustice is that even as they expect the global South to give up the little that it has, the biocentrics choose to ignore the inequities in which they themselves are complicit. As citizens and beneficiaries of the military-industrial complex, as consumers whose endless appetites scoop up resources from around the world, those who claim to speak for the planet and tell people in the global South how they should run their lives, are guilty of forgetting the first law of biocentrism: All life is connected.

In addition to the presumption that those who claim to speak for the environment are somehow morally superior to those who represent forest-dwellers, farmers and pastoralists, there is the assumption that an environmental goal is by definition a universal good and must prevail over the interests of particular social groups even if they are poor and exploited. In Delhi, where I live, the cause of creating a 'clean and green city' has been vigorously pursued by bourgeois environmentalists, who have used the Supreme Court and the High Court to get rid of thousands of small industries and hundreds of squatter settlements where working class families worked and lived (fig 5). The instrument for this judicial action has been public interest litigation – on the grounds that securing clean air and water and green spaces is obviously in the public interest, the greater common good. However, the idea of the public is mobilised to exclude and disenfranchise large sections of the city's population. The courts and the media have consistently turned a blind eye to the devastating effects of such projects of urban improvement on the lives of Delhi's under-class. That the working poor may have their own environmental priorities such as toilets and sewers and drinking water is not even considered. Nor is the fact that the greater burden of air and water pollution in the city is generated by the rich, by their cars and their sewage (fig. 6). In the name of environmental improvement, we get more injustice – for people and, ironically, for the environment.

[insert fig 5 about here]

[insert fig 6 about here]

Protecting the environment then seems to be yet another scheme of organising the world, landscaping the globe into a mosaic of separate zones – extraction, production, consumption, conservation, and so on – designed by the global North, where conservation may be another form of elite consumption, of controlling places and lives to feed Northern desires.

This seems all the more tragic when we think of all the ways in which communities have, in fact, cared for their environment, often under daunting odds. These examples of conservation seem like embattled islands in seas where the tide of extractive consumerism is always rising, never receding. In the Niyamgiri hills in Orissa, or in the Narmada valley, people have come together to negotiate with the state on their own terms. They reject how environment and development are brandished as

double-edged weapons: your land, forest and rivers for our money, roads, schools, medicine, our religion, our values. To speak for the rights of these communities is not to romanticise them as ecologically noble savages, as bearers of every environmental virtue, but to direct attention at the processes of capitalist extraction in which power and profit lie in the global North. We need an honest discussion about contending modes of appropriating the environment, about property rights and planetary priorities: environment for whom? Which people? Whose justice? Since the environment exists in culture, it is the cultural modes of producing and legitimising unequal rights to the environment that we must highlight and challenge.

Seconding the motion: Don Nonini

In this debate, I second this motion. My argument will briefly proceed as follows.

Philosophical Argument against the Opponents to the Motion

First, I will argue that it is inconsistent and fallacious to argue for justice for the environment as distinct from justice for people who are organically part of an environment. The opponents to this motion are caught on the horns of an intractable dilemma. Either they must argue that humans are not part of the environment, or they must argue that humans are part of the environment, but should be an inconsequential element within that environment, somehow subtractable from it in such a way that what is nonhuman, thus purified of the human, can be said to be the environment for which justice can be posited.

If the opponents to the motion adopt the position that humans are not part of the environment, then they have made an assumption that is empirically incorrect. It is manifestly the case that human beings are one species that participate actively in networks of metabolic interactions with other species. Human beings depend upon other species for digestion, respiration, waste disposal, shelter, protection, etc., and the other necessities of human life. In turn, humans also have acted, not always under specific conditions of their choice, as stewards for the reproduction and continuity of survival of nonhuman species. They voluntarily promote the survival of species (and networks of species) which they domesticate, cultivate, and protect from incursions by other humans or by nonhuman species; they involuntarily serve as food and as environments themselves (e.g., in the case of the thousands of species of bacteria that are part of the human micro-biotic environment), as reservoir (e.g., for parasites during part of these species reproductive cycles), etc. To engage in the pretense that human beings are not part of the environment in this sense is to engage in a kind of counterfactual fantasy that should be easily dismissed.

If on the other hand, the opponents to this motion argue that humans, although part of the environment, should be relegated to a much more inconsequential part of that environment, such that

their welfare can and should be subtracted out from that of the nonhuman elements (both living and nonliving matter) of the environment, then what? The idea is that humans should just go away; that apparently it would've been much better for the purposes of justice if they had never existed to begin with. This, one can demonstrate, is the foundational assumption behind most forms of Malthusianism. In this case however, not only do the opponents of this motion engage in an antisocial, indeed anti-human argument, but they do so on flimsy philosophical grounds.

Here our opponents find themselves caught on the horns of another intractable dilemma. Either they ask the same humans to legislate their own non-presence in the environment, since it is only humans who can seek and obtain justice – not other living or nonliving forms of matter -- but this would require the self-annihilation, or at least self-dispossession, of humans who would extract themselves from “the environment”. Now, I would argue this is empirically extremely unlikely, and morally repugnant! The other horn of the dilemma would have to be that justice for the environment in this case requires that some humans legislate, in the interest of justice, that other humans who are part of specific environments other than the environment of such legislators, be removed from these other environments in order to be more just to the non-human elements of those environment which remain. This second horn of the dilemma, I would argue, is precisely what the opponents to this motion would have to favor, but this conception of justice presupposes processes of violent dispossession which have historically been associated with imperialism and the triumph of supposed “civilization” over those who are “primitive” etc. One might take for example the numerous opportunities that European colonial administrators in Southeast Asia employed to “prove” that swidden cultivation by indigenous peoples was necessarily “wasteful” and “inefficient,” thus demanding their removal from such lands in the interest of “the Crown” and similar imperial entities. In other words, this is where the “rubber hits the road, or tarmac,” where a broad principle that humans ought to be extracted from the environment they depend upon in order to save it, improve it, protect it, etc., is distilled down to, and hypostasized into, the ugly facts of colonialism and imperialism, of “native removal,” ethnic cleansing, and the like.

The Substantive Case for the Motion

It is time to move beyond such logical difficulties for our opponents to state the positive case for our motion – that justice for people must come before justice for the environment. To begin with, it is necessary to examine the intertwined facts of history and nature that were (in my opinion) incorrectly opposed in the prior debate of Monday*. In other words, to start with, instead of speaking of “the environment,” let me instead speak of nature, and the role of history in its making.

“Nature” in the sense that we have to use it today is one based on “second nature” – the conception by Marx and Engels that nature under capitalism is nature transformed fundamentally by human activity. In contrast, as Marx and Engels put it, “Nature, the nature that preceded human history . . . is

a nature that no longer exists anywhere (except perhaps on a few Australian coral islands of recent origin)” (XXXX:). In other words, neither nature nor the environment as they are constituted remain unmarked or untransformed by human activity. While our opponents will concede that this is so – because it is presumably the source of their complaint that there is insufficient justice “for the environment” – it has implications that they have not sufficiently paid attention to.

The principal issue that our opponents have neglected is that if nature is indeed second nature transformed by human activity and practice, then justice for nature or the environment is inextricably connected to justice for human beings – that is, justice toward human beings in the process of their transformation of nature. And, following the premises of Marx and many subsequent thinkers within political economy, justice toward human beings in their transformation of nature is necessarily justice in their relationships to one another. This is now what we need to consider.

However, what are these injuries to the environment that our opponents and indeed we ourselves) see requiring redress? What are the elements of the “planetary ecological crisis”? These would include within the period of last 300 years of industrial capitalism : the signs of global climate change (the melting of the Arctic and Antarctic ice sheets, a rise in sea level, rapid decrease in glaciers, ocean warming (and a consequent dramatic decrease in oceanic phytoplankton), droughts over wide areas, and extreme weather events). But beyond local climate change, we can refer to ocean acidification, the extraordinary burden of nitrogen and phosphorus runoff into the fresh and salt waters of the earth, the disappearance of fresh water due to disruptions in planetary hydrological cycles, deforestation, and atmospheric loading with toxins, in addition to emissions of carbon dioxide which is the principle source of global warming. All these changes represent profound harm to nature and the environment, characterized most dramatically in the extraordinary loss of animal and plant species in what paleontologists are now calling the “sixth great extinction”. Any sense of justice which most humans would hold to in the face of these transformations would seek to redress and even reverse these transformations in order to seek the best possible remaining prospects for the survival and enhancement of humans and other lifeforms on earth.

Here’s what it comes down to. I wish to simply observe that by far the most crucial determining factor and most deleterious force with respect to these major transformations in the planet’s ecologies has been the actions of first modern colonial and now transnational industrial capitalisms and their compliant nation-states. Over the last two centuries, starting with but not limited to Western modernity (because of the complete complicity of Asian capitalisms in these transformations), these actions have led to the massive exploitation/ extraction of natural resources, including nonhuman biota and flora, and the reorganization of their production and extraction by industrial means.

If we but note the effects of industrialized agriculture, in which food is produced with industrial methods in massive, simplified monocropped plantation ecologies, processed in energy intensive

ways, transported over thousands of miles, and marketed to wealthy “consumers,” all to further the expanded capital accumulation of a few number of transnational food processors, traders, and retailers, then we can quickly see how central and deeply implicated are the indeterminately expansive logics of corporate capitalism in these harmful transformations of planetary ecologies. Industrialized agriculture, however, has also reduced hundreds of thousands of people to no more than the “backs” and “arms” of proletarianized farm labor that these corporations require.

But we could also give innumerable other examples from extractive capitalism of how injustices to people are linked to injuries to natural ecologies – whether it is despoliation of land and freshwater for farmers by the corporate copper and nickel mines in the Andes, or of the deltaic, littoral, and oceanic ecologies of the Gulf region of North America which have ruined the livelihoods of fishers brought about by the massive BP oil spill. And in the most recent form, the dominance of financial capital, we can speak of massive “land grabs” in Africa, Latin America and elsewhere, the “financialization of nature”, and of speculative finance in the ongoing commodification hundreds of thousands of numerous forms of goods previously held in common by humans – and of the displacement of prior occupants of land and users of resources.

Now having stated as much, it is also straightforward to observe that the expansion of industrial and financial capitalism across the planet over the last three centuries has been the major, if not the only, source of injustice toward human beings. This is at no time more obvious than in the current period of neoliberal capitalism, in which, as David Harvey and numerous other commentators have demonstrated, millions of people are experiencing accumulation by dispossession, intrinsically in the course of capitalist expansion and the environmental transformation of nature it has entailed. But accumulation by dispossession is a recurrent feature of modern capitalism over the last several centuries. Whereas today millions of farmers are forced off land to install hydroelectric projects in the Middle Yangzi River to promote China’s capitalist industrialization; three decades previously, millions were forced from their lands by the hydroelectric and other massive development projects of the World Bank. We are talking of nothing less than what Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972) called the “instrumental domination of nature” associated with capitalist expansion and accumulation on a world scale.

What we are therefore arguing is that appropriation of nature via capitalist industrial means, and the grossest and most abusive exploitation of human beings have necessarily gone together. Since we are referring to both human beings – qua exploited surplus and displaced labor – and the “environment” or nature as what is being depleted, ruined, etc. – it is important to realize that the processes of capitalist appropriation and realization of surplus value and of environmental degradation/simplification have always gone together, e.g., coal mining corporations in West Virginia in the US not only degrade the environment through “mountain top removal”, but also degrade the lives and living conditions of human beings – not only those who are employed by these corporations

(who experience multiple occupational injuries such as black lung disease), but also those people living in the “environment” of the mines.²

Summation

Here is the concluding gist of my argument, in the form of several modest proposals.

1. Coincidence. If the causes of injustice to people and of injustices to nature are so closely intertwined, so too must be justice toward people and toward nature. Our motion states: “justice toward people must come before justice toward the environment” – not that there is to be no justice for the environment. Contemporary corporate capitalism is engaged simultaneously in carrying out multiple forms of injustice directed toward millions of people by disrupting and destroying their livelihoods, even as it is also engaged in perpetrating multiple injuries to environmental ecologies and the material (biochemical) infrastructures and processes that make these ecologies possible.
2. Mutual Implication. It is abundantly clear by now that these insults toward the environment also imply injuries and abuses of human beings, because the former have adverse impacts on human livelihood and survival even in the middle term – that is indeed what global climate change and the other dimensions of the planetary ecological crisis imply.
3. Prior Qualification. Abused and exploited humans are in no position to remediate environmental injuries; dispossessed, the victims of structural violence of capitalism, they lack the surplus capacity and political power to redress these injuries. Only flourishing humans are in a position to make such changes.
4. Multiplicity of Struggles. Therefore, the only justice possible for the environment requires concomitant or prior justice for human beings, and that form of justice in today’s world must come out of multiple struggles, in many different locales, on many different fronts, against the abuses associated with transnational corporate capitalism – its mistreatment of human beings in the name of capital accumulation, but also its degrading transformations of nature in accordance with its indeterminately expansive logics on a finite planet.
5. The Only Possible Prospect. Justice and morality are distinctively human. “Justice” depends upon moral values and practices, and ultimately on moral action. But human beings are necessarily motivated by questions of their own survival, and the majority of human beings alive today are necessarily so motivated, even as they are subject to the oppressive conditions of capitalist power. The fundamental question is how to transform such motivations toward human flourishing to include the flourishing of nature (biodiversity, etc.) on which humans depend, and to mobilize both into

² In theoretical terms, both ecological Marxism (e.g., O’Connor 1998) and most variants of political ecology (e.g., Biersack 2006) are in agreement regarding these propositions.

specific forms of struggle against capitalist injustice. This is the only prospect before us, since nature divorced from humans cannot seek justice. Therefore not only in the ethical sense, but also in the pragmatic issue of “What is to be done?” the answer can only be: “Justice for human beings must come before justice for the environment.”

Against the motion: Helen Kopnina

I am going to argue against the motion 'Justice for people should come before justice for the environment'.

Having read some of my opponents' publications, I assume that Amita Baviskar and Don Nonini will support the idea that conservationists are mostly Western elites and that their actions impinge upon cultural practices and economic development of local communities. This argument is well developed in anthropology explicitly criticising conservation, where anthropological engagement is seen as a duty to uphold human rights and indigenous entitlements against Western neocolonialist practices, or neoliberal capitalist conservation. This critique often involves a discussion of historical contexts in which conservation areas or national parks were created in developing countries, with particular emphasis on the critique of the top-down and neo-colonial practices, in which environmental values are seen to be either imposed by post-colonial governments, or by international conservation organizations.

So far, I agree with my opponents, as I too fully embrace and support the efforts of non-Western communities, minority groups, or marginalized societies in their efforts at cultural self-determination. In a similar way, a nuanced critiques of prominent anthropologists Dan Brockington, James Igoe, and Paige West show how large Western conservation organizations have become commercialized and profit-seeking themselves, and how native ways of being in the environment have been subjected to more managerial or prohibitive approaches in which the conservation organizations profit while the local communities are left displaced and without compensation (West et al 2006; Igoe and Brockington 2007; Brockington et al 2008). Environmentalism or conservation in this context becomes suspect due to its proximity to the capitalist rapacious, neo-imperialist and even racist enterprise which tends to perpetuate environmental injustice through impingement on human or indigenous rights while catering to wealthy elites.

In line with the critiques of the neocolonial Western enterprise, I do believe that industrial development – both in socialist and capitalist societies – has ultimately lead to the erosion of cultural diversity and to creation of unwieldy development projects that tended to enhance, rather than address, current social and economic inequalities. I also agree that environmental justice, meaning the equitable distribution of environmental risks (such as pollution) and benefits (such as access to natural resources or conservation benefits) remains to be a large global challenge.

Yet, there is part of this critique that I think needs to be examined more closely. In this well-established critique of neocolonial neoliberal enterprise, the question of ecological justice, or justice between species, is often completely overlooked. Anthropologists such as Rosalyn Duffy and Robert Fletcher argue that Conservationists impinge upon cultural practices and economic development of local communities in order to create conservation areas and preserve biodiversity. As you see in this quote on the slide, some engaged critics actually argue that ‘it is ethically problematic to privilege conservation of a maximum level of biodiversity at the expense of livelihood security and poverty alleviation’ (Benjaminsen *et al.* 2006). Another quote in the next slide by a well-known anthropologist Conrad Kottak suggests that it is anthropological moral duty to ‘prioritize people’s interests and ‘not be dazzled by ecological data’ (Kottak 1999:33). It is this particular ethical position that people should always come first and the rest should be ignored as it deserves no moral consideration that I would like to object to.

Another issue is that environmentalism is not a Western but a universal phenomenon, and that love of nature is shared by traditional societies. In fact, it was traditional societies prior to colonialism and prior to economic development that were more naturally interconnected to the greater than human world. At present however, despite recognition of the fact that that indigenous people are ‘rarely isolated from global market forces’ (Pountney 2012:215), anthropologists who defend ‘people should come first’ notion seemed to somehow simultaneously assume that some cultures or societies are still ‘traditional’ and thus reify cultural traditions (implying somehow that some people are really more ‘developed’ than others); and try to defend the disadvantaged communities’ *economic* rights (which is anything but ‘traditional’). By talking about natural resource, economic benefits and compensation, supporters of ‘humans first’ perspectives also tend to think of these simultaneous traditional/cultural and modern/economic attributes not only as entitlements but also as morally normative categories. Within these categories, ethical considerations often automatically weigh toward ‘disadvantaged’ people and not disadvantaged non-human species.

The counterargument I want to develop here is best summed up in the words of environmental sociologist Eileen Crist, who simply indicates that what is presently happening is a great moral wrong that we are simply not aware of: ‘The mass violence against and extermination of nonhuman nations, negating not only their own existence but also their roles in Life’s interconnected nexus and their future evolutionary unfolding’ (Crist 2012). In her poignant essay *Requiem for a Roadkill*, anthropologist Jane Desmond (2013) calls for an ethical recognition of animal victimhood. Another anthropologist Barbara Noske (1989) has called anthropologists to heed to environmental ethics. In environmental ethics, the definition of Land Ethics comes to mind: ‘[a] thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise’ (Leopold 1949: 224-5). Similar to the land ethics, the deep ecology movement endorses

“biospheric egalitarianism” (Næss 1973), the view that all living things are alike in having value in their own right, independent of their usefulness to humans.

I feel that this debate is both extremely important and also extremely non-academic. It is moral, and it is political, and it is far from scientific. That is why I very much appreciate the fact that I was invited to be here. Returning to the original motion of this debate, please consider the following questions:

- Justice for people must come before justice for the environment?
- Justice for men must come before justice for women?
- Justice for whites must come before justice for blacks?
- Justice for heterosexuals must come before justice for homosexuals?

How is this motion, that justice for people should come before the environment, different from the good old ‘might makes right’ assumptions? I would like to ask the audience some more questions:

- Are these questions appropriate for anthropology and anthropologists?
- Why is racism, sexism, and every form of human discrimination seen as ‘bad’ in anthropology and yet discrimination against other species is exempt from the moral sphere of judgment?
- Should engaged anthropology not include ecological, not just environmental justice?
- If ethics can be seen as ‘progressive’ should environmental rights not follow human rights, women’s rights, minority rights, etc?
- Now when entire species are used for mass production and consumption, or critically endangered or at the brink of extinction is it not time to acknowledge environmental rights?
- What is the basis of moral judgment that makes one species – not just the rich and the poor, the white or the brown within the species - so much more superior and worthy of moral consideration than all millions of other earth’s living beings?

I agree with the proponents of the motion that culpability for ecological problems lies largely with corporate and political elites that perpetuate the industrial economy, mass consumption and commodification of nature. Yet, I disagree that environmentalism is western, elitist, and neocolonial. Environmentalism, and the love of nature, belongs to ALL people. As Vandana Shiva (2012), has said: ‘When nature is a teacher, we co-create with her—we recognize her agency and her rights’. I also do not doubt that without environmentalist activists, the very power hegemonies that all of us criticise will continue unabated, erasing cultural memory that used to foster sustainability and preserve ecological knowledge. What seems neo-colonial to me is not conservation or environmentalism, but the insistence that we should look at everything in monetary terms, that we should abandon nature, or rather use it as a natural resource for our enrichment, that we are above

nature, and that all that matters is how equitably the bits and pieces of wilderness that remain are divided between human populations. This thinking is in no way 'traditional', but reflective of what proponents of economic development would like us to embrace.

Privileging one species over all others tends to render the world as perhaps the same very corporate, political, profit-driven elites would like to see it – productive, efficient, devoid of emotions, consciences and beauty. Yet, we are all intertwined, all effected. After all, environmental degradation affects us all, either through climate change, or pollution, or through the erasure of bio-cultural diversity. As Siddharth Chakravarty, a First Officer on the Steve Irwin, Sea Shepard, has said, 'It is important to preserve the biodiversity of the planet. If the oceans die, we die'.

Presently, we ask: What is the maximal number of people that the Earth can provide resources for without severely degrading those resources for future human (sic!) generations? How can environmental justice (equality in distribution of environmental risks and benefits) serve all human beings? Yet, what about those 'others' that are driven to extinction, turned into a 'roadkill', relegated to the beyond-moral-consideration realm of collateral damage when huge areas of the rainforest are cleared for cultivation. Can we still speak about Justice?

Should we not ask instead, returning to Crist (2012): How many people, and at what level of consumption, can live on the Earth without turning the Earth into a human colony founded on the genocide of its nonhuman indigenes? The latter is rarely posed because the genocide of nonhumans is something about which the mainstream culture observes silence. Academics largely follow suit, perhaps because they view raising an issue about which silence is observed as a non sequitur (Crist 2012). Thus, I disagree that we should stop at environmental justice defined by social equity and economic redistribution only. Injustice affects some more than others, and this effect goes beyond the questions of economic benefits and cultural determination. It effects the very survival of numerous living beings.

Considering the fact that continuous advocacy and representation is needed to represent non-humans (who will never speak for themselves), we need to push ecological justice debate beyond academic compounds. This might require much more 'affirmative action'. This implies the need to develop a post-racial, post-gender, post-class, undifferentiated humanity so we can develop responsibility for other species. If social altruism can be learned (assuming that acquisition of ethical values is socially and culturally conditioned) or morally developed toward (assuming that there is such a thing as moral progress), this has significant implications for fostering biospherical egalitarianism and supporting biocultural diversity.

Finally, I would like to leave you with the story of Ganesha and the cat.

As a child, Ganesha loved playing with his bows and arrows. Spotting a white cat one day, he decided to play hunter and shot arrows at it. The terrified creature ran for cover, but Ganesha

thought it was playing a game.

He looked behind a tree – there it was, trembling and round-eyed. “Aha, got you!” said the chubby god and shot at it again. Miaowing with fear, the cat scooted for cover under a log. Ganesha chased it down and pulled it out. He rolled it around in the mud and threw it up in the air like a furry ball! Once more, the cat escaped. Ganesha lost interest and went back home.

He was in for a shock. There sat Parvati, his lovely mother, her face and arms scratched and mud-stained.

“Ma, how did you get hurt?” cried the little fellow.

“I’ve no idea,” said Parvati. “What have you been up to?”

“I was playing with a cat and..um...I was pretty rough with her.”

“Now I know why I have these bruises!” said Parvati. Drawing Ganesha close, she explained, “Ganesha, my body is the world and every living creature in it. I was that cat, too! Whatever you do to other beings, you do to me as well!”

Ganesha was stunned and deeply remorseful. “So my every little action matters...wow! I’m so sorry, Ma, I’ll never do harm to anything...ever!”

Smiling at her son, Parvati said, “That may not be possible, son. But do be aware of your actions and harm as little as possible.”

Nodding, Ganesha ran off to find the little cat and make peace with her.

In my last slide, you can see the picture of my three kids that I left in Colorado during holiday to come here. I came here because I think that their future – and the future of billions of other children, kittens, and cubs depends on whether we take a firm ethical and political stand, within and beyond the academia.

I ask you to vote against the motion.

Discussion

(NB: During the discussion, none of the speakers identified themselves by name. It is possible to listen to the debate online as noted above).

The discussion began with a suggestion that each of the presentations had argued in a similar vein, that justice for people must come *with* justice for the environment – a theme that then ran throughout the discussion (along with appreciation of the speakers’ presentations). There was general agreement that in Anthropology, there is a broad awareness that the dichotomy between people and the environment is historically situated, and that there are many people in the world who are committed to the interconnectedness of things and beings (an example was offered of Zuni people endowing things with personhood). One contributor observed that the human body itself consists of more cells that are

non-human than human, reinforcing the illusory quality of the dichotomy between the human and non-human.

Two key issues were raised in relation to the opposition between environment and people. The first related to the hierarchy of justice implied by the motion. Transposed to a set of questions about whether justice for men should precede justice for women, it is apparent that the grammatical structure creates a false equivalent, which requires an entity named the environment to be anthropomorphised in order to allow it a place in this hierarchy. As such, it normalises the Western traditions of instrumental reason, rather than generating a more inclusive awareness of the human. It also presumes that the problem of justice for people has already been resolved, as though having addressed questions of gender or ethnicity, we might now turn to justice for animals and plants.

The second substantive point builds on this lack of progressive justice, in relation to the use of environmentalism (the prioritisation of justice for the environment) as a political tool of the privileged. There are numerous instances in the ethnographic literature of cases where conservation is pursued at the cost of the most deprived people, where progressive inequality is justified in the name of conservation. In a Latin American context, for example, it was claimed that environmentalism and conservation are political tools of the rich. Yet environmentalism has also been exploited by indigenous and minority groups. Three examples were raised, first the case of the Yanomamo leader who presents himself using shamanistic discourses to appeal to environmentalists in Brazil, and secondly the use of the Kayapo leader by the Rainforest Alliance to lend credence to their campaigns, who, when the Kayapo did not gain sovereignty over their territories turned instead to doing business with the timber contractors. The third example referred to the rubber tappers' leader in Brazil, Chico Mendes, who achieved international recognition by engaging with the environmental movement.

These examples also suggest that the term justice itself requires closer inspection, since much of the discussion appeared to be focused on distributional justice, while procedural and interactional justice may prompt a different dynamic between the environmental and the human (again illustrating the difficulty of leaving behind the dichotomy while analysing it). Contradictions between ethical claims to justice and legal definitions of justice would require further attention for the debate to progress. Questions might include whether nonhumans should have rights, what those rights should be and how those rights should be balanced with the rights of humans, for example.

In her closing comments, Amita Baviskar reminded the assembly that the idea of the environment lying outside culture remains one of the chief organising fictions of contemporary conservation. Within this construct, she argued that an important reason for rejection of the promotion of environmental justice is that we cannot know what constitutes justice for the environment, nor the effects of preserving one ecosystem rather than another. Our access to the environmental can only be with or through people who make multiple claims over environments. Questions of ethics are

necessarily political questions, and Baviskar argued that these questions had to be posed in relation to particular populations, to clarify the diversity of claims, and thereby to demonstrate that environmental claims are as contentious as other identity claims. Environmentalism takes different forms, from progressive to fascist, and Baviskar called for attention to the frictions found in what are now complex networks of environmentalism. Under what terms are the Kayapo incarcerated in the rainforest and forced, as she described it, to perform an exotic form of indigeneity for the consumption of environmentalists in the global North?

In opposition, Helen Kopnina re-emphasised the effects of a rapacious capitalism that translates everything into marketable commodities, valuing nature as natural resources, or ecosystems services. She emphasised the lack of sustainability associated with contemporary consumption practices (such as in the vocabulary of the World Bank or the IMF). While appreciating the desire to abandon dichotomies, she warned of the difficulty of achieving justice for both humans and nonhumans, and wished to refocus attention on the need for affirmative action for those without a voice, who would never have a voice, namely nonhumans.

Don Nonini, in responding to the discussion, pointed to the profound simplification implicit in the progressive dichotomisation between humans and nature, and appreciated the complexifying questions from the audience. The simplifications that enable liberal democracies to represent Nature were built on violence towards human beings and had led to the current planetary ecological crisis. Before we dare represent what justice for the environment might mean, we must recognise the co-complications between social reproduction and the biological and biochemical infrastructure that form the basis of life on the planet. Justice for humans must therefore come before justice for the environment, but also constitutes justice for the environment.

Veronica Strang took the opportunity as final speaker of summarising the four points of her case. This is, that the notion of justice is concerned with balancing relations between those with power and those without power who cannot speak for themselves; that the interdependent production and reproduction that bind us together ensure that lack of justice for humans can be disruptive for all; that our categories do not reflect the realities of human-environmental relations; and that we manifest the ideas and values that we promote. Despite her sympathy for the promotion of social justice, she argued that justice for people is not enough, but requires balance, hence justice, with the nonhuman. She joined in the criticism of the notion of growth-based economic practices that externalise their costs to other species and lead to increasing conflict over resources and hence less justice for people. Characterising human and nonhuman relations as bioethical relations, she argued that putting human needs first appeared repellent. Instead, anthropology should promote an integrated view, upholding the capacity for collaborative rather than competitive relations not only between human groups but between humans and other kinds. In calling for justice for all, rather than justice only for people, she urged the gathering to vote against the motion.

The motion was defeated.

*see Critique of Anthropology Vol: Issue:

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