

**ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY IN BRAZIL?**  
**Theoretical and practical reflections on a South American question**

**Amós Nascimento, PhD<sup>1</sup>**

The Americas have been at the center of discussions on nature, ecology, and the environment since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The so called “discovery” and “conquest” of the Americas implies many environmental dimensions: the interaction with Native tribes, the learning about new crops – such as corn, potatoes, squash, and cocoa – that are now so popular worldwide, the finding of new plant and animal species – many of them catalogued by Alexander von Humboldt at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century –, and the challenges to impose development in natural areas – such as the *Chaco*, *Caatinga*, and the *Altiplano* – that seemed inhospitable. Even today, discussions on climate change presuppose the reference to two specific areas in South America that have a profound environmental impact on the globe: Antarctic and the Amazon. What are the issues and conditions specific to these South American areas and what particular challenges do they bring to philosophical reflection and environmental action? This paper will try to address this question by focusing on the specific case of environmental issues in Brazil.<sup>1</sup>

To begin this investigation, let us consider the following question: What kinds of studies have been made to address the environmental challenges in the region? Historically, the very name of the country derives from a tree found all over the Southeastern part of South America, *pau-brasil* (*Brazil wood*), which was extracted to nearly extinction. Several scientific projects have researched Brazilian natural resources, especially the Amazon forest, the large coast, water resources, fertile soil, and biodiversity. Moreover, Brazil was the setting for the political action of key environmental leaders such as Chico Mendes and the Kayapó leader, Chief Payakan, and important events such as the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (1992). Internationally, Brazilian leaders have been at the center of current global environmental discussions, from the need to preserve the Amazon region to the recent efforts to curb the emission of greenhouse gasses and reach an international agreement on climate change. All these elements would be enough to spark a philosophical reflection and discussion. The next question to be asked in this essay is, therefore, very simple: What has been the role of philosophy in the discussion about environmental issues in Brazil? To address this question, I will briefly survey the history of environmental issues and discussions in Brazil, then indicate the various disciplines and sciences that have addressed these issues, before I focus on some philosophical initiatives.

This will lead to another question: Can philosophy contribute to the reflection and action on environmental issues in this particular country? Although I can provide only a

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented in a meeting of the ISEE/IAEP in Allenspark, CO in 2004. The author thanks Robert Figueroa, James Griffiths, and Ricardo Rozzi for previous comments on this paper.

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

brief overview of such vast theme, I hope this overview will be enough to indicate a problem: the role of philosophy in environmental discussions in Brazil has been minimal. By showing some of the limits in the approaches of other disciplines and the growing number of challenges that need to be addressed in Brazil, I conclude that there are areas in which philosophical tools could be useful, especially if philosophers work interdisciplinarily with other sciences and disciplines. I also see philosophy including a pluralistic view of contexts and addressing environmental challenges in a way that offers new perspectives to environmental studies.

### 1. Environmental history, development, and activism

In this paper – which presents the first part of my arguments on this topic – I want to start by addressing the first question: *What are the issues and conditions specific to South America and the particular environmental challenges in Brazil?* As a possible answer, I present some concrete aspects and information about naturalist, preservationist and conservationist actions, as well as ecological and environmental claims in the Brazilian context. By sharing information on Brazilian environmental history, we can set the stage for a discussion of environmental initiatives in Brazil.

The history of Brazil is relatively long. It can be traced back to Native tribes in Pre-Columbian ages or also to the year 1500, which marks the so-called “discovery”<sup>2</sup> of a region known mainly for its natural resources, which later became the most important Portuguese colony (Assunção 2000). The official history of Brazil focuses on the negotiated political process that led to the colonization process by Portugal, the peaceful Independence of Brazil and establishment of its own monarchy in 1882,<sup>3</sup> the Abolition of Slavery in 1888 – much later than any other countries in the Americas –, and the change into a liberal republic in 1889 (Fausto 1999). More recent events include the rise of Populism in 1930, a military *coup d'État* in 1964, and the return to democracy after 1985. Since then, Brazil has been considered one of the emergent countries defined as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), but somewhat closed in its internal affairs, so that little about Brazil is discussed in the international arena. Beyond this official history, other important historical, social, and political markers are often neglected and need to be mentioned because they show the alternative history of social movements. For example, there was the Catholic attempt to evangelize the Native American Guaranis and establish Jesuit *missões* as a new experiment in politics around 1609 (Eisenberg 2000). This occurred at the same time of some other frustrated initiatives such as the establishment of *Quilombo dos Palmares* as an independent confederation of African runaway slaves between 1602 and 1694 (Kent 1965, Schwartz 1992, Anderson 1996). There was also a colonization of the northeastern part of the country and parts of the Amazon by Dutch Calvinists between 1630 and 1669 (Mello 1987) as well as the attempt to apply the ideas

<sup>2</sup> For a critical view of the term “discovery”, see Dussel (1995 and 2002).

<sup>3</sup> This was the only monarchy in Latin America (for the disappointment of Simón Bolívar). The Brazilian Empire lasted from 1822 to 1889. There were two similar but failed attempts in Mexico. Agustín de Iturbide led the Mexican forces against the Spain and was crowned Emperor in 1821, but lasted for only 18 months. In 1864, Maximilian of Austria was crowned as Maximilian I, Emperor of Mexico, but lasted only until 1867.

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

of key philosophers of the European Enlightenment to create a new republican nation in the state of Minas Gerais in 1789 (Maxwell 1973).

The environmental history of Brazil can be reconstructed along these same lines. The limits of this paper do not allow me to go back and review the environmental aspects of themes such as the genocide of indigenous cultures, colonization, and slavery, depletion of natural resources through mining and timber extraction, and the impact of modernization (Padua 2000). Let me simply start by mentioning that the modern history of Brazil begins with a clear environmental problem that needs further consideration: the extraction of *Caesalpinia echinata*, also named brazilwood [*pau-brasil*], which gave its name to the country, but is now nearly extinct. Moreover, there are historical examples of environmental actions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that are relevant today. For instance, already in 1797 there was a law protecting the forests and limiting timber extraction. Another example is a project on the restoration of the riparian vegetation and the water resources in Rio de Janeiro in 1862 – in what later became the Tijuca Forest (Dean 1995: 223-225). Having mentioned these examples, let me turn to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and review recent events that give us a glimpse of environmental actions and initiatives based on which a philosophical reflection could be developed. In what follows, I will focus my attention on two trends: the official history of governmental actions that culminate in the *developmentalism* of the military dictatorship in the 1960s and the *environmental activism* of various subaltern groups that opposed the instrumental and military exploitation and manipulation of natural resources and favored conservationist and democratic actions.

*a) Military developmentalism*

Political initiatives concerning the preservation of natural resources were taken already in the 1930s by the populist government of President Getúlio Vargas. In 1934 there was the First Brazilian Conference for the Protection of Nature in Rio de Janeiro. This led not only to the creation of several national parks, but also to the establishment of laws, such as the Forestry Code (Law 23.793), the Mining Code (Law 794) and the Water Code (Law 24.643) of 1934, the first National Park in 1937 as well as the Fishing Code of 1938 and the Hunting Code of 1943 (Diegues 2005). However, all these laws were being brought about in a time during which Brazil was eminently rural and led by military elite. With the urbanization, industrialization and modernization that began around that time, the cultural relation with nature changed, bringing about the degradation of natural resources.

A more systematic approach to what can be properly called the ecological situation in Brazil can be seen after 1960s, due in part to the impact of international movements and to internal discussions on the meaning and the negative impact of “development.”<sup>4</sup> However, 1964 marks the *coup d’État* by the military, which installed a dictatorship that lasted until 1985. To speak of environmentalism during this time requires us to consider two issues: the instrumental conception that the military

---

<sup>4</sup> The sociological debates on development and modernization in Brazil were led by Cardoso (1962, 1973), who became President of Brazil in 1994 and was reelected in 1998.

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

government had of the natural resources and the reactions of social and environmental groups to militarism.

On the one hand, we can observe government policies taking place during the military dictatorship, based on a double standard: the “control and exploration” of natural resources and the creation of a legal framework for development. This double axis was based, in turn, on doctrines of national security and territorial sovereignty. Among the controversial mega-projects of this period were the construction of the Trans-Amazonic Highway, the building of the Itaipu Dam, the Cantareira Water System in São Paulo, the Carajás Mining Project in the states of Pará and Maranhão, and the building of nuclear power plants in Rio de Janeiro – most of them considered the world’s largest projects at the time (Hall 1989; Guimarães 1991: 121ff.). With the support of the military government, other private mega-projects in the Amazon were implemented as well, such as the Jari Project by American mining billionaire Daniel Ludwig, the Firestone plants, and other initiatives that led to forest degradation (Hageman 1985).

The mega-projects supported by the military government were justified as security measures: to conquest the Amazon forest instead of leaving it open to smugglers and guerrillas, to build a large dam upstream from the Argentinean capital city of Buenos Aires to have the capacity to strategically flood this city, to have energy independence from foreign sources by using fossil fuels and nuclear power, and many other similar initiatives (Couto e Silva 1967). Such measures had a profound economic impact as well and served to foster a modernization process on several fronts: the mechanization of agriculture, promotion of agro-business, electrification of rural areas, reform and control of land use, exploitation of natural resources (such as minerals and water), and the creation of technological centers (Stepan 1988). Economically, the period of the military dictatorship in the 1970s was defined as the “Brazilian miracle” [*milagre brasileiro*] although this occurred at the cost of limiting democratic values, exploiting impoverished populations, and incurring into a record breaking foreign debt to finance these projects.<sup>5</sup>

Simultaneously, however, it is at this time that one can observe a series of environmental public policies. The National Council for the Control of Environmental Pollution was created in 1967 through Law 303 and the Brazilian government was officially represented in the UN Conference in Stockholm in 1972. Another concrete result of this period is the creation of the Special Secretary for the Environment (SEMA) in 1973, which led to the establishment of the National Environmental System (SISNAMA) and the National Council on the Environment (CONAMA) in 1981 by Law 6.938 (Guimarães 1991: 143ff.)

The next stage in this process was the involvement of the Brazilian government in international discussions and agreements on environmental themes. At this point, the concept of *sustainable development* became central to political discussions, especially because it included an economic component that was compatible with the governmental agenda on developmentalism. This brought about an association between international financing institutions – such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the International Monetary Fund – and the military government, generating a huge

---

<sup>5</sup> At that time, many political theorists – such as Samuel Huntington – were arguing that democracy was a hindrance to growth and dictatorships were better able to foster economic development. See Przeworski & Limongi (1993).

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

national debt. The available funding, however, was used to finance mega-projects, new technologies, and to open the Brazilian market for new products. Moreover, this association imposed severe restrictions on social policies, thus having a great impact on civil society.

*b) The militant environmental activism of civil society*

On the other hand, environmentalism was also growing in alternative ways as a social movement with a double aim: to defend democracy and defend the environment. Similar to other movements opposing military dictatorship, environmentalists received more support when they establish links with international groups. Thus, the ecological movement in Brazil became more visible only after the UN Conference in Stockholm in 1972.

Already in 1970, rubber tappers who lived in the Brazilian Amazon region felt the impact of mega-development plans on their culture and means of subsistence and formed the Xapuri Rural Worker's Union under the leadership of Chico Mendes. Their engagement in the protection of the native *hevea brasiliensis* trees (Dean 1987) brought about not only the institutionalization of the National Council of Rubber Tappers in 1985 and the international support of organizations such as Inter-American Development Bank and the UN (Mendes 1989), but also a series of conflicts with farmers – supported by the Union of Rural Property Holders (UDR) and their gunned men. This conflict led to Mendes' assassination in 1988 (Revkin 1994).

Similarly, indigenous peoples became more active politically and organized in several groups as Chief Mario Juruna, Chief Raoni, Marcos Terena, and other important leaders were able to bring national and international attention to their causes. Juruna, whose Xavante tribe first learned about the Western civilization in 1950, became very active in defending the rights of indigenous lands in the 1970s and he was elected the first Native American representative in the Brazilian Parliament in 1983. Raoni, from the Kayapó tribe, appeared in public for the first time in 1984 to protest the invasion of native lands (Turner 1993). In 1987, several tribes were organized nationally in the Alliance of Peoples from the Forest (APF) and in the Union of Indian Nations (UNI) around issues of land demarcation and protection of their reserves (Turner 1995). In 1989, they established a strategic partnership with the rubber tappers and received the support of international groups such as the singer Sting and the company The Body Shop (Meneses Bastos 1996; Bird 2004).

The Landless Movement [*Movimento Sem Terra – MST*] was a movement formed by family farmers from the Southern region of Brazil, who lost their lands and began to migrate to other regions between 1979 and 1985. This migration occurred as a result of the military attempt to modernize agricultural practices in Brazil, as new economic models forced small farmers and farmworkers to leave rural areas and migrate to urban centers or to the Amazonian region (Chaves 2000). As they moved north, families also became involved in local unorganized reactions to this state of affairs, but they were violently repressed. With the support of liberation theologians connected to both the Catholic and the Lutheran Church in the southern part of Brazil, they re-read the Exodus narrative in the Bible and reinterpreted the idea of a “promised land,” criticized

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

capitalism, and affirmed that “food was a human right” (Wright & Wolford 2003). With time, the movement gained national recognition and began to critique agro-business, reject non-sustainable agricultural practices, and oppose the development and commoditization of genetically modified organisms (Griesse 2008). To strengthen its position, the Landless Movement pressured governments to use environmental laws against biotechnological companies speculating on the global food market, promoted agro-ecological practices among family farmers, and encouraged biodiversity. As they collaborated with international organizations opposing the World Trade Organization, the Landless Movement also became a powerful player in Brazilian environmentalism (Karriem 2009).

Another environmental group that emerged during the 1970s was the movement against large Dam projects, which led to the creation of the National Movement of People Affected by Dams (MNAB) in 1981 and reached its peak in the campaigns against the destruction of water falls for the building of the Itaipu Dam in 1982 (Rothman 2001). Similarly, several environmentalist groups were created as an answer to local problems and then gained national visibility, as was the case of SOS Mata Atlântica (Fuchs 1996) and the Brazilian Society of Environmental Law, which was created out of the movement in defense of the Piracicaba River. Finally, it is also important to recognize that this process was complemented and supported by the action of important international environmental organizations, such as Greenpeace, WWF, Nature Conservancy, and Earthwatch, which were able to bring wider international attention to the Amazon region (Hageman 1985; Batmanian 1994). It is in the light of all these processes that the founding of the Brazilian Green Party in 1986 can be understood (Viola, 1987 and 1998).

The tension between the military dictatorship and the environmentalism of various subaltern groups can be explained by the opposition between an instrumental conception of natural resources by the military and the social reactions to militarism by democratic groups. After 1986, with the democratization process, there was a shift and these two issues that marked the period after 1964 could no longer orient environmental activism. Due to a lack of a new consensus, several groups worked at cross-purposes or even in conflict among themselves. The most important historical moment, in which these several lines came together for a common cause, was the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

One of the outcomes of the discussions in Rio was precisely the agreement on the concept of *sustainable development* and the Agenda 21. The Conference was influential in creating a growing concern for the environment in the country, also because it aimed not solely at satisfying the claims of grassroots environmental movements, but also at committing governments to have policies on these issues (Yanarella and Bartilow 2001). Moreover, the popularization of these issues motivated a growing number of environmentally aware consumers, and forced the creation of new standards and policies. Thus, the plethora of environmental initiatives in Brazil could no be limited to one specific sphere anymore, but had to involve the State, private initiatives and civil society at large.

### c) Sustainable development?

The facts, actors, and actions I have presented show that environmentalism in Brazil can be better understood if we analyze two ideological aspects: First, the framework of a military government exploiting Brazilian natural resources based on the idea of *military developmentalism*. Second, the role of several groups of civil society espousing a social and political alternative to development, which I have labeled *militant environmental activism*. The re-establishment of democracy and the overcoming of developmentalism followed a gradual process that came to its climax in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro. One of the outcomes of the UN Conference was the affirmation of the principle of *sustainable development* as a compromise between the different social and political actors. This was initially accepted as a victory by all parts. Thereafter, however, there was a lack of consensus among activists as to whether this principle could guide environmental action.

In reconsidering our initial question – What are the issues and conditions specific to South America and the particular environmental challenges in Brazil? – it is possible to affirm that the two main issues we observe in Brazil are common throughout South America since many countries had the same experience of militarism and democratic struggles. It is also possible to observe a common association between environmental activism and democracy. However, environmental activism did not rely directly on philosophical reflection – which may explain the lack of coherent principles or theories to orient environmental action. The result of this lack of theoretical reflection led to the seemingly naïve and acritical acceptance of the concept *sustainable development*, which was later criticized for being a contradiction in terms. After the UN Environmental Conference in Stockholm (1972) and a series of other international meetings, the Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future* (1987), simply reaffirmed an idea of “development” that had been questioned on many grounds. Although many Brazilian philosophers were very active in the field of political theory, especially in criticizing authoritarianism and promoting democratic ideals (e.g., Chauí 1986), they seem to have neglected environmental activism.

In fact, immediate and concrete environmental policies were implemented based more on the approaches of other sciences and disciplines with specific foci. Although this led to a deeper understanding of several areas, there was still a lack of unity among the different perspectives and knowledge derived from their studies. Since philosophy does not seem to have had an impact on environmental activism, we will turn to theoretical aspects and approaches that were developed in relation to the facts depicted above.

## 2. Theoretical discourses on the environment

*What kinds of studies and considerations have been done to address the environmental challenges in Brazil?* Theoretical reflection has somewhat accompanied the facts we have referred to, but this was done in *a posteriori* form, since the interest of academia on environmental issues was more clearly expressed only after the UN Conference in 1992. Moreover, these theoretical perspectives remained in a descriptive mode or sought to understand the social, political, and economical impact of environmental actions.

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

For sure, *ecology, biology, and the life sciences* were privileged areas for the theoretical assessment of topics related to the taxonomy and phenomenology of natural resources, the measure of the global impact of the Amazon forest and the discussions on biodiversity. Moreover, the ecological perspective has influenced other areas of the natural sciences, involving disciplines such as toxicology, hydrology, chemistry, and medicine, which have dealt more systematically with issues of environmental impact and degradation (see, for instance, Brannstrom and Oliveira 2000 and Benetti *et alli*, 2004). In addition, the number of projects and publications in these areas has showed a steady growth. There is certainly room for philosophical discussions at this point. However, our concern here is with those theoretical perspectives that have addressed more clearly the need for conceptual tools to orient environmental action at large.

After 1992, *political theory* was emphasized as a possible way of interpreting environmental activism. In a review and commentary of the main themes and decisions of the UN Conference, Benjamin (1993) shows that there was an implicit dynamics in the event, which could be portrayed as a dialogue between two actors: the ecologists (who would take an ecocentric perspective and claim to represent both the environmental reality and the claims of environmentalists) and the rationalists (who took an utterly anthropocentric perspective and were acting as commentators on the themes presented, translating them in terms of the existing social, political or economic frameworks, without questioning their validity or applicability). The concerns with political rationality could have been addressed philosophically with the categories of liberalism, Marxism and other theories, but this does not seem to have been done. In the background, military developmentalism was being updated in economic models.

Similar positions are described in the work of Crespo and Leitão (1993), from the point of view of *sociology and anthropology*. They developed an extensive survey on what Brazilians thought about ecology in the aftermath of the UN Conference. In a complementary study on the images of the environment in Brazil, Carvalho (1998) showed how the idea of “paradise” was a main motive in the ecological imaginary of Brazilian society. On the other hand, Alonso and Costa (2001) developed an extensive evaluation of the literature on the environment from the perspective of the social sciences, indicating that there was a slow growth of interest on environmental issues during the 1980s and a greater interest on these issues after the UN Conference in Rio in 1992. However, they also pointed out that the intellectual discourse in this area lacked methodological and theoretical sophistication, being characterized mainly by its – sometimes blind – militant character and concentrated on very specific case studies. Following Pacheco *et alli* (1992), Alonso and Costa (2002) went further to argue that environmental issues in Brazil needed to be understood also according to cultural categories and include the recognition that social and environmental movements, politicians and the academia had conflicting interests.

From an *international studies* perspective, Héctor Leis (1996) and Eduardo Viola (1998) studied the ecological movement and its relation to the democratization and globalization processes in Brazil and Latin America. Viola has shown that after the military dictatorship the environmentalist movement began its institutionalization process, trying to unite different groups within the structure of party politics (Viola 1988) and spreading environmentalism to other social sectors. While this led to the creation of

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

the Brazilian *Green Party*, this initiative was not as successful as it could have been, due to the lack of sound principles and political strategies (Viola 1992, 1997). Thus, although the Green Party has had a good exposition in Rio de Janeiro – especially through politicians such as Alfredo Sirkis and Fernando Gabeira –, its political representation in Brazil was of only an unexpressive 1% (Viola 1987). Also for this reason, forms and initiatives for green politics in Brazil have been carried out mainly by the Workers' Party – with which the Green Party has been associated – or under the influence of international groups.

In *legal theory*, there is certainly much material to be discussed, starting with the seminal work of Leme Machado (1996) on *environmental law*. Out of his studies and the foundation of the Society for Environmental Law, this area has become highly specialized, with several publications and authors dedicated to commenting on the legal framework already existing in Brazil since the 1930s. More recently, environmental law has been more concerned with water issues and its intersection with economic issues. Cueva (2001) has provided a good overview of this field. Another area that requires further reflection concerns the permissibility of genetically modified crops in Brazil: while activists and the Ministry of the Environment – Marina Silva, who was a rubber tapper and worked with Chico Mendes – were against this, there was much pressure from economic groups for the use of genetically modified organisms. This was the most important discussion after 2003.

*Environmental economics* is yet another approach, exemplified by Alexander Fuchs' analysis of the conflict between economy and ecology concerning the Atlantic forest in the state of São Paulo (Fuchs 1996). Based on his field research, he concluded that the native population of the region should receive support for sustainable agriculture and tourism in a sustainable way. Similar studies have dealt with the global impact of the Amazonian rainforest (Hageman 1985; Batmanian 1994). Nevertheless, Peter May edited *Natural Resource Valuation and Policy in Brazil* (1999), with various articles that offered a general overview of “alternative forms” by which economists address ecological issues in Brazil. Instead of limiting their concern with the Amazon, which has already considerable attention in international studies, these economists discussed other ecosystems and social realities, developing micro-economic studies on their sustainability and assessing their application to policy and management (Harris 2002). The principles guiding *environmental economics* are those of efficiency, cost-benefit analysis, and balance of natural resources, as well as sustainable development and sufficiency (Chichilnisky 1997).

One of the most successful areas for environmental theory has been *environmental education*. One reason for the success of this subject is the fact that it assumes human unawareness of the environment as its point of departure and proposes education as a means to attain such awareness. This process is well summarized by Isabel Carvalho (2005) in her short article on the state of environmental education in Brazil. In her view, since the 1980s there is not only an increasing number of teachers and professors who understand themselves as “environmental educators”, but also the institutionalization of this field, especially with the establishment of the Brazilian Network of Environmental Education (RBEA). Furthermore, environmental education has been included as an important topic in the Agenda 21 and thus incorporated in

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

Brazilian policies. While this positive view of environmental education is shared by many authors, such as Brügger (1999), Cavalvanti (1995), Di Ciommo (1999) and Grün (1996), and despite the growing number of publications and organizations in this field, the problem is the often conflicting pedagogical approaches based on different philosophical views – constructivism, liberationism, eco-feminism, hermeneutics, behaviorism and postmodernism, among others. Nonetheless, the different trends have stressed “nature” and “human sensibility” as two key categories to environmental education. While environmental educators have clearly established a dialogue with philosophy and opted for Gadamer’s hermeneutics and the Edgar Morin’s theory of complexity, there seems to be little direct dialogue between educators and philosophers, although many philosophers have moved on to the field of environmental education.

Another perspective closely related to environmental philosophy is represented by *bioethics*, an area that has many overlaps with environmental ethics. The Brazilian Society of Bioethics was founded in 1995 and established a fruitful cooperation with philosophers from other contexts, such as H.T. Engelhardt Jr., John Harris, Alasdair Campbell, and others. The development of this field was fast, with a growing number of associations, new publications, and the organization of several events (Diniz, Guilhem & Garrafa 1999). However, the focus of bioethicists in Brazil was on health issues observed in Catholic universities and public research institutions attached to medical hospitals. Due to the connection to the Catholic Church, many initiatives centered around issues such as abortion, euthanasia, human cloning, sexuality, and human rights (Pessini & Barchifontaine 2000; Diniz 2004). One important topic that is related to environmental problems and could have been explored, but was somewhat neglected at the beginning of this work on bioethics, is the problem of genetically modified organisms.

Finally, there is also the perspective of *theology*, represented primarily by Leonardo Boff. Known as one of the most important representatives of liberation theology, who was silenced by the Vatican, Boff has progressively turned his attention to ecological questions, without losing sight of the perspective that has oriented his past work: the spirituality of a Christian ethics and the preferential option for the poor. Based on this, Boff reflects on the concrete experiences of grassroots groups such as the Base Christian Communities, the Brazilian Landless Movement (MST) and several community organizations spread throughout the country, relating their suffering and poverty to international economic projects that destroy their natural resources (Boff 1995). In order to orient these alternative groups, Boff not only goes back to Saint Francis and his ethics of *care*, but also tries to go well beyond anthropocentrism by urging a spiritual revolution based on the idea that we should see ourselves as members of a “larger planetary and cosmic community” (Boff 1997).

All these perspectives are important and meaningful, as they turn their attention to nature, ecology, and the environment, and try to mediate the attempted dialogue between the main facts, actions, and actors of environmentalism in Brazil, articulating their claims at the social, political, and economical levels. However, with a few comments that follow the interdisciplinary approach to environmental philosophy proposed by Donald VanDeVeer and Christine Pierce (1994), we can indicate their interaction with philosophical themes. For instance, the reliance of environmental education on philosophy is clearer, but philosophical theses are affirmed tacitly, without discussion of

their premises, thus leading to a simple assertion of conflicting conceptions of nature based on common sense. This is also the case with economics, a field whose outcome is still heavily dependent on the adoption of philosophical views on self-interest or possession of rights, or those of Adam Smith or Karl Max – to mention only the classics. The same could be applied to law theory and political theory, which are generally based on liberal and contractarian theories. These are theoretical assumptions affirmed tacitly, but these points are never discussed in detail.

Now, after having established the points of contact between several disciplines and some philosophical themes, we could explore and discuss their perspectives and problems in detail. However, I shall leave these issues aside and take up again the question concerning the impact of philosophy on environmental issues in Brazil *vis-à-vis* the plethora of already existing theoretical initiatives. In my view, we can argue that the depletion of natural resources, deforestation, extinction of species, legal frameworks to protect the environment, economic considerations on sustainability and the well-being of present and future generations can be discussed also in terms of epistemic, normative, aesthetic, political, or economic categories that are part of the philosophical repertoire. There is enough material for philosophical reflection, but again, we need to deal with a lack of initiative on the part of philosophers.

### **3. Philosophy and the Environment**

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned that the question to be discussed at the end was very simple: *What has been the role of philosophy in the discussion about environmental issues in Brazil?* Based on the review I presented so far, it is possible to answer this question *via negationes*: Philosophy has played a minimal historical and direct role in environmental discussions in Brazil.

However, if we consider the indirect impact, it is possible to argue that many other disciplines are informed by philosophical concepts and use certain philosophical tools to develop their respective contributions. Based on this assumption, we can now briefly discuss whether philosophers have any role in considering issues in relation to the environment in Brazil.

One could say that each of the areas I reviewed have an implicit philosophical dimension. Another possible approach could simply consider whether and how the ideas of some environmental philosophers from other contexts or the debates on environmental ethics have had any impact in discussions concerning the environment in Brazil. It is also possible to bring the discussion to an even higher order and check the impact of philosophical views on the premises of the sciences and disciplines seen above. From a more bibliographical perspective or in the light of the history of ideas, a more concrete approach would be to concentrate on the works of professional philosophers around the world, who clearly focus on environmental philosophy, and then check whether they have any impact in Brazilian discussions. For example, one could analyze the translation of Peter Singer's *Animals Liberation* (2004) and other writings into Portuguese and measure how others have cited it. Moreover, there is also the possibility of observing the impact of Holmes Rolston III in his visits to Brazil (Rolston 1992 and 2000) or the adoption of Callicott's pluralist view on environmental ethics (2001) and then seeing how his

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

dialogue with other philosophers went along. The same would apply in considering the approach of German philosophers to environmental issues, such as Karl-Otto Apel (cf. Apel 1988, Gronke and Littig 2002). In all these cases, we can check if there is any compatibility between these several theoretical views and the practical aspects, we have seen so far.

All these conjectures indicate that there are not only several environmental problems, but also corresponding alternatives that could be explored. However, at first glance these venues do not seem to have been considered. Therefore, instead of continuing with these types of conjectures, I just want to affirm that despite the growing practical concern with the environment in Brazil, environmental action in Brazil seems to suffer from a lack of dialogue with philosophy. Why is this a problem? In my view, philosophy could help us to discuss and develop principles to orient good concepts and good practices. One reason to appeal to philosophy is the apparent lack of consensus among environmentalists, the fact that sustainable development still seems to be a strong concept, despite its internal contradiction, and the need to articulate the different areas of environmental research in a form of dialogue. In the end, the lack of consensus, concept, and communication is due to a deficit on sound reflection on the role of environmental philosophy in Brazil.

What can we learn from this? Let me summarize my conclusions and answer this last question:

*The very name "Brazil" implies a history of environmental problems.* I argued that Brazil is a good case for environmental philosophy. To back this claim, I started with a first section in which I not only reflected on the meaning of "Brazil," but also presented a brief environmental history of Brazil and added that this country has been the setting for the action of key environmental leaders and events. There has been a growing preservationist and ecological concern by activist groups and many initiatives to protect the environment in the country, involving the State, private initiatives and the civil society.

*Many disciplines are studying and addressing environmental problems in Brazil.* These problems go from deforestation and natural catastrophes through policies on natural resources and minimization of pollution to ecological studies and concern for the welfare of present and future human generations. These actions had the impulse of democratic processes and the principles of the UN Conference in 1992, but now we see a lack of good principles to orient better practices.

*Philosophy has played a minimal historical role in environmental discussions in Brazil.* Despite the growing practical concern with the environment in Brazilian society, philosophers have been slow in addressing these issues. Based on the plethora of already existing practical and theoretical initiatives, there is no excuse for not using ethical, aesthetic, political, epistemic, and other philosophical categories to address environmental issues and contribute to the development of new concepts.

*Recent environmental discussions in Brazil show the tension between two tendencies: military developmentalism and militant environmental activism.* As I reviewed the theoretical discourses on the environment in Brazil, I presented a double perspective: on the one hand, I recognized that there are important intuitions at play, but they seem to be split into two fractions that follow the developmentalist approach of a

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

military technocracy or the democratic perspective of groups in civil society that attempt to address environmental problems.

*There is a possible role for environmental philosophy in Brazil.* Military developmentalism and militant environmental activism certainly have their philosophical assumptions. As they seem to have become obsolete, we need to think of new concepts, programs, and traditions that could provide new theoretical perspectives and motivation to consistent and consensual action. This may be a role for philosophy, which can make use of ontological, political, aesthetic, or epistemic tools. However, this has not been done in a satisfactory manner yet.

#### 4. – References

- ALONSO, A. & COSTA, V. (2001) “The Environmental Field in Brazil: An analysis of the social sciences literature” in *DRC Working Paper*, Number 26, Brighton.
- ALONSO, A. & COSTA, V. (2002) “Por uma sociologia dos conflitos ambientais no Brasil” in *Ecologia Política. Natureza, sociedade y utopia*, Buenos Aires, Clacso - Conferência Latino-americana e Caribenha de Ciências Sociais, pp. 115-136.
- ANDERSON, R. “The Quilombo of Palmares: A New Overview of a Maroon State in Seventeenth-Century Brazil” in *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3, Brazil: History and Society (Oct., 1996), pp. 545-566.
- APEL, K.-O. (1988) *Diskurs und Verantwortung*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp.
- ASSUNÇÃO, P. (2000) *A terra dos brasis: a natureza da América portuguesa vista pelos primeiros jesuítas (1549-1596)*, São Paulo, Annablume.
- BATMANIAN, G. (1994) “The Pilot Program to Conserve the Brazilian Rainforest” in *International Environmental Affairs*, Vol. 6, Number 1.
- BENJAMIN, C. (1993) *Diálogo sobre Ecologia, Ciência e Política*. Rio de Janeiro, Editora Nova Fronteira S.A / Fórum de Ciência e Cultura da UFRJ.
- BENNETTI, A., LANNA, A. & COBALCHINI, M. (2004) “Current practices for establishing environmental flows in Brazil” in *River Research and Applications*, Vol. 20, pp. 427-444.
- BIRD, F. (2004) “International Trade as a Vehicle for Reducing Poverty: The Body Shop’s Community Trade Programme” in Bird, F. & Herman, S. (Eds.) *International Businesses and the Challenges of Poverty in the Developing World: Case Studies on Global Responsibilities and Practices*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan.
- BOFF, L. (1995) *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books.
- BOFF, L. (1997) *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books.
- BRANNSTROM, C. & OLIVEIRA, A.M.S (2000) “Human modification of stream valleys in the western plateau of São Paulo, Brazil: implications for environmental narratives and management” in *Land Degradation and Development*, Vol. 11(6), pp. 535–548.
- BRÜGGER, P. (1999) *Educação ou Adestramento Ambiental?* Florianópolis, Let. Contemporâneas.
- CALLICOT, B. (2001) “Multicultural Environmental Ethics” in *Daedalus*, Vol. 130, No. 4 (Fall 2001) [Religion and Ecology: Can the climate change?], pp. 77-97

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

- CARVALHO, I. (2005) “A discussion of environmental education on the basis of diagnostics of four ecosystems in Brazil” in *Educação e Pesquisa*, Vol. 31(2), May-August (2005), pp. 301-316.
- CARVALHO, J. (1998) “O motive edênico no imaginário social brasileiro” in *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, Number 38, Outubro 1998.
- CAVALCANTI, C. [Org.] (1995) *Desenvolvimento e Natureza: estudos para uma sociedade sustentável*, São Paulo, Cortez.
- CHAUÍ, M. (1986) *Conformismo e Resistência*. São Paulo, Brasiliense.
- CHAVES, C. (2000) *A marcha nacional dos Sem-Terra. Um estudo sobre a fabricação do social*, São Paulo, Relume-Dumará.
- CHICHILNISKY, G. (1997) “Development and Global Finance: The case for an International Bank for Environmental Settlements” in DRAGUN, A.K. & JAKOBSSON, K. (Eds.) *Sustainability and Global Environmental Policy*, Cheltenham [UK], Edward Elgar.
- COUTO E SILVA, G. (1967), *Geopolítica do Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, Ed. José Olympio.
- CRESPO, S. & LEITÃO, P. (1993), *O Que o Brasil Pensa de Ecologia?* Rio de Janeiro, MAST/CETEM/ISER.
- CUEVA, R. V-B. (2001) *Wirtschaftliche Anreize für den Umweltschutz: Eine vergleichende Untersuchung von System und Recht der Wasserbewirtschaftung in Deutschland und Brasilien*, Frankfurt, P. Lang.
- DEAN, W. (1987) *Brazil and the Struggle for the Rubber*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- DEAN, W. (1995) *With Broadax and Firebrand: The destruction of the Brazilian Atlantic Forest*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- DI CIOMMO, R. (1999) *Ecofeminismo e Educação Ambiental*. São Paulo, Cone Sul/UNIUBE.
- DIEGUES, A.C. (2005) *El mito de la Naturaleza Intocada*, São Paulo, NUPAUB.
- DINIZ, D. (2004) “Abortion in Brazilian Bioethics” in *Série Anis*, Brasília [LetrasLivres], 1-3 (Março 2004), pp. 1-3.
- DINIZ, D., GHUILHEM, D.B., GARRAFA, V. (1999), “Bioethics in Brazil” in *Bioethics*, Vol. 13 Numbers 3-4 (1999), pp. 244-248.
- DUSSEL, E. (1995) *The Invention of America*, New York, Continuum.
- DUSSEL, E. (2002) “Brasil: Séculos de Encobrimento” in A. Nascimento (Ed.) *Brasil. Perspectivas Internacionais*, Piracicaba, Editora UNIMEP.
- EISENBERG, J. (2000), *As missões jesuíticas e o pensamento político moderno: Encontros culturais, aventuras teóricas*, Belo Horizonte, Ed. UFMG.
- FAUSTO, B. (1999) *A Concise History of Brazil*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- FUCHS, A. (1996) *Lo sungsansa tze fu r den Konflikt zwischen O konomie und O kologie im tropischen und subtropischen Regenwald am Beispiel der Mata Atla ntica Brasiliens* [Kölner Forschungen zur Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeographie, Band. 45], Köln, Universitätsverlag.
- GRIESSE, M. (2008) “Social ethics for new technologies: The case of DuPont” in *Revista de Educação – COGEIME*, Vol. 17, Number 32-33 (Janeiro-Dezembro 2008), pp. 103-118.

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

- GRONKE, H. & LITTIG, B. (2002) “Problemas Ambientais, Ética e Política Ambientais: Os riscos ecológicos como desafio para a ética do discurso” in *Impulso* 30, Vol. 13, pp. 11-34.
- GRÜN, M. (1996) *Ética e Educação Ambiental - A Conexão Necessária*. São Paulo, Papirus.
- GUIMARÃES, R. (1991) *The ecopolitics of development in the Third World: Politics and environment in Brazil*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- HAGEMAN, H. (1985) *Hohe Schornsteine am Amazonas. Umweltplünderung, Politik der Konzerne und Ökologiebewegung in Brasilien*, Köln, Dreisam.
- HALL, A. (1989) *Developing Amazonia, deforestation and social conflict in Brazil's Carajás programme*, Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- HARRIS, J.C. (2002) “Book Review: *Natural Resource Valuation and Policy in Brazil*”, Peter H. May [ed] (Columbia University Press, 1999). In *Human Ecology* 30 (No. 3, 2002): pp. 417-419.
- KARRIEM, A. (2009) “The rise and transformation of the Brazilian Landless Movement into a counter-hegemonic political actor: A Gramscian analysis” in *Geoforum*, Vol. 40 (2009), pp. 316-325.
- KENT, R. K., 'Palmares: An African State in Brazil,' in *Journal of African History*, no. 6 (1965), pp. 161-75.
- LEIS, H. (1996) *O Labirinto: ensaios sobre ambientalismo e globalização*. São Paulo, Gaia.
- LEME MACHADO, P.A. (1996) *Direito Ambiental Brasileiro*, São Paulo, Malheiros Editores.
- MARTINS, W. (1978). *História da Inteligência Brasileira*, 2 Vols, Sao Paulo, Cultrix.
- MAY, P. (1999) *Natural Resource Valuation and Police in Brazil: Methods and Cases*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- MAXWELL, K. (1973) *Conflicts and Conspiracies. Brazil-Portugal (1750-1808)*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- MELLO, J. *Tempo dos flamengos: influência da ocupação holandesa na vida a na cultura do norte do Brasil*, Recife, Fundação Joaquim Nabuco, 1987.
- MENESES BASTOS, R. J. 1996. “Musicalidade e ambientalismo na redescoberta do Eldorado e do Caraíba: Uma Antropologia do Encontro Raoni-Sting”, in *Revista de Antropologia*, Vol. 39, Number 1, pp. 145-189.
- MENDES, C. (1989) *Fight for the Forest. Chico Mendes in his own Words*. London, Latin American Bureau (Research and Action).
- PACHECO, R.S., LOUREIRO, M.R., FINGERMAN, H., AMARAL, H. & McDOWELL, S. (1992) “Atores e conflitos em questões ambientais urbanas” in *Espaço e Debates*, Vol. 35, São Paulo.
- PADUA, J. (2000) “Annihilating Natural Productions: Nature's Economy, Colonial Crisis and the Origins of Brazilian Political Environmentalism, 1786-1810”.
- PADUA, J. (2002) *Um Sopro de Destruição: Pensamento Político e Crítica Ambiental No Brasil Escravista, 1786–1888*, Rio de Janeiro, Jorge Zahar.
- PESSINI, L. & BARCHIFONTAINE, Ch. (2000), *Problemas atuais da bioética*, São Paulo, Ed. Loyola.

## South American Environmental Philosophy Section

- PRZEWORSKI, A. & LIMONGI, F. (1993) "Political Regimes and Economic Growth" in *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 7, Number 3 (Summer 1993), pp. 51-69.
- REVKIN, A. (1994) *The Burning Season: The Murder of Chico Mendes and the Fight for the Amazon Rainforest*, New York, Plum.
- ROLSTON III, H. (1992) "Earth Ethics: A Challenge to Liberal Education" in J. Baird Callicott and Fernando R. da Rocha (Eds.), *Earth Summit Ethics: Toward a Reconstructive Postmodern Philosophy on the Atlantic Rim*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, pp. 161- 192. [Keynote address at Conference in Porto Alegre, Brazil, May 25-29, 1992].
- ROLSTON III, H. (2000) "Intrinsic Values in Nature" in Miguel S. Milano and Verônica Theulen (Eds.) *Proceedings of the Second Brazilian Congress on Conservation Areas*, [November 5-9, 2000, Campo Grande, Brazil], Vol. 1, pp. 76-84.
- ROTHMAN, F. (2001) "A comparative study of Dam resistance campaigns and environmental policy in Brazil" in *Journal of Environment and Development*, Vol. 10, Number 4, December 2001, pp. 317-344.
- SCHWARTZ, S. *Slaves, Peasants, and Rebels: Reconsidering Brazilian Slavery*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1992.
- SINGER, Peter (2004) *Libertação Animal*, São Paulo, Ed. Lugano.
- STEPAN, A. (1988) *Rethinking Military Politics: Brazil and the Southern Cone*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- TURNER, T. (1993) "The Role of Indigenous Peoples in the Environmental Crisis: The Example of the Kayapo of the Brazilian Amazon" in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, Vol. 36, Number 3, pp. 526-545.
- TURNER, T. (1995) "An Indigenous People's Struggle for Socially Equitable and Ecologically Sustainable Production: The Kayapo Revolt against Extractivism" in *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, Vol. 1, Number 1, pp. 98-121.
- VANDEVEER, D. & PIERCE, C [Eds.] (1994) *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book. Philosophy, Ecology, Economics*, Belmont (CA), Wadsworth.
- VIOLA, E. (1998) "El Proceso de Globalización de actores en la política ambiental brasileira" in *Nueva Sociedad*, Caracas, Number.153, pp. 24-32.
- VIOLA, E. (1997) "The Environmental Movement in Brazil: Institutionalization, Sustainable Development and Crisis of Governance since 1987" in N. MacDonald and O. Stern (Eds.) *Latin American Environmental Policy in International Perspective*, Boulder, Westview Press.
- VIOLA, E. (1992) "From Preservationism to sustainable development. A challenge for the environmental movement in Brazil", in *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, London, Vol. 12, Number 4, pp. 129-150.
- VIOLA, E. (1988) "The Ecologist Movement in Brazil", in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol.12, Number 2, pp. 211-228.
- VIOLA, E. (1987) "O movimento ecológico no Brasil (1974-1986): Do ambientalismo à eopolítica" in *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais*, Vol. 1(3), pp. 5-26).
- WRIGHT, A. & WOLFORD, W. (2003) *To inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil*, Oakland, Food First.

South American Environmental Philosophy Section

YANARELLA, E. & BARTILOW, H. (2000) "Dreams of sustainability: Beyond the antinomies of the global sustainability debate" in *International Journal of Sustainable Development*, Vol. 3(4), January 200, pp. 370-389.