

THE POWER OF THINGS WITHOUT PRICE: TRADITIONAL PEOPLES AND COMMUNITIES AND THE CRITICISM OF DEVELOPMENT

Emmanuel Duarte Almada^{1*} and *Marcel Serra Coelho*²

¹ *Laboratory of Biocultural Studies – State University of Minas Gerais*

² *Laboratory of Evolutionary Ecology and Biodiversity – Federal University of Minas Gerais.*

*E-mails: almadaceae@gmail.com**, *marcel.s.coelho@gmail.com*

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With the current collapse of the planet's ecological systems, the technical discourse about ecological modernization still flourishes in political and academic arenas. Within this context, the economic valuation of services related to ecosystems and conservation biology are among the key technical and ideological tools of those who defend the viability of the current development model that is supposedly the most sustainable (Coelho *et al.* 2013). At the same time, social movements against the negative impacts of the urban-industrial capitalistic model of development have spread throughout the periphery of the world-system. Traditional peoples and communities who fight for their territorial and identity rights are highlighted among them. These struggles, however, represent a reaffirmation of modes of existence, of sociability and of the replication of material bases that oppose the economic system and hegemonic politics. If, on one hand, economic valuation is based on an accounting of ecosystemic and biodiversity services in relation to stocks for the production of market goods, the cosmology of these peoples and communities points in a different direction. Frequently characterized as subsistence, the economics of these groups is actually based on the maintenance and regeneration of environmental conditions. The development of new agricultural varieties, technical innovations, and social systems, as well as the appropriation and distribution of resources, are not primarily focused on accumulation, but rather maintenance. On the other hand, the ecosystemic services that are increasingly managed in a secular manner by traditional peoples and communities are accounted for in the environmental valuation as development-related service. The true value of the

practices and knowledge of traditional peoples and communities could be due to their having proven in the end that the solution to the environmental crisis will not come from market relations.

The voice of both indigenous and traditional peoples and communities, defending their territories and ways of life, began to manifest primarily after the second half of the 20th century, along with the so-called "new social movements". This reaffirmation of cultural identities comprises a resistance to the progress made by predatory development models beginning in the 1980s, particularly in response to neo-liberal models.

It is important to remember that the regions that possess the greatest biodiversity on the planet are also those where we find the greatest linguistic and cultural diversity. Indigenous populations around the world represent a population of 300 to 500 million people and, if we consider other communities with traditional ways of life (farmers, fishers, *ribeirinhos*, *quilombolas*, etc.), the population grows to about 1,300,000 to 1,600,000. Of the approximately 7,000 languages spoken throughout the world, 150 are sustained by 240 indigenous populations in Brazil, totaling 896,917 people, according to the 2010 census.

In thinking about the economy of the environment, all of this cultural diversity could be included in the category of non-utilitarian or intrinsic values. On the other hand, the traditional knowledge of these peoples and communities is responsible for maintaining ecosystemic services that are essential for the entire society. Countless international documents, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of

Cultural Expressions, point to the need to protect and consider traditional knowledge for the conservation of ecosystems.

Traditional peoples and communities are responsible for the maintenance of the majority of the planet's agrobiodiversity, which is the base for food sovereignty for the majority of the world's population. According to the FAO, close to 90% of the world's food production comes from family-based agriculture. In Brazil, family farming represents about 70% of food production, while occupying only 24% of the land (França *et al.* 2009). Beyond food production volume, farmers that are family-based, indigenous or from traditional communities are responsible for the maintenance of millions of agricultural varieties. As an example, in the high Rio Negro (northern Brazil) alone, there are more than 70 varieties of cassava, which is the result of a complex system of cultural exchange. In a global context, which is experiencing accelerated environmental changes, this enormous agrobiodiversity becomes even more important for the maintenance of socioecological resilience.

In a similar manner, traditional health care systems facilitate bioprospecting - and frequently biopiracy - of new medications by the pharmaceutical industry. In this area, key conflicts related to intellectual property and patent systems come to a halt. While there is an attempt to "domesticate" and adapt traditional knowledge to market logic via TRIPS (Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights), the majority of traditional peoples and communities resist a system that privatizes this knowledge. The attempts to commercialize indigenous health care systems illustrate well the incapacity - to understand - or even a deliberate lack of understanding - of other cosmologies, in which relationships with others and with nature are not in line with market regulations.

Payment mechanisms for environmental services can represent yet another threat to traditional territories. As communities are reduced to being suppliers of environmental services, and nature (air, water, biodiversity) becomes a commodity, autonomy in territorial management becomes increasingly compartmentalized and fragmented.

The *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, an initiative of the UN, affirms the impossibili-

ty of considering local ecological knowledge in decision-making. This effort to hear the voice of traditional peoples and communities represents an important step in the fight against the "monocultures of the mind" and in support of an ecology of knowledge (Shiva 2002, Santos 2007). However, involving traditional knowledge, even if it is in line with the terms of political thinking and hegemonic economics, will contribute little to the building of a new environmental rationality (Leff 2003). The knowledge of traditional peoples and communities is not made of elements that can be individualized, but rather is comprised of other cosmologies that are incommensurate with the modern economic logic. This is where the impossibility arises in fitting traditional and indigenous cultures into the logic of ecosystemic valuation. If, on one hand, the economic valuation of ecosystems serves ecological modernization as a tool that guarantees a supposed ecological sustainability of the urban-industrial capitalist system, traditional cosmologies and ways of life bring to light the impracticality of reconciling capitalism with the preservation of the planet's living systems. In response to the question posed by James O'Connor (2003), *é possível um capitalismo sustentável? (Is sustainable capitalism possible?)*, indigenous and traditional communities answer: *não* (no)!

Territorial and identity defense movements can contribute to building "another possible world", but not through the inclusion of their knowledge as commodities in the world market. Perhaps the best example today of the characteristic radicalism of indigenous cosmologies is the principle of *Sumak Kawsay*, translated as the principle of *Bem-viver (Living well)*, which was created in the midst of the Latin American indigenous movement, particularly in Bolivia and Ecuador. *Sumak Kawsay* represents a reaffirmation of ancestral ways of life, based on other sociabilities and ways of relating with nature, as well as a denial of paradigms related to capitalism, development and economic growth as the great obstacles of modern day.

A political development that resulted from adopting the *Sumak Kawsay* principle was the creation of the Plurinational States in these two countries. This means recognition and subsequent incorporation of radical differences between cultures that comprise the society, creating opportuni-

ty for true dialogue around different knowledge. In the case of Ecuador, *Sumak Kawsay* was accepted in such a way that the Constitution recognized nature (*Pacha mama*) as a bearer of rights, bringing indigenous cosmologies to the center of the country's political organization.

In Brazil, the Extractive Reserves (RESEX) and the Sustainable Development Reserves (RDS), which emerged amid the development of the socioenvironmental field during the 1980s, represent other means of resistance and the social reappropriation of nature (Leff 2003). Even having been created under the auspices of the National State, the RESEX and RDS serve the maintenance of anti-hegemonic sociability mechanisms, where there is no room for the privatization of life.

The role of traditional peoples and communities is unquestionable in the maintenance of ecosystemic services and in biodiversity conservation. Still, their principal contribution to overcoming the environmental crisis is exactly the subversive potential of their cosmologies and territorialities before the colonial and Eurocentric thinking that still feeds the ideas of progress and economic development. In the last five centuries, in the name of development and modern values, millions of lives have been wasted and decimated, territories invaded, cultures exterminated, entire ecosystems destroyed and the destiny of all humankind seriously compromised. The way to overcome the crisis is

not found within the system, but at its margins. It is from the periphery of the world-system, of life and of the biocultural memory of traditional peoples and communities where viable socioecological paths have emerged (Toledo & Barrera-Bassols 2008). And, by being focused on the maintenance of life and not on the accumulation of capital, traditional peoples and communities will certainly be the protagonists of this *other possible and, urgently needed, world*.

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