

AN ECOLOGICAL VISION OF POLITICS

MANUEL GONZALO

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Becoming Aware

Something extraordinary came from the dark side of the Moon. In December of 1968, on board Apollo 8, William Anders captured something historic. For the first time, Earth was photographed in brilliant color, emerging from the sterile lunar soil.

"The Blue Planet"—as Frank Borman, the commander of the vessel, would call it—was lost in the obscurity of the galactic depths. Our planet looked like a small dingy sailing upon the ocean. Its smallness was notorious. The three astronauts felt a deep sense of fragility at the same time as they were captivated with admiration for the beauty that it radiated.

This photography produced an enormous environmental impact. It called into question the understanding of those who believed that "the planet possesses limitless resources."

In the 1960s, developmentalist theories preached that progress was limitless and that the American model could be replicated in every country. The photo denied it: in order for each person to expend the energy that an average North American expended there would need to be 300 earths...but there was only one earth.

Concern for the planet increased. In 1972 the Club of Rome published *Limits of Growth*. It was followed by The 2000 Global Report to the President, of the United States Environmental Quality Advisory Counsel. Later, the Evaluation of the Ecosystem of the Millennium insisted: there is an inseparable bond between humanity and the planet, and dilapidating resources has a steep price.

What has become of these documents? The governments did not give a coherent response. Nevertheless, knowledge increased, and an anthropocentric vision developed into a geocentric, cosmocentric vision.

Humans combined their self-satisfaction with scientific advances with the myopia of thinking that limits for development did not exist. They embraced a domineering posture, but this posture was revealed as a lie by the facts and by international events such as the Kyoto Protocol in 1990 and the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which gave a scientific

foundation to a grave concern. Taking care of the planet was no longer a job for crazy people or poets, but an urgent, and dramatic duty, impossible to postpone. The recent report from Paris, *Climate Change 2007*, holds human beings primarily responsible for this climatic disequilibrium.

A Global Vision

In 1866, the Prussian biologist Ernst Haeckel coined the term "ecology" to study the relationships that organisms maintain with their environment and with other species. A new vision was being born that went beyond the concrete tree in order to analyze the forest of which it formed a part. Until that point, the analysis of the individual part dominated: one conducted incisions and dissections in order to examine the exact muscle of the animal, the composite eye of the insect. Haeckel was looking for a vision of the whole. Thus, "ecology" combined meteorology, biology, geology, sociology, and even spirituality. Every simple tree is part of an enormous tapestry, all-embracing and synthesizing. Now, the planet is our new forest to study. We have become aware that everything is interrelated and that, without each species, life is impossible: all emerge in their significance and must be respected. Since then, ecology has amplified its presence in different areas. Let us look at four.

The first has been called "environmental ecology," the science of the interrelationships between organisms and their environments. It speaks to us of food chains, habitats, ecological niches, environmental quality, ecosystems, populations, pollution, and biomass. There are only three starring actors in this movie of life: the producers, the consumers, and the decomposers. An ecosystem is constituted by different groups that are interdependent. In order for it to be stable, the recycling of materials must follow a circular path. All the Earth is a large ecosystem.

The second area has been called "social ecology," the analysis of the economic models and political decisions that impact the millions of human beings who populate the planet. Can an economic model—the capitalist model—that daily marginalizes more and more millions of people in the cycle of production

and consumption, be valid? According to Leonardo Boff, “when capitalist practices dominate, ecological concerns are sent into exile or consigned to limbo.” The system of the Earth is in just as much danger as the poor of the Earth. The problems of production and distribution, social justice, marginalization, benefits, basic necessities, politics seeking the common good are treated here in all their roughness. This ecological consciousness has painstakingly emerged, subjected to strong criticisms from powerful groups—like the Bush government—which pay for studies which diminish the importance of the disasters that the planet confronts.

The third is known as “human ecology.” It has to do with the attitudes of people and creating a life in harmony with oneself, each other, and with the environment. Some postures—domineering, monopolizing, excluding, and dilapidating—far from nurturing human beings, permit the instincts of territoriality and accumulation to serve as the North Star. The “warrior,” accustomed to dominating, imposing, tyrannizing, and being self-centered, passes through his life destroying spaces for humanity. His attitude impacts others by destroying their environment, marginalizing them, and excluding them from the banquet of life.

The fourth can be defined as “cosmic ecology.” It locates the roots of the human being in the long evolutionary history of the cosmos. The human species, all other animal species, and all living things share the same origin: the first cell that possibly appeared in the depths of the ocean. There had to be many prior conditions for life to surge upon the Earth: a planet formed more than 4,650 million years ago, a star recently fallen, the thousands of millions of years that passed since the appearance of the Milky Way and other galaxies, and the elemental particles that danced in the times of the Big Bang...There are many reasons for discovery and surprise. The human species is the latecomer in a chain of about 14 million years of evolution.

Cosmic ecology shows us what we human beings are: the creativity and infinite heat of the first seconds of Creation, made incarnate in consciousness and the capacity to love. Many scientific discoveries have been necessary so that our species could take account of our origin. Let us hope that humanity carries on its shoulders this beautiful history. It is an inviting and dynamic call: this reality is converted in

a demand for stewardship; the knowledge is translated into responsibility.

Towards the Future

Ecological knowledge understands how to look at the past and towards the future. In their wisdom, some indigenous communities insist that no significant decisions be taken without taking into account the repercussions upon those who will live four generations from now. Ecological knowledge is aware of the complexity of all that exists.

If we did not know our origins or the limitations of the planet, perhaps we could justify environmental pillage and the belief in growth without limits. But the photo from Apollo 8 and the theory of the Big Bang help us to know where we are standing and from where we have come. Embracing our origins, we can embrace our role as humans. We are called to take care of this fragile planet and to marvel at the creation of which we form a part.

We are made of star dust. The construction of the atoms that constitute our bodies and the development of our cells have taken place over the course of millions of years. In us, the Universe has become conscious. Through us, it thinks, loves, questions, and takes responsibility. We have the capacity to adore this reality.

This responsibility urges us to create, reclaim, and practice an economy that takes into account the necessities of the majorities, a non-excluding politics, a culture of closeness with others—in sum, a holistic vision that lets us commune with all the cosmos and to live in harmony with all creatures. From this vision—personal and political, ethical and spiritual—we will know that we are translating the wish of God: intelligent beings who live in harmony with each other and with the environment from which we come.

It is urgent that we take care of the planet and that we struggle—in our daily life and in our ideological choices—against the practices and policies that degrade it. We have before us a spiritual challenge: it is time to “naturalize ourselves, to “return home,” to recuperate ourselves and the other human beings of the Universe which witnessed our birth.

William Anders could only recognize the Earth in which he lived when he contemplated it from afar. All of us have contemplated his image hundreds of times. Will we learn to look at it and take care of it in a holistic and responsible way? □