Review of Radical Political Economics
2016, Vol. 48(4) 569–576
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Political Economics
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DOI: 10.1177/0486613416665828
rrpe.sagepub.com

Third World Alternatives for Building Post-capitalist Worlds

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Abstract
In the context of great diversity and profound social inequalities, environmental injustice prevails. Conflicts between institutions promoting economic development (i.e., growth) and ecologists and civil society are rampant. This paper introduces alternatives emerging from groups, whose organizations are shaped by different cosmologies, products of their multiple ethnic origins, and by the profound philosophic and epistemological debates among social movements proposing different strategies for achieving progress, improving well-being and conserving ecosystems.

JEL Classification: Q57, P48, Z10

Keywords
alternatives, cosmologies, post-capitalist, environmental justice, indigenous knowledge

1. Introduction

In 1999, protestors outside the negotiating sessions of the World Trade Organization lifted their voices and banners to declare "Another World Is Possible," taking their cue from the theme of the World Social Forum. In Latin America, however, we had a different slogan: "Many other worlds are possible, AND they are already under construction." For a very long time, communities throughout the Americas and in the rest of the world have been actively involved in forging alternatives to the strait-jacket of globalization, the present stage of neoliberal capitalism that has triggered the current triple crisis in which most of humanity is currently living. Our colleagues in the economics profession are desperately searching for paths out of the multiple crises—economic, social, and environmental—without recognizing that they are the product of the very institutions from which they are trying to escape. Furthermore, the renewed official commitment to implement environmental governance mechanisms, as the global problem of climate change begins to become increasingly evident, will remain difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. This is the result of deep social inequalities and trends and attitudes of hegemonic forces that have shown an extraordinary "perverse resilience," not only preventing progress in the implementation of public policies and social strategies that protect the various dimensions of the planetary system and its extraordinary diversity—cultural and ethnic—but also managing to restructure their own agendas and discourses, claiming to be leaders in the implementation of a "green

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Date received: January 10, 2016
Date accepted: June 10, 2016

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economy" without changing their basic strategies or reducing their impacts (Barkin 2013). This process is provoking the double movement that was central to Karl Polanyi's (2001) analysis: a direct confrontation between, on one hand, politicians, wealthy investors, technology providers, investors with concessions in regions, and sectors recently opened to foreign investment, and on the other hand, organized social groups that consider these intrusions a threat to their productive systems and their ways of life and health, while also destroying their communities and cultures and the ecosystems on which we all depend.

Our analysis is grounded in the visions of the myriad local and regional groups who, over the centuries, were systematically relegated to increasingly inhospitable regions as successive waves of conquerors laid claim to their lands, their resources, and even their bodies, transforming them into victims of colonialism and (inter)national capitalist development. Today, many of these people are rejecting their insertion into global markets, the appropriation of their lands and resources, and their assignation into the lowest ranks of highly stratified and polarized societies. They are creating new spaces in which different social and productive structures are responding to demands for local control of the governance process, ensuring local welfare and environmental stewardship. This requires new ways of doing research and building models for understanding these societies; this paper reports on some of the results of our recent work.

As participants in this process, we find that since classes are deeply rooted in institutions, an intercultural dialogue has proved particularly fruitful in going beyond both universalism and cultural relativism, to accept and value cultural pluralism for advancing toward a democratic, just, and peaceful harmonization of conflicting interests (Dietrich *et al*. 2011; Panikkar 1995; Vachon 1995). The growing interest in the commons, as a system that emerges beyond the market and the State, offers a context within which to understand this process (Barkin and Lemus 2014; Bollier and Helfrich 2012; Linebaugh 2013; McDermott 2014; Ostrom 1990; Walljasper 2010). On this basis, these groups are implementing new decision-making systems promoting collective over individual well-being, assuming a cosmocentric vision of planetary processes.[1] To overcome inherited inequalities, exacerbated by the public policy, communities are creating strategies that generate new opportunities, promoting both social justice and environmental restoration. They are redefining their identities, combining knowledge of their cultural roots with their history of struggle.[2]

> [This way of struggle]. . . has never been a blind, spontaneous reflex to objective economic conditions, [rather it] has been a conscious struggle of ideas and values all the way. (Thompson [1959] 2014: 109)[3]

This new vision of social progress embraces lifestyles and community organization. In Latin America, they are known as "Sumak Kawsay," "mandar obeciendo," "Abya Yala," or "comunalidad," similar to "Ubuntu" in South Africa or "Swaraj" (radical ecological democracy) from India (Escobar 2011; Esteva 2015; Kothari, Demaria, and Acosta 2014).[4] These varying approaches share five basic principles: autonomy, solidarity, self-sufficiency, productive diversification, and

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[1]Cosmocentric refers to the centrality of a "world view" in the beliefs that guide the organization and dynamics of the societies that are choosing to attempt to distance themselves from the institutions and epistemological structures that have oppressed them through the centuries.

[2]Ivan Illich (1973) emphasized the importance of a holistic approach based on strengthening community in his path-breaking and iconoclastic work.

[3]Although Thompson describes the idea of class consciousness in pre-industrial England, it seems appropriate to apply his analysis to the indigenous struggles in Latin America.

[4]Our personal experience is with various groups in Latin America, and most especially Mexico, where we have collaborated for several decades with communities involved in what many now characterize as building post-capitalist societies. The Asian and African references come from comrades involved with these movements with whom we have developed strong relationships in recent years.

sustainable management of regional ecosystems. One insightful observer of this process commented, "Indigenous peoples are on the front lines of a battle, fighting a war that is on behalf of all of us, because it is there that the capitalist system looks to relaunch a new form of accumulation" (Gustavo Esteva, cited by Bessi and Navarro 2014).

Throughout the world, social groups are challenging governmental attempts to "manage" them. Market-based systems of private property are inappropriate for determining governance mechanisms; their historical claims have shaped landscapes into territories where the whole panoply of activities that comprise social life within an ecosystem are inextricably intertwined, imbued with cultural heritages. Guided by cosmologies, these processes differ greatly from the judicial mechanisms that governments attempt to enforce.

Internationally, a complex set of new rules protects the rights of peoples living in these territories, extended more recently to urban areas. They oblige governments to seek "prior consent" when attempting to appropriate resources, modify the territories of indigenous peoples, or limit their ability to govern themselves. These recent developments have a long history, from the concessions granted the peasantry in Britain in the *Magna Carta* of 1215 to the recognition of the "Indian Republics" in Mexico in the eighteenth century, creating spaces for different styles of life and governance. The communities became part of the "commons," "movements of human activity and global demands for the distribution of wealth and the safeguarding of the common resources on each continent" (Linebaugh 2013: 279). They are not simply involved in creating "an alternative economy, but an alternative to the economy" (Esteva 2014: i149).

2. The Importance of Surplus

The decision to create autonomous forms of self-government represents an audacious challenge to the prevailing model of governance and social justice based on representative democracy and "free" trade. Rooted in their territories, the process spawned new institutions for the social appropriation of the natural environment and production systems to strengthen community, to meet basic needs, and to facilitate the exchange with peers (barter) and on the market.

The design and implementation of new activities involves considerations of equity and sustainability. In the discussion of individual projects with which we have been in contact, an interesting aspect of the analysis is not only the choice of technique but also equally important, a concern for attending the socially defined needs of community members while creating a balance between the use of natural resources, the regulation of land use, and ecosystem conservation. Their approach often leads to identifying possibilities not available in the global economy or creating opportunities that the market simply dismisses; specific examples abound in the systematic inclusion of voluntary labor for the construction of new infrastructure or community projects and the obligation of people who might otherwise be idle to participate in productive activities. In this way, the community generates surpluses that would not be possible were it integrated into the market system, surpluses that are generally distributed by common decisions, for both individual benefit and collective purposes.

These activities are organized on a voluntary basis to ensure their viability and continuity. In many cases, groups are trying to rebuild the social fabric eroded by internal and external forces alike. We focus on the collective nature of decision making: they explicitly organize social and productive resources to generate surplus for "reinvestment" and "redistribution" (Baran 1957).

The central role of surplus in community management often goes unnoticed and is misunderstood. Although rural communities in general and indigenous groups in particular are considered to be living on the edge of subsistence, our relationships with communities throughout the Americas reveal their ability and commitment to produce and collectively manage surpluses, using them to reward members who have made significant contributions in the production, channeling most of it for collective purposes.

Focusing on the production and management of surplus to socially defined needs within the limits of their ecosystems, this collective management contributes to environmental justice that would be difficult to achieve in the market-based societies of which they are a part. Unlike other societies tied to the global economy, these communities organize to ensure that their members not suffer poverty and unemployment. As a result, they have a greater productive potential than might be expected from a simple examination of the financial resources at their disposal; this capacity is documented in the literature on "voluntary" participation in collective tasks, including construction and maintenance of infrastructure and conservation of ecosystems (e.g., *tequio, faena, minga*).

The social mechanisms for the allocation and rotation of administrative and political positions, so important for local governance, also generate resources in these communal organizations, guided by worldviews quite different than those based on individual gain. Equally important, the commitment to universal participation in decision making creates a shared responsibility among the members to contribute to collective tasks. These resources, often invisible in the market economy, emerge from the social capacity to promote broad participation.

These societies are improving their abilities to implement new projects by taking advantage of advances in science and technology, combining them with local knowledge to increase production, and improving their welfare and their ability to protect their ecosystems (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1991). By examining the availability and use of surplus, the communities are better prepared to determine how best to implement their long-term projects. What is astonishing is the clarity of many of the participants of the ways in which particular activities contribute to overall objectives.

3. Paths to Environmental Justice

Throughout the Americas, communities are implementing new approaches in the face of harassment and outright violence by the State. While protecting their natural resources and subject to the discipline of the market and political systems, it is remarkable that they continue to mobilize at the national and local levels, continuing to collaborate internationally with others to consolidate new lines of production and experiment with ways to improve existing activities.

During the second half of the twentieth century, Mexican communities waged a relentless battle to assert their rights to control the lands they were able to recover after the Revolution. In the 1980s, they were particularly effective in reclaiming forest concessions from private firms (71 percent of the nation's forests). Their innovative management schemes are outstanding examples of sustainable management, testimony to the skills that communities have acquired in reconciling pressures to ensure conservation with the need to create jobs and generate income (Barkin and Fuente 2013; Cronkleton, Bray, and Medina 2011).

The Zapatista uprising in 1994 strengthened the movement to assert indigenous identity and autonomy in Mexico (http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx; Muñoz Ramírez 2008). Their growing visibility since then is partly a result of their responses to the repressive actions of the state and private companies with mining and renewable energy concessions to remove them from their territories.

The combination of traditional conservation strategies with cutting edge technologies to protect their natural water sources and streams, while assuring adequate supplies, has proved controversial. It contrasts sharply with the approach of the National Water Commission, which prefers a uniform, centralized administrative model along with an infrastructure program to harness these resources for large-scale hydroelectric projects and for supplying the insatiable demands of industrialization and urban growth. Many communities that have historically met their own needs and even share surpluses with neighboring communities are now involved in struggles, along with environmentalists, arguing that this approach to public works simply postpones "the day of

reckoning" regarding the need for a sustainable water management approach. Denying the right to emplace micro-hydroelectric plants is one example of this irrationality, resulting from narrow neoliberal economic policies and a fear of the independence (autonomy) that this would give the communities (Barkin and Klooster 2006).

A particularly successful project is "Agua para Siempre," which transformed one million hectares of arid, steeply sloping lands in a region near Tehuacan, Puebla. Using "appropriate" technologies, it created underground aquifers and filtering structures similar to those found in some of the oldest irrigation projects in the Western Hemisphere dating back to the eleventh century. This project, which began in the 1980s, combines agro-ecological and cooperative agro-industrial enterprises, creating jobs and products that are proving attractive to consumers because of their social, ecological, and nutritional qualities (Barkin 2001).

Despite the obstacles and conflicts, many communities are reorganizing production to supply their basic needs and produce goods that can be exchanged for others (barter). Ongoing efforts are oriented to identifying new activities that make use of renewable resources to produce goods that can be advantageously exchanged. This approach promotes social dynamics that bring together producers in organizations that become stronger as they become part of their communities. To further this process, new collectives are forming to introduce new activities and technologies to strengthen their organizations and their ability to govern.

One of the most important organizations accompanying the communities is the Via Campesina (VC; http://viacampesina.org). This group has a presence in more than eighty countries, representing more than two hundred million members. Founded in 1996, the VC adopted a strategy of food sovereignty and agroecology as the appropriate path by which to strengthen peasant organizations consistent with improving health and caring for the environment (Demaris 2007; Rosset 2013); many of its members are ethnic organizations that are also demanding recognition of their heritage and right to autonomy. It is a force for bringing together numerous other organizations, including some from the advanced countries, to address problems of hunger and malnutrition. Its political strength is perhaps most vividly illustrated by the highly controversial decision taken by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to declare 2014 the "International Year of Family Farming," although the VC would have preferred its formulation as the year of peasant agriculture (http://www.fao.org/family-farming-2014/en/).

Other social groups are actively promoting social, political, and productive changes to improve their lives and environmental quality. In Chiapas, Mexico, the Caracoles (local governments established in Zapatista territory since 2003) offer a model of social organization and change that has a powerful effect on other communities and other countries. Their activities are improving welfare, contributing to the diversification of the economy and increasing productivity; the communities have reached a high level of self-sufficiency in food, healthcare, and education (Baronnet, Mora Bayo, and Stahler-Sholk 2011; Vergara-Camus 2014).

In South America, numerous Andean communities participate equally in the promotion of collective strategies, known as "good living" (Sumak Kawsay in Quechua). Throughout the Americas, communities are forced to defend their territories, cultures, and societies from invasion by those who covet their resources, or institutions that might erode their cultural differences. Among the most visible are groups like "Idle No More" in Canada, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Iroquois) in eastern North America, the Movement of Landless Workers (MST) in Brazil, the Mapuches in Chile, the National Indigenous Congress, the National Assembly of Environmentally Impacted Peoples, and the Network of People Affected by Mining in Mexico.

Accompanying these acts of resistance, many groups are involved in constructive activities, promoting collaboration with university researchers and civil society to explain the value of their approaches, contributing to the sustainable diversification of their production (Toledo and Ortiz Espejel 2014). One illustrative example involves research that led to the inclusion of "rotten" avocados (*Persea Americana* "Hass"), in the diets of fattening pigs in backyard lots, resulting in

metabolic changes that reduced their cholesterol levels, improving incomes and environmental conditions; in this case, as in others, based on a similar paradigm, indigenous women were especially benefited, because they were the innovators and their communities soon recognized their leadership (Barkin 2012).

With a different approach, academic activists are working with producers in various regions to protect and enhance the production of a traditional Mexican alcoholic beverage—mezcal—modifying traditional planting and harvesting techniques of the cactus (*agave*) and enriching the life of the community by promoting cooperative production that is helping to increase revenue and recuperate ecosystems (Delgado-Lemus, Casas, and Tellez 2014). In another widely recognized project,[5] the Environmental Studies Group (Illsley Granich *et al*. 2007) contributed to local governance capacities to promote local forms of "good living" and ecosystem restoration.

In another region of Mexico, in the state of Oaxaca, four Zapotec communities continue to tend their mulberry trees (*morus alba*), raising silkworms to produce the traditional thread that is woven into attractive garments that are marketed locally and through an exceptional Textile Museum in the state capital. Elsewhere, there are experiments with new plantations of a perennial native cotton, *coyuchi* (widely cultivated before the Spanish Conquest), which are woven into clothing also sold at the museum, as an alternative to genetically modified cotton that currently dominates the industry.

In Peru, and more recently in Bolivia, Pratec, a well-established grassroots technical assistance organization is implementing effective strategies for community learning, improving production of potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*) in the complex ecologies of the Andean world, carefully balancing this work to also support progress with other resources (Gonzales 2014).

4. Building Post-capitalist Worlds

While these initiatives are changing the map of America, many other "developments" threaten to erode the possibilities of improving the lives of peoples and conserving the environment. Even while indigenous communities are asserting their recently "re-discovered" rights to continue their forest and water management activities, governments are encouraging large-scale initiatives by transnational corporations that threaten the delicate balance of activities production on which the communities depend for their livelihoods and for ecosystem balance. These projects raise fundamental questions about the ability of communities to defend their territories, including their substantial cultural, social, and productive patrimonies that tie them to their ecosystems.

Conflicts are the order of the day, occasioning seemingly intractable differences and violent clashes, because the mines, dams, petroleum, natural gas, ecotourism, and other projects threaten the very existence of the communities. Generally, they reject the notion that the sacrifices that this destruction involves can be compensated with money, arguing that this would destroy their communities and force them to move toward a path of institutionalized marginalization as isolated individuals, a life of limited opportunities without social support systems and the security that their communities offer.

Ongoing initiatives to strengthen or create post-capitalist worlds (or "niches of sustainability") by indigenous and peasant communities in the Americas are extremely important and encouraging. While the momentum of the global market is clearly threatening social groups and ecosystems around the world, the continuous and successful efforts of indigenous peoples and peasants to implement their own strategies of social and productive change show that environmental justice can become a reality in growing segments of the population; this will not happen where the capitalist structure of production dominates. Therefore, the implementation of local solutions that create areas for autonomous action will be even more significant and effective,

[5]The UN Development Program awarded it the Equator Prize in 2012.

while the areas dominated by the world market will continue to suffer environmental degradation and heightened social conflicts.

Authors' Note

This article extends the analysis originally developed in the project on "Environmental Justice in Latin America" sponsored by the European Commission (Barkin and Lemus 2016). Our thanks to Charalampos Konstantinidis of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, for insightful comments.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This article is the result of a collaborative research project "Environmental Governance in Latin America" funded by the European Union's Seventh Framework Program for Research, Technological Development, and Demonstration under grant agreement 266710, coordinated by the Center for Latin American Studies and Documentation at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands.

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