

Introduction: A Sustainable Future for Latin America?

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In 2017, the European Alps lost more than 5 feet of water-equivalent glacier mass. In 2018, more than 8,000 fires burned on nearly 2 million acres across California. In 2019, Davi Kopenawa, shaman and spokesman for the Yanomami people, warned an audience of US-based scholars gathered in Cambridge, MA, of the imminent danger his people and the rainforest faced¹. A month later Amazonia burned. As I write these lines, Australia is in flames. In the context of these twenty-first century challenges, the task of envisioning and planning for sustainable societies is center stage. We also face a time of volatile political divisions in which our democracies are being tested by how they respond to environmentally-driven migrations, endemic poverty, and inequality, and are in some cases failing when measured against principles of human rights. The inequality gap has been widening progressively since the 1970s (Sachs, 2010). What does a sustainable future look like for Latin America? What is unique about Latin American thought in its understanding of the current era, known as the Anthropocene? How can that unique thought give rise to sustainability and resilience?

These were the kind of questions around which a group of scholars, intellectuals, and professionals convened in the fall of 2017 to understand the

¹ “Amazonia and Our Planetary Futures, a Conference on Climate Change.” A meeting hosted by Harvard University’s David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies (May 7-8, 2019).

potentialities of the humanities, the arts and the social sciences, indigenous knowledges, rural practices and traditions, for informing an ethics of sustainability for the region.² Reflections from that meeting are at the root of this bilingual collection of essays and conversations. The present special issue of *A Contracorriente* has an interdisciplinary scope as it brings together a variety of content and critical approaches that integrate diverse voices and contemporary discourses in the broader search for novel ways of imagining a collective future for Latin America. The critical framing proposed for the collection is that of sustainability, a complex concept that invites, if not demands, a clear response from the humanities. Such an appeal to the humanities, the arts and the social sciences is necessary and urgent.

Sustainability is a complex concept that is capable of integrating the ecological and social dimensions of public life. It also constitutes a proactive approach in the integrated planning of public policies, in order to systemically understand the full impact of productive activities and act responsibly for the common good. However, in practice, the intimate connection to culture and the humanities has been overlooked and the framing of sustainability-related problems has been almost exclusively focused on an approach to environmental issues that favor technical responses derived from scientific studies. Historically, sustainability emerged from aspirations for peace, freedom, and development of international dialogue in the aftermath of World War II—rooted in values that are reaffirmed today through international agreements, with terms such as equity, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. It is by way of this broad understanding of sustainability that an interdisciplinary dialogue becomes essential for providing vital insights on culture and human institutions, while addressing the ethics and values that are being reaffirmed internationally as a common global goal. To access the full range of opportunities embedded in the concept of sustainability, Thomas Kelly proposes a rhetorical shift, and reframes questions about the meaning of sustainability to ask: “What sustains us?” (2009, 5) Indeed, what sustains us on this planet as diverse people and communities, as complex cultural beings, in complex interconnected environments? The role of culture is essential in building the kind of systemic capacity needed to adapt and to evolve with changing conditions.

² “A Sustainable Future for Latin America?” New England Council of Latin American Studies 2017 Annual Meeting, hosted by the University of New Hampshire (November 4, 2017).

This special issue is organized around a confluence of thought that foregrounds discourses interrogating how a *Latin American outlook* can generate an interdisciplinary dialogue about a future for the region. It is organized into three sections, each featuring contributions from the arts, the social sciences and the humanities. These sections provide readers with pathways for navigating a variety of topics using critical approaches from diverse disciplinary fields, and, in the process, seek to facilitate readers' access to local sources of regional knowledge. The first section brings together *conversations* about the rich nature of environmental thinking from Latin America. These conversations are followed by an interdisciplinary section of case studies from the social sciences. The final, theoretical article of the section prepares the transition to the humanities by bringing into view the existing canon of scholarly work on "epistemologies of the South" (Escobar, 2015), or what is also known as *Global South* perspectives. To complete the collection, an ecocritical analysis of films and literary texts offers novel readings and draws important cultural insights from artistic works. Separately and together, these sections manifest what a Latin American outlook on sustainability has come to represent.

The collection opens with a visual conversation that responds to a series of images of artistic installations by sculptor Néle Azevedo. The resulting aesthetic discourse taps into our emotional intelligence as it invites, and in fact demands, a rethinking of the climate crisis and human existence. Then, an interview with scholar and long-time environmentalist Enrique Leff offers, among other things, a philosophical perspective regarding the urgency of reclaiming spaces for *otros saberes*, for other ways of knowing the world, comprehending and inhabiting sustainable life-worlds, an outlook that is vibrant and alive in Latin American thinking about the earth, with the Earth. This Latin American outlook on sustainability, as discussed by Leff, was part of the early discussions of the new international agendas.³ However, almost five years later, we should interrogate how much this critical environmental view of the world was actually integrated into the 2015 United Nations' Agenda for Sustainable Development. The social sciences-oriented articles that comprise the second interdisciplinary section of this volume engage regionally-specific discussions about that agenda. Looking ahead, what is particular about the 2030 UN Agenda, and what does it mean for Latin America?

³ See "A Short History of the SDGs," by Paula Caballero, then Senior Director of Economic, Social and Environmental Affairs at the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Impakter*, sept 2016).

In concert with this agenda—and its Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs—we can engage the essential role of cultivating intellectual, ethical and social qualities within the search to improve and sustain quality of life for our planet. Both the SDGs and the 2030 UN Agenda represent an important improvement over previous UN agreements, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that preceded them and expired in 2015. They represent an inclusive framework for international collective action that is *universal*: they apply to everyone, all countries, and they are intended to transform current conditions, rather than just respond to symptoms. They are meant to serve as a set of common guidelines towards national policy change and the strengthening of regional agreements. When viewed as guidelines, the SDGs can be appreciated in their full capacity to generate a collective common goal, rather than being seen as prescriptive of a top-down approach. It is in this generative potentiality that a Latin-American experience and environmental thinking can contribute its most valuable insights.

For example, in his article, historian Michael Smith interrogates the paradox between the legacy of a mercantile appropriation of the UN technical agenda on sustainable development (1992 and 2000) and the current proposals for the sustainability of rural Nicaragua. Leda Pérez and María Amparo Cruz-Saco analyze the gender equality targeted by one of the SDGs and address the topic by looking in depth at Peru's State policies and economic structures in a most fundamental expression of gender equity for social wellbeing: family and childcare. Shifting gears, José Carlos Freire and Alexandre Fernandez Vaz offer an overarching historical reading of the region's geopolitics through an analysis of the current Brazilian political situation, which invites a wider reading of the Latin American democracies of the twentieth century. If we believe that the political is a substantial component for the interpretation and implementation of a sustainable agenda, these analyses enable an understanding of sustainability that involves a reassessment of the quality of contemporary democracies, and whether the current political landscape facilitates or hinders the implementation of an integrated 2030 Agenda. Terry-Ann Jones follows with a similar exploration of the SDGs and questions whether they can promote integrated policy without serious scrutiny of Latin America's colonial past. Her fieldwork with migrant workers that seasonally leave Northeastern Brazil to work for the sugarcane industries of the South sheds light on the discriminatory heritage—racial, ethnic, class, and cultural—upheld by extractivist practices and intensified monoculture agrobusiness. This second section comes to a close with an article by Juan Ramos titled "Sentipensar sustainability," in

which he redirects both the sustainability and academic discourses towards an epistemology of the South. After describing the seminal works of Fals Borda and Arturo Escobar, Ramos highlights the ontologically diverse nature of the region by proposing a decoloniality of thought and generating space for the humanities, thereby creating a smooth transition to the third part of the volume, where these topics are fully engaged.

It is worth noting, however, the rhetorical conflict that the term *development* poses to the SDGs. The concept of development continues to occupy the central conceptual role of a powerful semantic constellation in modern society, and limits the sustainability agenda in its definition of poverty, human development and environment. In a recent publication, Vandana Shiva highlights the need to reclaim “our true humanity as members of the Earth family” in light of how our current discourse and imagination of development continues to dominate the global sphere in the twenty-first century (6). She also points out that this discourse is shaped by a convergence of patriarchal thinking and capitalism, having as a consequence severe social fracturing, including the separation of humans from their natural environment. In that same volume, titled *Pluriverse, a Post-Development Dictionary*, Arturo Escobar explains the idea of the *Pluriverse* as “a world where many worlds fit,” a Latin American alternative to the monolithic notion of development (121). The pluriverse is a form of confrontation of the most frequent referent of the global model for life: modernity. But modernity is a proposal that was rooted historically in patriarchal societies, hierarchically organized through categories of difference that gave rise to colonial domination and contemporary coloniality. In other words, *development* is still intimately entwined with the power structures, practices and legacies of European colonialism that in contemporary societies have become integrated into social orders and forms of knowledge.

How can de-coloniality and alternatives to our current capitalist model promote sustainability? How do literature and literacies interrogate these issues and the kinds of globalization and mass culture that marginalize local cultures and communities throughout the continent? The essays in the final section of this collection engage these questions, and while the authors confront a legacy of patriarchy and coloniality, they also offer a window of hope by identifying fractures in the cultural fabric that upholds these dynamics. Moving geographically from South to North—as an inversion of a conventional cartographic reading of the continent—the article by Andrea Casals Hill and Pablo Chiuminatto introduces the reader to ecocritical analysis of literary texts in

the context of a poetic dialogue between fundamental milestones in Chilean poetry. Employing an ecocritical lens, they adopt an open approach to the complex paradigm of sustainability and offer a broad panorama that spans the twentieth century. By looking at the works of writers Vicente Huidobro, Gabriela Mistral and Nicanor Parra, this article embarks on a poetic quest attuned to a living and dynamic understanding of nature. Also in a Chilean context, Ignacio Lopez Vicuña's article reads a 1982 film by Raúl Ruiz as a postcolonial parody capable of erasing borders of difference and celebrating multilingualism. Indirectly, this celebration interrogates the validity of the advancement of Western knowledge in the far South. However, Lopez-Vicuña's postcolonial lens also shows how this work exposes the genocide of the continent's southernmost inhabitants and the disappearance of rich cultures entwined with the ways of the land and the Pacific Ocean waters, thus exposing the colonial roots of Chile's modernity.

Reflecting on ethics and the politics that underpin today's discussion about the Anthropocene, Nicolás Campisi adopts an ecological ethos to read contemporary novels by Argentina's Samantha Schweblin and Mexico's Guadalupe Nettel. This comparative approach becomes a dialogue between the dystopias portrayed by two writers at opposite ends of the region, offering a close look at apocalyptic landscapes left behind by global extractive practices. By comparing creative texts that connect body, community, and environment through disease and destruction, Campisi explores the continuity between the local and the global, and a shared perspective from two different latitudes that ultimately evokes an environmental imagination that spans a continent. Stepping into the heart of the continent, Sam Johnson and Fernando Beleza analyze works that portray the intricate web of contemporary problems facing Brazilian society today, which further underscore the failures of modernity. Echoing the dystopic qualities of the previously-mentioned novels, Beleza brings readers to the urban spaces of Brazil's megalopolis, and interrogates the cinematic avant-garde's political relationship with Brazilian environmentalism. His ecocritical reading of *cinema do lixo* discusses the relevance of an aesthetics of sustainability that forces us to rethink contemporary environmental imaginaries in Latin American cinema, and in Brazil in particular. In a different context, Johnson takes a post-colonial approach to reading an autobiographical novel by writer and activist Kaka Werá Jecupé, a leader in contemporary indigenous struggles. Jecupé's chronicles are a complex portrayal of the *pueblos originarios de la Amazonía* and their relation to citizenship, activism, and Brazilian identity. Johnson's selection of a text written by a recognized writer who is also an

activist and an indigenous leader is central to highlighting the way the work confronts coloniality. Through its ecocritical lens, the article brings to light the urgent need to decolonize knowledge and acknowledge spaces for local, traditional and ancestral ways of knowing that for centuries have been ontologically integrated with nature. In the final article, Sarah Anderson advances a similar concern for the sustenance of a local culture attuned to the rhythms of life. She entwines the historical fiction of Mexican writer Sofía Segovia with today's ecological troubles of the borderlands and reads Segovia's novel as an urgent call to seek out sustainable solutions for the region—within the local knowledge of indigenous traditions.

The main goal of this volume is to generate a dialogue that acknowledges the full spectrum and reach of sustainability: understood as an epistemology of interdependence and co-evolution between culture and the natural environment on all scales; as the only way forward, to celebrate difference and overcome otherness; as the means to embrace the interdependence that is essential for sustaining life and to trace a clear path for responding to an intergenerational ethical obligation; but also understood as the basic ethical principle for contemporary democracies. To this end, the irresponsibility of our current model of development is critically addressed and the need to adopt sustainability as an ethic of the common good underlies the critical frame of the articles presented here. This ethics of the common good begins with how that good is defined, and moves us to assess not only the political representation of every citizen as having a democratic right and responsibility towards equity, but also to acknowledge the need for collective participation in building a cumulative and robust knowledge that responds to common interests—as the first four articles in the collection demonstrate. Ultimately, as the editor of this special, it is my goal that the critical works included here uncover how the dramatic changes in our biophysical environment are symptomatic of a broader crisis, a crisis of modernity, of modes of production, a crisis of modern ethics and contemporary societies—or, as the conversation with Enrique Leff highlights, a crisis of modern Western thought that failed to comprehend the ecological and cultural conditions necessary for sustaining all life on the planet. Latin America is a region rich in diverse forms of practical and adaptive knowledge of many cultures. The Latin American experience enriches the opportunities for the pursuit of sustainable futures in the region, especially when we understand that much of the regions' own ecological potential is embedded in its traditional knowledge (Leff, 2012).

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