ENVIRONMENTAL MORALITY AND MODERNITY: Elements to think of the Brazilian case

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An apparent paradox seems to bind environmentalism and modernity together: at the same time that the former emerges denouncing the failure of several of the promises of modernity, it does so by making use of elements that lie in the very core of the latter. Moreover, it is only when modernity seems to have radicalized its own constitutive dimensions that the environmental movement turns to occupy a more meaningful place in the political dynamics of Western societies. The environmental critique that gained expression among central Western societies since the post-World War Two led by scientific communities and civil associations hang on a set of values that are essentially modern when drawing the attention of society for the negative impacts of contemporary human interventions upon the natural world. Thus, it is quite interesting to notice that even though the dark side of the accomplishments of the project of modernity is sharply unveiled and severely criticized by an emerging environmental ethics, the very emergence and legitimacy of the latter relies on pillar aspects of modern morality.

The issues I intend to tackle are essentially of a social-theoretical nature. My paper aims at inquiring precisely into the modern underpinnings of the environmental morality (or environmental moralities) that environmentalisms of several tonalities work out in the wake of their critique of modernity. I intend to unveil the ethical-moral bedrock, on which contemporary proposals of moralizing nature by environmental movements of different tonalities lie, showing their intrinsic attachment to modernity itself.

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Nevertheless, the attempt to unmask the links between modernity and environmental morality raises a second theoretical task. Indeed, from the 1950s on, environmental problems became increasingly global in their production and impact. Not only the pollution produced by the most industrialized societies started to trespass the borders of the most developed countries of the world but also societies of a lower level of industrialization gradually became key polluters of the ecosphere. Simultaneously, one watched the dissemination of environmental associations all over the world, spreading throughout countries of different levels of industrialization the critique of the deleterious effects of the pattern of relationship between the Western civilization and its natural environment. The question that emerges out of this unprecedented context is: to what extent environmental morality and modernity are equally entangled when viewed on a global scale? Specifically speaking, how to explain the very character of environmentalism in a country like Brazil, in which key modern dimensions do not seem to work at the same pace they do in the so-called central Western societies?

In the pages that follow, I will first consider the Habermasian oriented-thesis on the emergence of the environmental movement which, by attaching such emergence to the various facets of social rationalization, makes clearer the modern sociopolitical and cultural contours from where civil environmental associations rise. After that, I will spend some time pointing out to the moral stage from where the different proposals of moralizing nature depart. I will then try to systematize the several tonalities of environmentalism according to the different ways humans – natural world relations are conceived by environmental associations. This will allow me to conceptualize the particular ways the natural world is placed in the highly abstract and principle-based modern morality. It is only then that the Brazilian case will make sense for my theoretical investigation. I will present some of the main events that characterized the emergence of environmentalism in Brazil and, finally, discuss its relationship to the particular type of modernity proper to that country.
The Environmental Movement

*through the lenses of the Habermasian oriented thesis*

How to provide a theoretical explanation for the emergence of a social movement that, despite sharply criticizing and denouncing the flaws and hazards of a particular social structure, makes use of some of the building blocks of this very social structure? Jurgen Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action* set the ground for a powerful strand of social analysis capable of providing some explanation for this apparent paradox. His theoretical enterprise aimed at reaffirming the project of modernity, which was said to be doomed to dwindle by his predecessors of the Frankfurt School (ADORNO, 1992; HORKHEIMER, 1976; HORKHEIMER & ADORNO, 1985; MARCUSE, 1968).

Striving to escape from the blind alley that Weber and the first generation of the Frankfurt School had ascribed to the project of modernity, Habermas widens the understanding of the scope of the process of rationalization. He argues that beyond the strategic-instrumental facet emphasized by the Weberian tradition (WEBER, 1978a; 1978b and the Frankfurt School’s works above mentioned) modern times are also the stage for and the outcome of rationalization processes pushed forth by a different logic: modern societies not only set the ground for individuals to be rational in respect to ends, but also be rational when searching for mutual understanding upon everyday situations (HABERMAS, 1984). This means that, in Habermas’s hands, modern social dynamics turned to be viewed as operating in two main different realms, according to two specific logic: a systemic one and a second one he names *lifeworld* (as he draws upon contemporary systems theory and the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl and Schultz). The former realm hosts the processes of material production and reproduction of society by means of an autonomous and self-compelling economic subsystem, at the same time that it sets the stage for the administrative and
political regulation of modern complex societies, similarly by means of an autonomous and self-steered subsystem. On the other hand, the *lifeworld* realm embraces processes of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization which, in modernity, are no longer based on pre-given and taken for granted worldviews but rather on a rational pursuit of mutual understanding reflexively oriented.

It is here that the Habermasian thesis on the emergence of the environmental movement in contemporary Western societies, as well as the set of explanations that followed Habermas’s theoretical footprints, makes sense. Habermas places environmentalism in the middle of a set of other social movements, which spring out of the new character of social conflicts proper to central modern societies. Such conflicts no longer revolve around issues regarding wealth distribution, i.e. around matters of material production. Rather, they come out of the conflictive terrain in between the systemic and the *lifeworld* realms.

One can only understand this idea once the “*colonization*” thesis is evoked. When Habermas strove to overcome the theoretical blind alley that the first generation of the Frankfurt School had conducted critical theory, he had to provide a new explanation for the Marxian-Weberian idea of reification. It is a misunderstanding, argues Habermas, the conception of the “iron-cage construction” as an inexorable result of social rationalization. This means that, for him, the instrumentalization of modern social life is not the outcome of processes of symbolic rationalization nor a result of the shattering of the objective Reason. Otherwise, it is the result of the invasion of linguistically mediated domains of everyday life by the instrumentally-driven subsystems, responsible for the material production and administration of modern complex societies. Such new way of conceptualizing reification Habermas designates “*colonization of the lifeworld*”.

It is precisely reacting to this “colonization” phenomenon that contemporary social movements emerge. Instead of conceiving them as attached to struggles around material production
and distribution, Habermas understands them as being linked to issues revolving around “the grammar of forms of life”. Accordingly, quality of life, equal rights, possibilities of self-accomplishment, broader political participation, and human rights are some of the new hot-spot zones of social conflict. The exemplar social movements that spring out of this unprecedented reality are: the antinuclear movement, the environmental movement, the feminist movement, the pacifist one, local movements, alternative movements, etc. Among them, there are those that carry out a defense of traditional and social rank, at the same time that there is a set of them that “already operates on the basis of a rationalized lifeworld and tries out new ways of cooperating and living together” (HABERMAS, 1989a: 394). The latter is, for him, the case of the manifestations “sparked by themes of ecology and peace”. This is the path he follows to explain environmental protests:

*What sets off the protest is (...) the tangible destruction of the urban environment; the despoliation of the countryside through housing developments, industrialization, and pollution; the impairment of health through the ravages of civilization, pharmaceutical side effects, and the like – that is, developments that noticeably affect the organic foundations of the lifeworld and make us drastically aware of standards of livability, of inflexible limits to the deprivation of sensual-aesthetic background needs.* (HABERMAS: 1989a: 394).

Habermas’s theoretical framework opened up the terrain for other investigations that focused their attention either on social movements, by and large, or more specifically on the environmental movement. It was by following these basic theoretical footprints that authors such as Claus Offe, André Gorz, and Ulrich Beck managed to search for more precise links between environmentalism and modernity.
Claus Offe (1985; 1990) interpreted the environmental movement as part of a phenomenon he named “new social movements”, which for him started to gain enormous political and cultural importance in the advanced industrial societies of the Western world from the 70s on. Offe locates the new social movements at the core of an emerging political paradigm that gradually superseded the one that prevailed in West Europe from the post II World War to the early 70s. At the bosom of the previous paradigm rested issues regarding economic growth, wealth distribution, and social security, as well as a general consensus over 3 aspects: 1) investment decisions were instituted as the space of action of owners and managers acting in free markets according to the criteria of profitability; 2) organized labor was the other side of the coin, legitimately struggling for income distribution and social security; and 3) political conflicts were to be solved by means of a representative democracy structured around party competition. Thus, in the old political paradigm, the most prominent political and social actors were specialized, comprehensive, and highly institutionalized interest organizations and political parties, and the main mechanisms of conflict resolution were collective bargaining and party competition. The predominant values in such a society were social mobility, private life, consumption, instrumental rationality, and authority.

For Offe, the exhaustion of those basic assumptions is the background for the emergence of the new social movements, handing uncommon banners, demonstrating their demands by means of unprecedented ways, eventually proposing alternatives for a new political array, and finally, bringing to the fore of political life issues such as pacifism, environmental quality, human rights, unalienated forms of work, among others. It is true that their values are by no means of a new type: autonomy and identity in opposition to manipulation, control, dependence, and regulation can be traced back to the first movements of the bourgeois era. What is new is their doubt that these values can be accomplished by means of economic and scientific progress as well as by democratic mass politics, the conservative environment of the nuclear family, and the institutions of mass culture. They are also very innovative with regard to their modes of action and form of
organization. Internally, they are highly informal, discontinuous, context-sensitive, and egalitarian, i.e. they avoid any trace of bureaucratization. Externally speaking, they are characterized for setting in motion “unconventional means” for demonstrating their claims but also by their suspicion vis-à-vis the so-called “institutional political actors and rules” (political parties, negotiation, collective bargain). Finally, they are not class-oriented mobilizations although one can single out their new-middle class basis. The environmental movement is then conceived as one of these new social movements, springing out of contemporary situations that spread out fear and anxiety due to violations of or threats to the physical and symbolic integrity of individuals and social groups as well as to their lives and ways of living, by the institutional arrays of the advanced industrial society, its material production pattern, and the scientific-technological innovations attached to it. In this sense, the environmental movement, just like its peers, is conceived as a modern phenomenon that strives to deepen some of the accomplishments of modernity at the expense of the negative effects triggered by some of the modern institutions of our societies.

André Gorz (1991; 1993), in turn, argues that the environmental movement emerges as a spontaneous protest against the destruction of the “culture of everyday life” by the economic apparatus and the political power of contemporary modern societies. In this sense, for Gorz, the “defense of nature” by environmental associations should be understood originally as the defense of their lifeworld, defined essentially as a domain in which the outcome of peoples’ activities corresponds to the everyday interactions that made their existence possible. He argues that environmental mobilizations must be interpreted not as targeting a scientifically defined “nature” but as aiming at an everyday life released from the pressure of external arrangements that eventually impose foreign ends to individuals’ social lives. According to him, the “nature” they tackle is an environment whose dynamics and structures are familiar and accessible to the intuitive understanding of people in their quotidian lives. That is why those environments look “natural” to environmentalists.
A phenomenon of a radicalized stage of modernity is how Ulrich Beck (1992; 1995) conceives of the environmental movement. For him, such movement arises at a time when the very constitutive dimensions of modernity reached such a degree of accomplishment that they started to turn against themselves, shaking their very underpinnings, undermining the ground on which those dimensions seemed to rest safely. This new stage in modern life justifies Beck to assert that we are now living in the context of a “reflexive modernity”, delineated by the undermining outcomes of modernity’s own conquests. Thus, if the so-called “first modernity” pulled a secularized worldview as well as rationally framed social structures to the core of Western societies at the expense of religious worldviews and traditionally organized ways of life, now it is modernity itself that is the target of substantive changes. The bureaucratic State apparatus, the capitalist market economy, science, and the social institutions based on the values of moral individualism clash their assumptions and side effects against themselves, uprooting their once unquestionable functioning principles. Science has its misunderstandings and limitations unveiled by the scientific knowledge itself. By the same token, economic growth, which used to be thought as the inexorable direction towards which every human society should move, sees its dark sides debunking its once celebrated benefits. Moral individualism, in turn, triggers processes of individuation to a degree that the bourgeois familial nucleus and its corresponding private realm is shattered in the face of a new variety of forms of life and self construction. As a consequence of all these transformations, Beck argues that the production of wealth is gradually but steadfast being downplayed by the production of risks, which impact on several realms of modern societies, including the political-administrative apparatus, the psychological structure of individuals, and the natural and urban environments.

It is in such circumstances, pervaded by processes of rationalization that turn their positive as well as their deleterious accomplishments against themselves, that movements such as the feminist, the pacifist, and the environmentalist emerge, expressing the new situations of risk that
take over contemporary modern societies. This is certainly the case of the ecological banner that environmental associations hand. Beck states that

where trees are cut down and animal species destroyed, people feel victimized themselves in a certain sense. The threats to life in the development of civilization touch commonalities of the experience of organic life that connect the human vital necessities to those of plants and animals. In the dying of forest, people experience themselves as ‘natural creatures with moral claims’, as movable, vulnerable things among things, as natural parts of a threatened natural whole, for which they bear responsibility. (BECK, 1995: 74)

In this sense, for Beck, the environmental movement is one of the most important expressions of the generalized consciousness of affliction that pervades reflexive modernity and the increasing uncertainties that start to flood individuals’ lives.

Although the analytical enterprises above explored provide a clarifying account of the modern context out of which environmental movements emerge, i.e. even though they excel in suggesting the contours of the modern macro-scenario from where environmental movements spring, they do not specify how environmental associations make use of central aspects of modernity in their attempt to moralize nature. Thus, so far, only one side of the apparent paradox I mentioned before was tackled, namely how environmental movements are born from a modern landscape denouncing the negative outcomes of modernity. What remains to be tackled is how they profit positively from modernity in order to propose a moralization of the natural world. This task requires from me a consideration of some of the basic elements of modern morality.

**Legality and the Postconventional character of modern morality**
For each level of social complexity there is a corresponding stage of morality. This is what becomes clear in the seminal works of Émile Durkheim (1995; 1997). In both *The Division of Labor in Society* and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim reveals how the transition from one level of social complexity to another of a higher stage leads to a shift in the moral and legal configuration of society. In Durkheim’s analytical framework, societies of low levels of complexity are internally bound together by a mechanical type of solidarity, in which a concise and all-embracing collective consciousness is capable of imposing itself over individuals minds and thus guaranteeing social cohesion. All domains of individuals’ lives are then permeated and driven by a set of objectives and behavioral standards completely external to them. Morality, here, is intrinsically attached to an all-embracing religion, extensively and intensively shared by all individuals of the considered society. Moral rules have not attained any considerable level of abstraction and generality since they are too attached to concrete circumstances of everyday life. As in this level of social complexity collective consciousness is the main “device” of social cohesion, every transgression and deviation is inflexibly charged with an expiatory type of punishment. In this sense, laws here are almost always of a penal type.

Still following Durkheim, as long as societies become more densely populated and internally differentiated, the once all-pervading collective consciousness loses the strength to curb individuals’ drives, to determine the totality of their lives as well as to hold them together. As a consequence, the task of guaranteeing solidarity to the social body is transferred to the increasingly complex social division of labor. This does not mean, however, that morality disappears from society. The shift from a mechanical type of solidarity to an organic one is accompanied by a moral shift as well as. An all-encompassing religiously delineated morality is replaced by a less substantive morality that has the human person in its core, the very basis of the idea of human
rights. Its higher degree of generality and abstraction gives more room for individual particularities, which are ultimately constrained by the respect of the human person.

As a matter of fact, according to Durkheim, the higher level of complexity modern societies attained made “purely moral rules” occupy a much less central place in social life than they used to do in societies of lower levels of organization. Consequently, transgressions are no longer felt to damage the whole social body, but only its individual parts. That is why restitutory laws replace expiatory laws in case of deviance and transgression. The legality that is structured in this new context is far more complex and detailed due to the need of being more attentive to the various realms that turn to get a certain degree of autonomy from one another. Domestic law, contractual law, commercial law, procedural law, administrative law, and constitutional law are, then, some of the emerging components of the modern legality that accompanies the modern type of solidarity in whose center rests the social division of labor.

Habermas (1984; 1989a) clearly follows the trail Durkheim has blazed but overcoming the simplifications attached to the notions of *mechanic solidarity* and *organic solidarity*. In his effort to reconstruct the path towards a more abstract modern morality he tries to bridge the gap between archaic societies and modern societies by taking into account intermediary levels of social organization and their corresponding stages of morality. The social formations upon which Habermas draws his considerations are four: (a). Egalitarian tribal societies; (b). Hierarchical tribal societies; (c). Politically stratified class societies; and (d). Economically constituted class societies. The “Egalitarian tribal societies” (a) have a level of complexity somewhat similar to the archaic societies to which Durkheim attributed the existence of an all-embracing collective consciousness structuring the totality of social life. They are significantly undifferentiated since the only divisions that lie in their core are of gender and age, responsible for the definition of the major social roles. In the second case (b), a status system arises in such a way that families start to get ordered hierarchically according to prestige. As a consequence and on the basis of this primary
major differentiation, special roles are singled out for leadership functions in war and peace times, for ritual matters and healing practices, for settling legal conflicts, among other tasks. In both (a) and (b), social interactions are structured fundamentally by the kinship system. The next step towards complexification (c) marks the rise of social groups that turn to be the bearers of a differentiated and privileged political power, occupying the top positions of the State apparatus and, thus enjoying authority over the mass of the population. The final step of complexification (d) is characterized by the autonomization of a realm of economic production, which is ethically neutral and steered by the media “money”. Here, a job market turns to structure an important part of social life at the same time that the State apparatus becomes an also autonomous subsystem steered by the media “power” and based on taxation. This fourth stage somehow corresponds to the societies Durkheim attributes an organic type of solidarity as a result of internal differentiation and complexification.

In order to grasp the different stages of morality that correspond to the gradient of social complexity above mentioned, Habermas (1989a; 1989b) draws from Lawrence Kolberg’s 3 stages of moral consciousness: the preconventional level; the conventional level; and the postconventional level. In the first of them, only the consequences of individuals’ actions are judged under the light of “expectations of behavior”. In the following stage, the orientation to norms and the intentional violation of them by individuals are already subject to a more general judgment. In the final stage, norms themselves are judged in the light of principles. Therefore, there is a path towards increasing moral generalization and abstraction, from simple “expectations of behavior”, through “more general norms”, up to “highly abstract principles”. Just like in Durkheim’s works, the underlying idea is that as far as societies get more complex and differentiated, all-embracing traditional worldviews start to lose strength and legitimacy as they get fragmented and secularized. Accordingly, those worldviews eventually cease to bear the status of
the unquestionable stock of knowledge and moral reference out of which individuals interpret their relationships with the objective world, with the social world, as well as with their subjective world.

Simultaneously to this path towards generalization, *morality* and *law* are gradually detached from one another, till the moment they start to occupy two different realms. This moment, proper to our contemporary modern societies is thus defined by Habermas:

*At the level of principled moral consciousness, morality is deinstitutionalized to such an extent that it is now anchored only in the personality system as an internal control on behavior. Likewise, law develops into an external force, imposed from without, to such an extent that modern compulsory law, sanctioned by the state, becomes an institution detached from the motivations of the legal person and dependent upon abstract obedience to the law.* (HABERMAS, 1989a: 174).

The social macro-scenario that corresponds to the *postconventional* stage of morality is precisely the one Habermas defines as the “economically constituted class societies”. They are societies that went through a massive process of rationalization and differentiation at the end of which two subsystemic domains of social life got detached from those realms linguistically and symbolically mediated. A self-steered economic subsystem and an also self-compelling political-administrative subsystem become autonomous and ethically neutral realms, organizing important domains of social life wherein individuals behave strategic-instrumentally: the State and the market. On the other hand, that massive thrust of complexification leads to the rationalization and differentiation of the *lifeworld* structures in such a way that the tasks of cultural reproduction of social life, social integration, and socialization of individuals are uncoupled from the subsystems and from one another. As a result of such intensive and extensive process of secularization and fragmentation, no “taken for granted” worldviews can be accessed by individuals in their effort to
understand the objective world, to regulate their mutual expectations of behavior, and to deal with their subjective lives.

Essential for the understanding of the moral and legal contours of modern societies is the idea that although system and lifeworld are more detached from each other the more a society gets differentiated and rationalized, the self-steering domains of society have to maintain or to foster an anchorage in the linguistically mediated realms of social life. This is an obvious necessity since human societies are constituted by beings that ascribe meanings to their actions, even to those that are ultimately ethically neutral. Theoretically speaking, this anchorage has assumed four basic forms in the history of central Western societies by means of “waves of juridification”: the bourgeois state, which turned to guarantee “the liberty and property of the private person, the security of the law, the formal equality of all legal subjects before the law, and thereby the calculability of all normed action. On the other hand, public law authorizes a sovereign state power with a monopoly on coercive force as the sole source of legal authority” (HABERMAS, 1989a: 358). The second wave, the bourgeois constituted state, led to the constitutional regulation of administrative authority by citizens to whom actionable civil rights – rights of life, liberty, and private property -- against the sovereign were guaranteed. In the third wave, the democratic constitutional state, the constitutionalized state power was democratized, as citizens became the bearers of rights of political participation in the form of general and equal suffrage and the recognition of freedom to organize political associations and parties.

The fourth wave takes place when a capitalist market economy is already fully developed and the social domains of the production of material life become ethically neutral once uncoupled from a rationalized lifeworld. A self-steered economic subsystem, then, assumes the organization of a key portion of social dynamics, setting the borders of a job market wherein individuals

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2 By “waves of juridification” Habermas (1989a) means the gradual formalization of social relations in the form of written laws.
participate only as the owners of their labor force. It is in order to control the negative side-effects of the economic dynamics upon individuals’ lives that a democratic welfare state is fought for: it limits working hours, guarantees workers freedom to organize unions and bargain for wages, protects them from layoffs, provides citizens social security, among other conquests. “These are instances of juridification processes in a sphere of social labor previously subordinated to the unrestricted power of disposition and organization exercised by private owners of the means of production.” (HABERMAS, 1989a: 361). But it is here that the “colonization thesis” makes sense. All these legal devices guarantee protections at the price of taking away a great deal of individual and social freedom. This is so because of the way these legal devices intervene in the functioning of the lifeworld, atomizing social relations, bureaucratizing what is supposed to be symbolically mediated and offering monetary compensations in domains of social life that are not monetarily measurable. For Habermas, this is precisely the new meaning of reification in contemporary central Western societies.

Nevertheless, this fourth wave of juridification unveils a key aspect that Kolberg’s idea of a postconventional stage of morality does not envision from the beginning. Among the most rationalized contemporary societies, although morality and law get detached, the latter maintains a double character: it works as a media control but also as an institution. In the first case, as it is linked to areas of social life that host economic and administrative activities, law serves as a means for organizing media-controlled subsystems, autonomous from normative contexts of action. Otherwise, in the second case, law remains strongly attached to substantive justifications coming out of the context of everyday life. This is the case of all regulations of offenses in domains of life strongly circumscribed by moral standards. Therefore, on the one side, modern legal structures host laws that are “embedded in a broader political, cultural, and social context; they stand in a continuum with moral norms and are superimposed on communicatively structured areas of action. They give to these informally constituted domains of action a binding form backed by state
sanction” (HABERMAS, 1989a: 366). On the other, technicized and de-moralized areas of law grow along with the complexity of the economic and administrative subsystems, regulating domains wherein strategic-instrumental actions prevail.

By and large, these are the main contours of the morality and its legal counterpart in contemporary modern societies, as worked out by the Habermas of the *Theory of Communicative Action*. A couple of aspects deserve to be emphasized for the purpose of my argument in this paper, though. First, in the “reflexive” stage of modernity, as Beck names it, morality loses ultimate substantive contents at the same time that normative regulations cease to be deduced from pre-given and pre-assured worldviews. Due to the fact that morality turns to rely on very abstract and general ethical principles, normative patterns are no longer inexorably reproduced in everyday circumstances. This means that individuals’ mutual understandings lose their immediate reference and require, in order to be reached, unconstrained processes of rational communication. Thirdly, as Anthony Giddens (1991a; 1991b) points out, both social relations and self-identity formation, once de-substantialized, become open to a greater variety of possibilities and choices, which are, to a larger extent, reflexively conducted. The terms of everyday life as well as individuals’ subjectivity become a project liable to be constructed, rather than the outcome of fate. Fourth, given the outstanding level of social differentiation and complexification, increasing risks of social disagreement are partially mitigated by the growing importance of media control but also by the formalization of normativity by means of positive laws that rely ultimately on linguistically mediated domains of social life. Therefore, the terrain in between morality and legality in modernity becomes propitious for new types of struggles regarding the identity of social groups and their projects for society. Social complexification leads to the coexistence of different projects that, consequently, struggle to gain broader reverberation in the cultural and political scenarios of our secularized societies. New warrantees for the self-determination of individuals and social groups are attained but at the price of more pervasive and sophisticated processes and devices of
reification. It is here that the attempts of environmental associations to moralize the natural world as a way of controlling the uncertainties of the future make sense.

**Environmentalism(s) and the modern moralization of nature**

The other side of the apparent paradox mentioned above, namely how the environmental movement makes use of some of the attributes of modernity, is fully unveiled if one takes into account the ways it moralizes the natural world. Indeed, as modernity unfolds, there is a growing perception that the increasing control of nature that rationalization provides is paralleled by sprawling future scenarios fraught with risks and uncertainties (TAVOLARO, 2001a). As a matter of fact, the high levels of intervention of the modern processes of economic production into nature entail side effects that cannot be precisely predicted by any means (BECK, 1992; LUHMANN, 1993). The irony rests on the fact that these intensive interventions have been continuously justified by the comfort and security they supposedly provide to humankind. Aware of such modern puzzle, environmental associations strive to enter the political terrain in order to influence decision-making processes. By moralizing nature, the environmental movement addresses the need of establishing thresholds of intervention into the natural world but also provides elements for the identity formation of their members and sympathizers. What is however usually neglected by analysts is that the “natural world” itself is depositary of several definitions by the different “tonalities” of environmentalism. Such aspect is determinant for the various ways nature is moralized.

How to grasp the different “tonalities” of the environmental movement in a systematic way that allows us to, later on, propose an interpretation on the particular uses of core elements of modern morality by environmental associations, in their attempt to curb the current pattern of human intervention into the natural world?
One first aspect to be considered is the role that the moralization of nature plays for environmental associations and their members. If one assumes the idea that civil society (which comprises social movements and other social organizations that require communicative interaction for their everyday functioning and future perpetuation) is the institutional level of a secularized modern lifeworld (COHEN & ARATO, 1992; COHEN & ARATO, 1995), then one can accept that environmental civil associations moralize nature as a way of defending themselves against the reifying threats that systemic realms impose to them. This means that by proposing ethic and moral codes capable of regulating the interaction between humankind and nature they are also fostering elements for the sociability and identity formation of their own members (TAVOLARO, 2001b). But this general statement blurs the internal variety of environmentalism. Robin Eckersley’s analysis on the main contemporary “green political theories” seems to provide the most fruitful way of handling this issue.

In fact, Eckersley is concerned with relating “clusters of particular environmental ideas to particular movements”. The author proposes, then, a spectrum whose poles are an anthropocentric approach on nature, on the one side, and an ecocentric approach. On the anthropocentric side, green political theories and particular associations are concerned with fostering new opportunities for human emancipation in the context of an ecologically sustainable society. On the ecocentric pole, the opportunities for self-accomplishment and emancipation are pursued in the context of a broader notion of the subjects who will benefit from those opportunities. Such notion is enlarged by an ethical move that turns to ascribe “moral standing” for the “nonhuman world” (ECKERSLEY, 1992). Filling up the gap from one pole to the other, one can find a couple of conceptions that manifest particular environmental ethical approaches to nature as one slides from a more anthropocentric perspective towards a more ecocentrically-oriented attempt to moralize the natural world. These main positions are: the resource conservation movement, the human welfare ecology, preservationism, the animal liberation movement, and finally ecocentrism.
The modern version of the resource conservation strand, whose roots can be traced back to Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the United States Forest Service, has in its core the concern with the elimination of waste in processes of economic production. “Development” is the main orienting principle of this approach to nature, followed by the ideas of “prevention of waste” and “development for the benefit of many, and not merely the profit of the few”. Rather than disappearing from the sociopolitical scene of the 20th century, as McCormick (1992) and Caulifield (1992) tend to diagnose, the resource conservation approach conquered several sympathizers right after the II World War in many countries of Europe and North America (DALTON, 1994). It is essential to bear in mind that the conservationist strand of environmentalism, in its attempt to create expectations of behavior by humans towards nature, manifests an explicitly anthropocentric perspective. It proposes a set of principles in whose core lies a utilitarian conception of the character of the relationship between humankind and the natural world. Humans are to behave rationally vis-à-vis a natural environment that is essentially viewed as input for economic production, even recognizing the increasing risks that, in consequence of the contemporary level of technological development, pervade modern life.

Sliding on the spectrum some steps away from the conservationist position, one finds the human welfare ecology, whose roots can be found in the labor movement of the 19th century and its struggle for a healthier work environment. The major social and political transformations that urbanization and industrialization brought about throughout the 20th century pushed this strand to a position of evidence and popularity in comparison to the other strands of environmentalism. The pollution of the urban environment, the accumulation of toxic waste, the intensification of ground, air, and water pollution, the rise of new types of diseases usually attributed to the hasty rhythm of modern life, such as cancer and stress, the danger of nuclear plants and their wastes, global warming and the thinning of the ozone layer are some of the targets that citizens, consumers and householders concerned with the welfare of human beings started to tackle. In this sense, although
posing a sharp critique on the pattern of development of the Western civilization, drawing attention
to the need of taking into account the side effects of the usually blindly celebrated scientific-
technological conquests of modernity, the human welfare ecology also conceives of nature from an
anthropocentric perspective. The normativity this strand works out is one that poses the need of
respecting the urban and natural environment as long as this will ultimately improve the well-being
of humankind.

A little bit further on the spectrum towards the ecocentric pole, one reaches the
preservationist strand of environmentalism. At this point, the natural world starts to be seen from a
much less utilitarian perspective. There is now a noticeable aesthetic appreciation of nature, a
spiritual valorization of wilderness, as well as an emphasis on the uniqueness of the nonhuman
nature. Accordingly, whereas conservationism is concerned with providing most rational ways for
the economic utilization of natural resources, preservationism fights for the protection of the
natural world from development. As Eckersley points out, for those who share this approach to
nature, preservation of wilderness is seen “as both a symbolic act of resistance against urban and
cultural monoculture and the materialism and greed of consumer society and a defense (both real
and symbolic) of a certain cluster of values. These include freedom, spontaneity, community,
diversity, and, in some cases, national identity” (ECKERSLEY, 1992: 41-2). The construction of
“neomyths” around natural parks and reserves, through which sympathizers struggle for the
maintenance of untouched portions of the natural world, as Antonio Diegues (1996) could
demonstrate, seems to be a typical case of the preservationist position. Nonetheless, although less
utilitarian than the former strands, preservationism does not trespass completely the
anthropocentric borderline in the way it moralizes nature. Indeed, preservationists continue
subsuming nature to a narrow idea of emancipation, in the center of which humanity is placed. As
Eckersley puts it, such approach ascribes aesthetic endowments to the natural world from a very
specific cultural tradition, namely the Western one, out of which sympathizers justify the maintenance of supposedly untouched and “virgin” environments.

The frontier towards an ecocentric approach is more keenly attained when one reaches the position that the animal liberation movement occupies on the anthropocentric - ecocentric spectrum. Its roots can be found in the early modern “humane societies” that, in the 18th and 19th centuries struggled for the prevention of cruelty to animals by humans (THOMAS, 1988). This movement ascribes moral worthiness to certain members of the nonhuman world regardless of their lacking of capacities such as linguistic skills, self-consciousness, or the ability to enter into reciprocal arguments. The central aspect that justifies the attribution of moral value to these members is their sentient feature. Following this conception of nature, the animal liberation movement proposes a normativity that prohibits the hunting and slaughtering of all sentient beings, vivisection, and agricultural-industrial activities. Since “sentient animals” are at the bosom of this approach to nature, every environment that can be shown to be essential for their survival ends up occupying a core position in the normativity proposed by the animal liberation movement.

But it is only the ecocentric movements that fully reach the other pole of the spectrum. There are three subgroups within the ecocentric strand: the autopoietic ecocentrism, the transpersonal ecology, and the ecofeminism. The first of them attributes moral values to all entities (individuals, species, ecosystems, and the ecosphere) that display the property of autopoiesis, i.e. that perform activities aiming at self-production and self-renewal. The main concern of the transpersonal ecology is “to expand the circle of human compassion and respect for others beyond (...) the human community to include the entire ecological community” (ECKERSLEY, 1992: 62). The accomplishment of this objective depends on a larger conception of “self”, by means of which humans will be able to experience a lived sense of identification with other beings. Finally, ecofeminists intend to cultivate a spiritual affinity of women and nature, both seen as the victims of a situation of oppression and domination by a man-centered civilization. For
all these perspectives, “the world is an intrinsically dynamic, interconnected web of relations in
which there are no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between the living and
the nonliving, the animate and the inanimate, or the human and the nonhuman” (ECKERSLEY,
1992: 49). The normativity ecocentric movements propose in order to regulate human - nonhuman
interactions departs from the following assumptions: by adopting a holistic perspective that
emphasizes populations, species, ecosystems, and the ecosphere rather than the atomically
conceived “individual” being, it turns to recognize the interests of the nonhuman community as well
as the interests of future generations of humans and nonhumans beings. Accordingly, every entity
of nature is to be valorized for its own sake and the particular conditions for their self-
accomplishment are to be fully respected, regardless of any human biased and instrumental
judgment.

At first, looking at the strands of environmentalism that present themselves as the
proponents of ecocentrically oriented normativities, it is hard to believe how they make use of core
elements of the modern morality. Otherwise, it seems that, when proposing sets of norms aiming at
regulating human - natural world relationships, they end up re-enchanting nature, as if turning their
backs to the world that the Enlightenment helped to delineate. Indeed, this is the tone of the critique
several authors pose when analyzing some of the normative propositions mentioned above. Deepak
Lal (1991), for instance, calls these ecocentrically-oriented strands as the bearers of “pre-modern
and fundamentalist” conceptions. For Tim Luke (1988), they make up a new version of the Jewish-
Christian myth of the “Fall of Man”, drawing to their normative proposals elements from the
worldviews of pre-modern, non-urban, and pre-industrial societies.

Is this really the case? To what extent what underlie their proposals of moralizing nature
are elements foreign to the modern morality?

As a matter of fact, the environmental positions that are closer to the anthropocentric pole
mentioned above are less problematically viewed as the proponents of an environmental morality in
tune with the postconventional moral stage explored before. Conservationists and human welfare ecologists moralize nature in such a way that an unsubstantiated set of moral rules turn to provide a new normative orientation for humans in their intervening processes into the natural world. As they benefit from the gains of reflexivity that a rationalized lifeworld provides, conservationists and human welfare ecologists criticize the idea that for so long oriented the material production and reproduction of industrial societies, namely that nature is an infinite source for the production of goods and that it has an infinite capacity of regeneration. Thus, the blind certainty proper to the “first modernity” is opposed by conservationism and sharply objected by human welfare ecologism, which turn to raise a set of norms that try to foster new and more respectful expectations of behavior by humans towards the natural world. At this point, nature still does not occupy a more central position in the morality that these two tonalities of environmentalism propose. Nevertheless, even for them the natural world is already the depository of moral values that aim at modifying what is seen as a deleterious pattern of relationship between humans and the nonhuman world predominating among contemporary modern societies. Here, there is by no means a backlash to “substantive values” or towards “taken for granted truths” proper to the preconventional and conventional stages of morality. Otherwise, both conservationists and human welfare ecologists appeal to general principles from were the basic elements of their environmental morality are drawn: universal access to the benefits that the management of the natural world shall bring; a careful management of the environment given the indisputable need of respecting human life; and the management of the environment must not jeopardize the possibilities of emancipation and self-determination of all human individuals, including future generations, their different cultural background and values appropriately acknowledged. In this sense, it is quite clear that besides springing from the very core of modernity, they make use of modern moral terms to propose new patterns of relationship among humans and between humankind and nature.
The same clear-cut affinity between *modern morality* and *moralization of nature* cannot be said to prevail among the tonalities of environmentalism that are closer to the ecocentric pole of the spectrum. Indeed, in their attempts to “reconcile” humans and nature, *preservationists*, adepts of the *animal liberation movements* and *ecocentrics* (*autopoietics*, *transpersonalists*, and *eco-feminists*) seem to re-enchant nature, to ascribe subjectivity to it, as well as to attribute human characteristics to the natural world (GUHA, 1991; LATOUR, 1998; LEWIS, 1993; WARWICK, 1989). This is precisely the critique Tim Luke, Deepak Lal and, to a large extent, Lúcia Ferreira (1996) pose to them. They all point out to the fact that these environmental strands bring elements from traditional and pre-modern societies into the morality they propose. By doing so, the authors argue, they downplay core aspects of the worldview inaugurated by the Enlightenment in favor of traditional enchanted elements. But a more accurate consideration of these ecologically-oriented perspectives reveal that the moralization of nature they propose is also oriented by *abstract* and *general principles*. First, it is important to notice that they make a very selective collection of non-secular elements of traditional worldviews, clearly interweaving them with key propositions of modern science. This certainly holds for *preservationists*, who sustain their arguments strongly relying on the scientific notion of *biodiversity*, by means of which they struggle for the protection of ecological cycles. This is also true for the adepts of the *animal liberation movement*, who base their maxims on the scientifically proven sentient qualities of animals. Finally, this also holds for the three *ecocentric* positions above discussed, which make a large use of scientific evidence to argue that all organisms, from both human and nonhuman worlds, “are not simply interrelated with their environment but also *constituted* by those very environmental interrelationships” (ECKERSLEY, 1992: 49).

Secondly, the “worldviews” that these environmental tonalities construct when bringing together traditional symbols and scientific elements are not semantically closed as “archaic myths” are nor unreflexively binding as traditional worldviews are. They are rather structurally fraught
with secular components drawn by their members from the secularized everyday life of contemporary societies. Accordingly, although symbolically powerful and crammed with traditional images, the main pillars of these “environmental worldviews” are build up with de-enchantment elements of modern everyday lives. This is why they are capable of attributing feelings and moral qualities to the nonhuman world without however turning their back to the moral accomplishments of modernity. They actually *can* attribute voice, feelings, and other human features to an enlarged conception of “moral community” without fearing that the morality they propose will lead humans back to social contexts in which “individual autonomy” and “reflexivity” are strange to everyday life, such as the case of those normativities stemming from preconventional and conventional moral stages.

As a consequence, it is legitimate to argue that the environmental morality(ies) preservationists, members of the animal liberation movement, and ecocentricts propose is (are) also guided by *general* and *abstract principles in the light of which* everyday norms are criticized and reviewed. Their main guiding principles are: equal access to the natural world and to a worthy life; nonhuman life, just like human life, possesses intrinsic values, regardless of any human end; the coexistence of every existing forms of life is essential for a full accomplishment of these intrinsic values. These are the principles asserted by the Deep Ecology, an ecocentrically-oriented environmental movement that Tim Luke (1988) believes to be the bearer of pre-modern values. Rather than pre-modern, they are *principles* that precede any concrete taken for granted norm or substantive value, orienting and creating expectations of behavior among humans and between humankind and the natural world.

But what I believe to unveil even more the use that the several environmental positions make of the modern morality is the way they deal with legality. As I have discussed before, in a postconventional moral stage, morality and law get detached from one another and start to inhabit different realms. Morality, as Habermas suggests, becomes an internal control on behavior whereas
law turns to be an external force sanctioned by the State apparatus. But this does not mean that modern legality is simply turned into an ethically neutral means of control. Otherwise, it keeps a double character that evidences the anchorage of systemic realms of society into the *lifeworld*: modern laws work both as a *media control* and as an *institution*. Given the lack of semantic unity of worldviews pervading rationalized and differentiated *lifeworlds*, risks of communicative lapse increase a lot, for social relations are no longer based on common and unquestioned normative backgrounds out of which individuals draw references for behavior in circumstances of everyday life. As a consequence, some expectations of behavior are formalized by means of written laws that, despite detached from immediate circumstances of everyday life, never lose completely their ties to symbolically mediated social processes. This is what ultimately differentiates law as an *institution* from law as a *media of control*, as the latter becomes a system of ethically neutral legal determinations controlling systemic social realms. It is essential to bear these elements in mind precisely because they shed light on a key aspect of the moralization of nature I have been investigating so far.

Lúcia Ferreira (1996) draws attention to the fact that contemporary environmental associations, when striving to institutionalize their concerns with nature, take two basic possible paths. In the first case, they fight for a broader meaning of rights, up until now restricted to the idea of material needs, civil and political rights. In this sense, some environmental strands fight for the internalization of “environmental quality” into the universe of existing rights: they want all citizens to be able to request the right of a healthy environment, to benefit from a better quality of life. This means that these environmental strands want nature to become an “object of rights” for the benefit of citizens, a step that would upgrade the already institutionalized political, civil, and social sets of rights. But there is a second path certain environmental strands take in their attempt to institutionalize patterns of behavior among humans as well as between humankind and the natural world. As they attribute feelings, “active voice”, as well as human qualities to the
nonhuman world such strands argue that all natural entities must be included in the universe of citizenship. These environmental strands understand that, by being ends in themselves and by existing for their own sake, all natural entities must have their possibilities of accomplishing their potentialities and self-determination respected, whatever the meaning humans ascribe to them. Accordingly, they intend to bring nature into the universe of citizenship, i.e. they fight to make the natural world a legally recognized “subject of rights” (FERREIRA, Lúcia, 1996; SERRES, 1991; WESTRA, 1989; WORSTER, 1995; di ZEREGA, 1995).

Thus, acknowledging the terms by means of which modern societies institutionalize an important portion of expectations of behavior (given the risks of misunderstandings emerging in the wake of a rationalized and fragmented *lifeworld*), all environmental strands strive to codify part of the environmental morality they propose in terms of rights. As one can deduct, the closer these strands are to the anthropocentric pole of the spectrum above mentioned, the more likely they are to attribute to the natural world the status of “object of rights”. They struggle for human beings to have equal access to the benefits that a well-managed nature can provide to humankind. This is especially the case of conservationists and human welfare ecologists. However, as soon as one slides on the spectrum towards the ecocentric pole, the attempts to institutionalize moral concerns with nature start to ascribe the status of “subject of rights” to the natural world. Consequently, by means of an enlarged notion of citizenship, entities of the natural world start to be seen as citizens who, just like human beings, must have the right to accomplish their potentialities. In this sense, rather than downplaying or despising the codes and terms by means of which modern sociability is structured, the several environmental strands I analyzed above make use of those same terms in their struggle to create new types of expectations of behavior, capable of modifying the prevalent pattern of relationship among humans and between humans and nature.

But, as I tried to highlight, the counterpart of the modern character of the environmental moralities analyzed above is the existence of a legal framework, designed on rational and
“desubstantialized” terms, by means of which civil society and the public sphere codify their demands and claims among themselves and vis-à-vis the political-administrative apparatus. Therefore, when fighting to make the natural world either the “object of rights” or the “subject of rights”, environmental associations find in the legal framework of complex and modern societies a legal idiom into which their moral concerns can be somehow translated. What remains to be seen is to what extent the Brazilian case can be read through these same lenses.

**Environmentalism in Brazil: a particular type of modernity?**

Environmentalism in contemporary Brazil has two important hallmarks, one of them seen from the standpoint of the political-administrative system and, the other, from the point of view of civil society. The first one corresponds to the creation of SEMA (Special Secretariat of the Environment), in 1973, while the second is the foundation of AGAPAN (Rio Grande do Sul Association for the Protection of Nature), in 1971. These two events mirrored the first effective steps that the Brazilian government as well as the Brazilian civil society took into a terrain that would gain increasing importance in the years to follow. For sure, one can legitimately argue that the environmental issue, viewed from the two perspectives mentioned above, had already some important antecedents. Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that both SEMA and AGAPAN symbolize a turning point in regard to the position that the environmental issue started to occupy amongst the Brazilian society and the so-called “official politics” in Brazil.

SEMA came up in the wake of Brazil’s participation in the Conference of Stockholm, in 1972, where the Brazilian mission had led the group of Third World countries that feared that

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3 See, for instance, PÁDUA (1997), for whom the roots of environmentalism in Brazil can be found in the early 19th century. See also DRUMMOND (1997), who draws attention to the mobilization of some civil associations around environmental quality in the early 30s as well as to a thrust of institutionalization of an essentially conservationist legislation in Brazil from the 30s on.
“environmental concerns” would become a major obstacle for their will of reaching high rates of economic growth. AGAPAN, in turn, can be said to have resulted, among other things, from the growing environmental problems that urban centers in the South and Southeast regions started to experience as a consequence of the amazing rhythm of industrialization Brazil was undergoing since the 1950s.

In Stockholm, the Brazilian government had adopted very polemic positions in regard to the equation *economic development – environmental protection*. First and foremost, Brazil argued that development should not be sacrificed in favor of environmental quality. Secondly, Brazilian delegates stated that those who should pay the most for the environmental quality of the planet were the most industrialized countries. Third, Brazilian delegates asserted that ill-defined environmental goals could not bypass the national sovereignty of any country. Finally, Brazil disagreed with every attempt to attach high rates of demographic growth to low levels of environmental quality (GUIMARÃES, 1991). Indeed, the assumption underlying the Brazilian position and its Third World fellows in the Conference was the idea that “environmental problems at the periphery were caused by ‘large numbers of human beings living in poverty’, and developing countries were in fact victims of worldwide pollution generated by a lack of planning in the major industrial economies” (GUIMARÃES, 1991: 150-51). The reactions to those polemic positions by an international community much more sensitive to environmental issues made Brazilian “official politics” aware of the importance of internalizing environmental concerns in future diplomatic negotiations, even if only on a remarkably rhetoric level.

It is true that the idea that the creation of SEMA, in October 1973\(^4\), was a direct outcome of the polemic position Brazil assumed one year before in Stockholm is not a consensus\(^5\). But much

\(^4\) SEMA was officially institutionalized in October 1973, by Decree No. 73.030, and placed under the coordination of the Ministry of the Interior (GUIMARÃES, 1991).

\(^5\) Roberto Guimarães (1991), for instance, argues that SEMA was a response to the increasing levels of environmental contamination in urban centers in the aftermath of already 20 years of heavy
less controversial is the fact that by means of SEMA, the Brazilian government made clear that its approach to the environmental issue would be a remarkably marginal one, with a great deal of emphasis on natural pollution rather than on natural-resources management. It is also of very little controversy the fact that in 1973, as Leila Ferreira (1998) points out, the institutionalization of environmental issues had a rhetorical profile given the clear-cut priority of the last administrations: economic development. Juscelino Kubitschek’s administration (1956-1960) had already set the tone of such approach to the environment by means of a “developmentalist” ideology that took for granted the supposedly unlimited natural-resource basis of the Brazilian territory. Later on, the military National Plans of Development (especially Médici’s I PND – 1972-1974 and Geisel’s II PND – 1974-1979) only pushed this ideology to its full-accomplishment. Médici, despite enacting a legislation to reverse contamination in urban areas, set up policies that stimulated the penetration of Amazonia. Geisel, as well, strove to install heavy industry in Brazil as a way of triggering economic development at the expense of any effective policy of environmental protection.

But despite the rhetoric profile of environmental policies, these first initiatives started to form the institutional bedrock of environmental protection and management in contemporary Brazil. In 1975, through decrees No. 1.413 and No. 76.389, the first environmental measures aiming at controlling industrial pollution in urbanized areas were set up. From then on, other important steps towards the institutionalization of the environmental issue were taken. On the state level, organisms of environmental management focusing on pollution control were created: CETESB (Environment Sanitation and Technology Company), in São Paulo; FEEMA (State Environment Engineering Foundation), in Rio de Janeiro; and SUREHMA (Superintendence of Water Resources and Environment), in Paraná. In 1981, the last military administration of the dictatorship period, headed by Gen. Figueiredo (1979-1985), promulgated the National Policy for industrialization. Otherwise, Laymert (1994), Pádua (1991), Viola (1987), and Viola & Leis (1995) prefer to say that it resulted from international pressures, specially by financing agencies pressured by the
the Environment, regulated in 1983, responsible for institutionalizing environmental zoning laws and the obligation of evaluating the environmental impact of economic activities (FERREIRA, Leila 2000). Indeed, it goes without saying that the legal-institutional framework thus created had such a degree of complexity and budgeting implications that few states and local administrations were really able to comply with the determinations (NEDER, 1996).

José Sarney’s administration (1985-1990), although having opened up a new democratic chapter in Brazil’s recent political history, did not change substantially the old military approach to environmental issues, reserving to them the same marginal and rhetorical position enjoined since the early 70s. In 1985, decree No. 91.145 created the Ministry for Urban Development and the Environment, which encompassed SEMA and other agencies that were supposed to deal with similar issues, such as the National Housing Bank, the National Council of Urban Development, the Environmental National Committee (CONAMA), among others. In 1987, that Ministry was renamed as Ministry of Housing, Urbanism and Environment, eventually extinct in the end of Sarney’s term.

But two other events during the Sarney administration need to be highlighted. First of all, the promulgation of the new Constitution in 1988, which dedicates a whole chapter for environmental issues, setting out a large number of new regulations. Its importance lies on the fact that by the first time, as Guimarães points out,

*The Constitution makes mandatory on public authorities the duties of protecting Brazilian flora and fauna; promoting environmental education; controlling the production, commercialization, and use of substances that may endanger the quality of life; and defining those activities that must be subjected to previous environmental impact assessments. The Constitution also declares Amazonia, the Atlantic Forest, the Sea Mountains, the Pantanal, and the Coastal Zone areas of National Heritage. Finally,*

international public opinion, following Brazil’s arguments in Stockholm.
according to the new constitutional text, any citizen can initiate legal procedures to prevent or halt any action considered detrimental to the environment. (GUIMARÃES, 1991: 200-1)

The second event that deserves attention was the creation of IBAMA (Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources), in February 1989, an umbrella agency encompassing SEMA, the Superintendency of Rubber, and other related agencies. IBAMA was set up precisely at a moment the Sarney administration was undergoing severe critiques from within the country as well as from abroad due to the high rates of depletion of the Amazonian rain forest and to the death of Chico Mendes, the environmentalist and leader of rubber workers (VIOLA & LEIS, 1995). At the same time, the government launched a resounding nationalist campaign around Amazonia, laying claim to the uncontested sovereignty of Brazil over the resources of the rain forest (FERREIRA, Leila 1998).

President Collor (1990-1992), in turn, created the SEMAN (the Secretariat of the Environment), which turned to coordinate IBAMA. It was under his brief term that the Rio-92 took place, triggering the dissemination of the environmental concern among several sectors of the Brazilian society. Collor also surprised the Brazilian public opinion when he announced José Lutzenberger, a key name of the Brazilian environmental movement, to head SEMAN. However, it became obvious that such “environmentalist thrust” by the Collor administration was a strategic move to gather international support for the attempt to bring economic stability to Brazil, which required massive international investments into a stagnated economy. The Itamar Franco administration (1992-1994) set up the Ministry of Environment, which continued to exist under Fernando H. Cardoso’s term (1995-now). In both terms, however, environmental agencies and their policies continued to occupy a residual position in the federal administration, being brought to the
political limelight only at those moments the international public opinion requires and, then, set aside as soon as the spotlights are turned off.

Maybe what deserves to be highlighted in terms of the institutionalization of environmental issues in Brazil since the second half of the 1980s is the great amount of local administrations that started to build on the terrain opened up by the 1988 Constitution. Such Constitution, besides having officially declared the natural and urban environments to be a central aspect of national politics, provided more political and fiscal strength to the state and local levels. This fiscal and political leeway changed the relations of power inside the Brazilian federation and gave room for interesting innovations on the lower levels of administration. Leila Ferreira (1996; 1998) conducted several investigations on some of these experiences, testifying for some fruitful legal and institutional accomplishments that helped to tackle environmental problems in more efficient and systematic ways. Some of these administrations started to rely on instruments such as: the CONSEMA (Municipal Committee for the Environment), local departments specialized on environmental issues, directive plans much more attentive to environmental impacts, among others. Among the local experiences inquired by Ferreira that turned out to be successful in regard to the implementation of environmental policies are Santos (SP), Porto Alegre (RS), Curitiba (PR), Belo Horizonte (MG), Uberlandia (MG), and Joinville (SC).

On the civil society side of the Brazilian contemporary environmentalism the hallmark was the foundation of AGAPAN, in 1971\(^6\). Before that, one could only find very few experiences of naturalists organized in civil society associations fighting for the protection of nature\(^7\). AGAPAN, among whose founders was José Lutzenberger, represents a turning point in the contemporary civil society environmentalism as it drew society’s attention to problems resulting from more recent

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\(^6\) It is interesting to notice that the contemporary Brazilian environmental movement itself considers the creation of AGAPAN a milestone of its existence, setting the ground for other civil society experiences all over the country. See Fundação Francisco (1995).
changes in the patterns of economic production and urban occupation in Brazil. Indeed, the emergence of an environmental movement with a new profile among Brazilian society has to do not only with foreign influences from the European and North-American effervescent environmentalism of the early 70s but also with an internal context propitious for claims around environmental issues. As Pádua (1991) points out, in the mid-70s, Brazil had already experienced high rates of industrialization and urbanization that unleashed unprecedented levels of air pollution and water contamination. Moreover, such combination of industrialization and urbanization produced an intellectualized middle-class much more sensitive to issues regarding human rights, free expression, political rights, rights of difference, among others, which gained a significant political reverberation in a country under military rule for already 10 years. It was a time when social movements of different sorts thrived, such as feminist movements, gay movements, black movements, neighborhood associations, sowing the soil for claims of a different order, as the case of environmental quality.

AGAPAN opened the way for those civil society associations that demanded more consideration by public authorities in the face of the widespread use of insecticides and herbicides, of increasing levels of water and air pollution, of domestic and industrial waste inappropriately disposed, and of the unnecessary destruction of natural areas. Its ultimate goals were the assertion of ecology as the science that could promote the possibilities for human continued survival, the promotion of a new ecological ethics, and the denunciation of the current deleterious pattern of relationship between nature and the Western civilization (VIOLA, 1987; VIOLA & LEIS, 1995).

After AGAPAN’s kick-off and the gradual political liberalization of the mid-70s, several other ecological organizations started to pop up in the main cities of the South and Southeast regions. At that time, the civil society environmentalism in Brazil focused its attention

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7 As was the case of the Fundação Brasileira para Conservação da Natureza (Brazilian Foundation for the Protection of Nature), founded in 1958 in Rio de Janeiro (VIOLA, 1987).
fundamentally on campaigns denouncing acts of environmental degradation in particular local areas, raising the consciousness of local populations for the impacts of those acts. Only in the late 70s the Brazilian environmental movement could get organized and influential enough to boost campaigns on a regional scale, such as the struggle against the construction of an airport in Caucaia do Alto (SP), in 1977-1978, against the inundation of Sete Quedas (PR) for the construction of a dam (1979-1983), and the campaign against the overlooked depletion of the rain forest in Amazonia (1977-1985) (VIOLA & LEIS, 1995).

From the mid-80s on, one observes a twofold process delineating the Brazilian civil society environmentalism: on the one hand, a gradual process of diffusion of the environmental awareness throughout different sectors of society and its civil associations, and, on the other, a process of organizational upgrading as well as professionalization among environmental associations. The first process led Viola & Leis (1995) to qualify this new “stage” of environmentalism in Brazil as a “multi-sectorial” one as it turned to encompass not only ecological associations but also civil associations targeting other aims (feminist ones, trade unions, religious groups, neighborhood associations, etc.), scientific groups and institutions, economic entrepreneurial associations, journalists, artists, among others (LEIS & VIOLA, 1995).

As far as the second process is concerned, the mid-80s witnessed a strong thrust of internal institutionalization by some environmental associations. Besides those tiny associations that continued to bring together amateur environmentalists engaged in local causes, a significant number of entities started to muster a larger rank-and-file and a better qualified personnel (from 5 to 60 people). At the same time, their budgeting underwent a meaningful upgrade (supported either by governmental agencies or by international NGOs) (VIOLA & LEIS, 1995). Such step toward institutionalization provided them a stronger infrastructure for action and horizontal communication (i.e., contacts among themselves). Indeed, in May 1986, environmental associations got together at the 1st National Meeting of Autonomous Ecological Associations, in Belo Horizonte.
(MG), attended by more than 100 associations, setting the ground for an active participation in the writing of the 1988 Constitution (VIOLA, 1987).

The very fact that Brazil hosted the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, in 1992, meant a further boost for the Brazilian civil society environmentalism. In 1992, there were 1,533 environmental NGOs in Brazil, out of which 985 answered a detailed questionnaire prepared by a NGO called *Mater Natura*. Among them, 20% had a budgeting revolving around R$ 11,000 and R$ 50,000, and another 20% around R$ 51,000 and R$ 100,000. For 45% of these NGOs, from 75% to 100% of their budget came from members contributions while for 46% of them, international sources were responsible for the same percentage of their revenues. It is interesting to notice that 67% said that their activities had to do with biodiversity, 53% with water resources, 50% with solid waste, and another 50% with the urban environment, generically considered. It is also quite remarkable that 86% of the NGOs interviewed asserted that their main activities were related to environmental education, projects focusing on local communities (for 58%) and campaigns aiming at mobilizing public opinion towards environmental quality (62%). Finally, it is interesting to have in mind that the target group of 78% of them were local communities, adolescent groups (for 61%), and local administrators (for 44% of the NGOs) (ECOLISTA, 1996).

However, despite the undeniable growth of environmental civil associations and the dissemination of the environmental concern throughout society, one cannot overestimate the capacity of those associations to exert influence over policy-makers or the solidity of the so-called “environmental awareness” among the Brazilian society (JACOBI, 1996). In fact, as Leis & Viola (1995) point out, the effervescence of Rio-92 ended up leading several environmental associations

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8 It is also quite remarkable that in 1987, SEMA counted 510 civil environmental associations in its records, 66% of them settled in the Southeast region and 18% in the South region (SEMA, 1987).
9 Nowadays, these values correspond to something from US$ 4,000 (R$10,000) to US$ 40,000 (R$100,000).
to overestimate their actual strength at the time of the Conference, something that later on turned out to be an equivocal. In the aftermath of Rio-92, when several environmental NGOs realized their limited political capacity, a certain climate of disorientation turned to prevail among Brazilian civil society environmentalists. The current picture seems to be one characterized by the lack of a well designed agenda, by a still precarious organizational infrastructure, by a limited production and circulation of information among the associations and between them and the larger society, and finally by the lack of capacity to forge a sociopolitical coalition strong enough to pressure policy-makers and entrepreneurs to put into practice efficient policies aiming at environmental sustainability (LEIS & VIOLA, 1995).

From the picture I have just tried to portray one can draw some elements that may be interesting to be conceptualized through the lenses of the Brazilian modernization. As the analysis of the political-administrative side of environmentalism in Brazil reveals, since the early 70s, an increasingly complex and detailed institutional and legal framework is gradually being set up on all levels of public administration. Several governmental environmental agencies have been set up, legal tools aiming at regulating activities that have implications on the environment were institutionalized, a skillful personnel in charge of environmental management has occupied key administrative positions, and policies designed to ameliorate the quality of life of urban centers and natural areas have been set in motion on a steadfast pace for already 30 years on the federal, state, and local levels. However, one cannot neglect the deep gap that separates this promising legal-institutional framework from its actual accomplishments. Since SEMA’s creation, it became very clear that the internalization of the environmental issue by the political-administrative apparatus in Brazil had a great deal of rhetorical weight at the expense of an effective functioning. Governmental environmental agencies in Brazil usually occupy very marginal and subordinated positions in the administrative building. Their budgeting is so short that their capacity to put some
of their elementary roles into practice faces insurmountable constraints (GUIMARÃES, 1991). Quite often, local and state administrations are expected to comply with an environmental legislation that requires from them an infrastructure and amounts of money larger than they can afford (NEDER, 1996). It goes without saying that environmental policies are remarkably fragmented and disconnected from other realms of public administration essential for an effective regulation of environmental issues. This is why Leila Ferreira (1998) argues that “there is in Brazil a deep gap between reality and the rhetorical level, which is translated into an environmental legislation that follows the international experience and presents extremely sophisticated instruments. As a matter of fact, in reality, the conditions to set these instruments in motion are still extremely limited” (p. 107).

From the standpoint of civil society, it is important to bear in mind the “exceptionalism” of the dissemination of environmentalism in Brazil, precisely at a moment the country was undergoing a dramatic economic backlash. As Eduardo Viola suggests (1997) this is a noticeable aspect if one

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10 For example, Guimarães (1991) draws attention to the fact that in June 1986, the amount of revenues assigned to the so-called “ecological package” by the Sarney administration was less than one-sixth of the budget of CETESB (São Paulo’s environmental agency).

11 According to Neder (1996), from the 70s on, a complex and detailed legal-normative framework dealing with environmental issues started to be designed by the federal administrative level at odds with the actual capacity of the state and local levels to put them into practice. Their incapacity was due to: 1) budgeting problems by the inferior levels of administration, even worse than the limitations faced by the federal level; 2) the marginal position that environmental issues continued to occupy in those lower administrative levels given other priorities that often dissociated economic development and welfare policies from environmental quality; 3) the lack of articulation between environmental agencies and other administrative agencies; 4) the incapacity of the public power to enforce the law and to make the larger population and economic entrepreneurs to abide by the environmental regulations.

12 This also holds for what Leila Ferreira considers to be the most positive experiences in terms of environmental public management, namely those involving local administrations from the second half of the 80s on. As her researches demonstrate, with few exceptions, even when there was a great deal of political will to tackle environmental problems, policies were not efficiently articulated with one another (FERREIRA, Leila, 1996; 1998). Maybe the most astonishing example is the case of São Paulo City, the largest city in Brazil and, certainly, one of the most degraded urban sites in the country. Between 1988 and 1992, when a leftist administration managed the city (Luíza Erundina’s administration), the environmental issues never occupied a secretariat of its own. Environmental issues were rather directly linked to the executive wing and handled by a very small personnel, detached from the main policies of the administration. Moreover, during Erundina’s term, the city never had a CONDEMA (Municipal Committee for the Environment), which was supposed to gather together civil society, the executive as
takes into account that in the great majority of First World countries, the dissemination of environmental values among society took place at moments of economic stability. This means that whenever those countries were taken by economic crises, environmental policies were withdrawn in consequence of lack of public support for expenses in environmental quality. In Brazil, otherwise, the process that led to the “multi-sectorial stage” of environmentalism was simultaneous to a very unsteady economic environment. Such exceptional profile had an important impact on the sociopolitical and cultural arenas where environmental civil associations and other civil organizations operated. First of all, environmental policies were generally perceived by the larger society as hampering economic development and requiring great amounts of revenues that could be spent somewhere else. Thus, measures targeting environmental quality, from the very beginning, had to face the problem of drawing legitimacy in a country struggling against high levels of poverty. In this sense, as Lúcia Ferreira (1997) points out, environmentalists in Brazil feel there is a kind of unbridgeable gap between their claims and the larger public opinion, a gap they have been trying to bridge by arguing that economic development and environmental quality are a false paradox, i.e. by claiming the links between environmental quality and mitigation of poverty (NICKEL & VIOLA, 1994).

A second aspect resulting from the “exceptionalism” of environmentalism in Brazil and responsible for shaping the character of environmental associations has to do with the lack of legal codes through which they can translate their claims in a public way (FERREIRA, Lúcia 1996). As the author argues, the conquest of citizenship in Brazil was always too narrowly associated with the idea of “superseding material scarcity”. Such narrow conception of citizenship entails problems for a broader understanding of civil, political, and social rights as key elements of a fully accomplished citizenship among Brazilian society. Consequently, civil, political, and social...
differences are usually seen as a direct outcome of “material inequalities”. In this sense, inequalities of different natures are only barely translated into appropriate juridical terms. This is precisely the case of environmental claims, which do not find a legitimate public language to reach the larger society and the political-administrative apparatus. Therefore, as Lúcia Ferreira argues, environmental associations end up taking two different paths at one and the same time: they strive to redesign the Brazilian polity so that their demands can get enough legitimacy to enter the political-public arena. Simultaneously, they withdraw to a private realm, restricted to a matter of personal behavior and ethical attitude, as they face real problems to find the appropriate codes to publicize their claims.

These elements provide interesting clues to map out the relationship between environmentalism and modernity in Brazil. As a matter of fact, it is hard to defend the idea that the de-traditionalization processes underwent by Brazilian society have not taken the path of modernity, being the latter conceived as a Western European project in its origins. From my standpoint, suffices to remind the weight that the European worldview played in Brazil since its colonial period. Suffices also to remember the decisive step towards modernization Brazil took as a consequence of the integration of the national economy into the Western capitalist system, of the gradual formation of a bureaucratically structured State apparatus, as well as of the dissemination of values of moral individualism among Brazilian society since the early 19th century (SOUZA, 2000). But what remains to be figured out is the very character of Brazilian modernity and how contemporary environmentalism is linked to it.

Indeed, Marcelo Neves (1996) believes that Brazilian modernity has to be conceived as a “peripheral” one. This is so because, for him, in Brazil, processes of de-traditionalization did not lead to the overcoming of a conventional morality by a fully accomplished postconventional one that could have brought the necessary components for the formation of an autonomous public sphere. Although Neves proposes a powerful diagnosis of the Brazilian case, he seems to
presuppose the existence of a single path of modernization in reference to which alternative paths are seen as imperfect accomplishments. Jessé Souza (2000) qualifies the sociological strand that insists in diagnosing Brazilian modernity as the “underdog” of a supposedly straight modernity by the term “sociology of unauthenticity”. The fruitful aspect of Souza’s critique, which is somehow shared by Maurício Domingues’s work (1999), is the possibility of conceiving modernity as a multi-faceted project encompassing several historical accomplishments. Thus, if it is true that the contemporary North-American and German societies are historical examples of modernity, the same can be said about Brazil and its particularities.

One can then go back to Marcelo Neves’s diagnosis of Brazilian modernity without running the risk of placing it on a disadvantaged spot in relation to a supposedly “authentic” modernization. For him, processes of de-traditionalization in Brazil led to the entanglement of juridical codes with social codes of other natures in such a way that the formers are incapable of operating according to their own terms and needs. Consequently, uneven political and economic influences over the public life are not blocked and filtered by means appropriate juridical criteria. Otherwise, there is an insufficient operational closure that precludes the juridical system to get solidly constituted and to efficiently regulate the different realms of society. Hence, if it is still possible to find a well delineated juridical system on the formal level, such formal identity is eventually destroyed as soon as juridical processes are set in motion. In fact, it turns out to be too fragile to resist the uneven influences of money and power by certain sectors of society at the expense of others. The ultimate picture is the following, according to Neves: the insufficient constitution of a postconventional morality leads to the political instrumentalization of the law with no effective counter-tendency by political procedures ethically-discursively based. What prevails is, then, the political and economic instrumentalization of the law. In such a scenario, argues the author, “human rights” and the principle of “popular sovereignty” are unable to pervade society as a whole. On the one hand, the relations of dependency preclude the emergence of the idea of
“individuals recognized as equal human beings from the juridical standpoint”. On the other, the privatization of the State hampers the constitution of a public sphere in which democratic procedures of participation and control of the State could thrive.

This picture helps us to understand some of the links between modernity and environmentalism in Brazil. Indeed, it seems reasonable enough to say that the middle-class sectors of the Brazilian society that support the environmental cause are no longer the bearers of a conventional type of morality. In this sense, it is legitimate to argue that, when moralizing nature, environmentalists in Brazil base their ethical proposals on general and abstract principles in the light of which everyday circumstances are assessed and measured. But this does not mean that they find a correspondent legal structure capable of translating their claims into laws that will effectively regulate environmental problems. Environmental civil associations do not find a legal idiom by means of which they can translate their demands and moral concerns into a binding juridical code. This is so because their moral concerns, even when based on desubstantialized and abstract principles, are not paralleled by an autonomous legal framework, strong enough to set the limits to the functioning of the political-administrative apparatus as well as of the economic subsystem. Accordingly, there is no autonomous juridical code capable of regulating the relationship between the State, the economic subsystem, and the larger society. This is why the environmental legislation in Brazil is so often rhetorically manipulated and set aside whenever it contradicts other predominant interests.

Although the picture I tried to portray is clearly very incomplete, I hope it sheds some light on a set of theoretical issues that have been the focus of an increasing number of investigations in Brazilian social sciences in recent years. Clear-cut arguments and a better-delineated diagnosis demand further research, which I intend to carry out in the future.
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