

**For the sake of global democracy, let us contribute to stopping
the commodification of the world
A manifesto for the cultural association
"Political ecology – research for alternatives"**

"Humanity is in a free fall towards complete disaster. The destruction is military, political, cultural, ecological, and economic. Biodiversity, hydrological resources and ecosystems are being attacked by a global economy of plunder that is insatiable in its appetite, in its exploitation of natural wealth, and in the use of violence in order to appropriate resources belonging to local populations" (Vandana Shiva).

The Association and the journal "CNS – Ecologia Politica" are intended as avenues for active citizenship, free documentation, and transparent information for the struggles of women and men throughout the world against this hopeless free fall because such tools are and will be indispensable.

I – The cultural association that we are organising and the new bimonthly periodical "Rivista internazionale di ecologia politica" (international journal of political ecology) that will soon be published on internet (www.ecologiapolitica.it) aim to promote and distribute knowledge regarding the "environmental question", to underscore its centrality with respect to the current crisis resulting from neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism, and to serve as a counter project to the dangers of permanent warfare, seen as the fruition of "unsustainable" development. Thus understood, the environmental question regards the "second contradiction between capitalism and nature" (James O'Connor) and the "non-neutrality and violence of commodities" (Giorgio Nebbia), two concepts which gave the journal its initial impetus 12 years ago. At the same time, the matter regards the issue of access to and use of natural and social resources, as well as the use and management of land, water, and waste, farming, GMO's, and biodiversity, the countryside, transport, and infrastructure, oil and alternative energy, chemical and nuclear weapons, environmental risk, appropriate technologies, and all practical and theoretical aspects related to the building of an alternative. Seen in this light, the environmental problematic questions the very foundations of the cultural *mainstream* and becomes the necessary basis for the overcoming of the "monocultures of the mind", the break-up of social ties, and the westernisation of the world.

For all these reasons, the Association and Journal prioritise the following issues for the purpose of analysis and activism, which are not mutually exclusive: *democracy and environmental justice*, which are inseparable, since no real democracy exists without the control over natural resources; *labour*, which includes the defence of safety at the workplace, of workers' purchasing power, of union rights, and of free association among workers; *organic farming*, intended as the struggle for food sovereignty and security and for the protection of natural water- and land-based cycles; *energy alternatives to petrol*, since petrol is at the core of modern conflicts and induces unsustainable lifestyles; and *the role of Africa*, which far from being the lost continent, as so often mentioned, is full of ferment, whose resistance movements and creative responses to crisis are virtually ignored by the West. Seen from here, the wars that so bloody that continent seem wholly traceable to corrupt African governments, which doubtless exist and play a role. Yet it must be stressed that, in the first place, western governments and trans-national corporations do interfere in those countries and actively incite conflicts throughout the continent.

II – Everywhere in the world, democracy is reduced to an empty shell as the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO and trans-national corporate bodies have taken it upon themselves to make economic decisions that are fundamental to the life of the planet. Decisions over the economy and the disposal of natural resources are centralised through the process of globalisation. This induces a growing insecurity for local peoples by expropriating economic and ecological resources from individuals and communities and thereby erasing cultural identities, democracy and individual and collective liberty.

When political and economic agendas coincide – as in the USA with Bush Jr. and in Italy with Berlusconi – democracy becomes a simulacrum and politics, in the sense of people's participation in the governing of public matters, loses ground. In this light, war is not so much the continuation of politics by another name, but it becomes politics in and of itself. Individual freedoms and rights, wherever they exist, evanesce. Even more, local peoples, forced to fight each other for resources and spaces of which they have been deprived, become preys and victims of all sorts of ethnic and religious divisions and of fundamentalisms of whichever origin.

The already dire situation of ongoing conflicts and wars over the control of natural resources in the South and of the drugs and arms trade are being further aggravated by the privatisation of water, energy, biodiversity, essential infrastructure such as aqueducts and sewers, water and electrical utilities, school and health services, not to mention the privatisation of agricultural markets in the South. In 2001 alone, such conflicts numbered over 50 (Michael Renner, World Watch Institute). To these low- and high-intensity wars must be added the US's new "pre-emptive" wars in Afghanistan and Iraq since 11 September 2001 and the Israel-Palestine conflict, which has lasted half a century, with millions of either dead, wounded, invalids, or refugees. The "collateral damage" of these wars last well beyond the actual duration of armed conflict. Perhaps more devastating are the after-effects of human rights violations, the short- and long-term humanitarian and environmental disasters due to the destruction of basic infrastructure, the contamination of water supplies and rivers, the destruction of subsistence farming resources, famine and malnutrition, the loss of archaeological, historical, artistic, and cultural heritage, and the emergence of epidemics and diseases such as leukaemia ("Gulf war syndrome") among the military. The consequences of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, of napalm in Vietnam, and of depleted uranium in the first Gulf war are already before our eyes.

III – The third millennium is increasingly characterised by "permanent and pre-emptive wars" for oil and natural resources, the conquest of markets, and geopolitical games of territorial control. The US Bush administration explain their military strategy both as a "defensive" response to Bin Laden's terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and as a "moral" duty to neutralise "rogue" states (the Axis of Evil) and force them to accept democratic rule (following the western model). They have no care about the fact that they have hardly provided any evidence for their contentions. Public opinion has contested their stance with unprecedented mobilisations of protest, such that even the major US daily – The New York Times – recognises that the anti-war movement is a sort of superpower with which to contend. Regardless, the US administration ignores such a mobilisation and continues to follow its own road.

Even in the US, the public – intellectuals, writers, and common people – descends on the streets major cities to protest the war. This is in sharp contrast to the American heartland, which largely supports the administration. The heartland is never informed of the critiques levelled against the US by the rest of the world and is not

even aware of the voices of domestic dissent. It does not realise that the "frontier" is no more. It does not go to see the films of Spike Lee, such as "The 25th hour", just as in the past it did not see the contentious films of Robert Altman. They cannot but be informed of the incident at Columbine, but they have little to no exposure to Michael Moore's film that condemns the armed nature of the US. The heartland has not yet lost its innocence and continues to believe that everyone has the duty and right of self-defence and with weapons.

The current arrogance of the US administration is a nefarious consequence of the "American coup". It originates in the rise to political power of the extreme right, which has formed through the reactionary American Enterprise Institute think tank. Its Project for a New American Century has been publicised in 1997, but has been in progress since 1991. The Project theorises a "historical necessity" for American supremacy in a unipolar world following the fall of the Berlin wall and the consequent need for preventive wars against any country that threatens the global predominance of the US. This plan bears the signatures of prominent members of the recent Bush administration, Vice-President Cheney and the head of his staff, Lewis Libby, Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld and the second in command, Paul Wolfowitz, Peter Rodman, responsible for global security concerns, John Bolton, arms control secretary, Richard Armitage, the undersecretary for foreign affairs, William Kristal, the ideologue and personal councillor to President Bush, Zalmay Khalilzad, the ambassador to Iraq, and lastly Richard Perle, already vice-undersecretary of defence under Reagan and ex-president of the Defence Committee of the House with Bush Jr.

The preventive war strategy has led to a severe crisis in both internal democracy and international relations. The most elementary rules of democracy have gone missing in that barely more than 20% of eligible voters participate during elections, environmental regulations and social policies have been gutted, while new antiterrorism and crime legislation increasingly impair personal liberties. In less than two years, the US has abandoned more than 20 international treaties on the environment and human rights, from the Kyoto Treaty to the International Penal Court. They wish to have a free hand in everything and are acting accordingly.

IV – Nevertheless, US militarism is more an indication of decay than economic power. Foreign debt has reached 2.3 trillion dollars or 23% of GDP. This surpasses that of the so-called developing world, which amounts to 2,17 trillion dollars, or 12% of its aggregate GDP. Even the federal budget is in the red. As paradoxical as it may seem, this crisis reflects and is the result of the neo-liberal globalisation crisis, which undermines the very basis of capital accumulation by privatising, commodifying, and destroying financial and natural resources. This process is ever more unsustainable both in the material and political sense in that the US, with 5% of the world population, consumes more than 50% of global resources. As a document from the State Department revealed in 1948, it is "For this reason we are the object of envy and resentment and we must therefore build a system of international relations that will allow us to maintain the same global disparity without threatening our national security." In Western Europe as well there exists such asymmetry between population and consumption levels that is founded on the exploitation of other peoples' resources, which is intolerable for the Earth's have-nots. Western Europe nevertheless does not pride itself in moral terms, nor does it theorise a strategy of preventive war, save for Great Britain. Roughly 70-80% of the public in Western Europe is actually against war and this could allow for a recovery of a sense of democracy among peoples.

It is in order to maintain global disparities that wars are being waged against many Souths around the world that are defined as poor, even though they possess the sort

of wealth that the North requires for maintaining its mass consumption levels. Compensating in part for the crisis of the left, local peoples and the international movements since Seattle revolt against this asymmetry such that, as Luigi Pintor states, "they have reached a level of subalternity and subjection not only towards right-wing politics, but towards its point of view, its mentality ... and not as a form of opportunism, but as a result of conviction."

V – In this framework, the environment and natural resources are no more mere reserves to be conserved, if they ever were. They are, rather, a focal point of struggle in both North and South against neo-liberal globalisation, whereby social groups resist and organise themselves in order to rebuild a broken-down world, so as to bring back justice and solidarity, a sustainable use of resources, moderate and sustainable lifestyles, and a living democracy on Earth. That is, develop the conditions for real democracy in water use, food distribution, and public participation, in contrast to formal democracy, whereby the more powerful makes the rules according to its own whims and consumption needs. This is the boundary between disaster and its alternative.

Campeños and small farmers, workers and artisans, women, children, and local peoples are thereby obvious agents of an alternative way of living, producing, and exchanging, all founded on a culture of peace and solidarity, of mutual listening and respect, of understanding and empathy, of sustainable use of nature, of the satisfaction of subsistence needs without undermining other species and biodiversity, of pluralism and individual responsibility, of good practices in daily life, and of negotiated solutions to conflict.

The agents of change are diverse and manifest themselves partially in movements such as the world social forum, but perhaps even more so in the daily struggles to live and survive. Alternative possibilities are represented by the innumerable experiences of struggle and there exists a rich literature, both in Italy and more profusely abroad, depicting these experiences. We at CNS-Ecologiapolitica, both through the Association and the journal, propose to make such experiences known and to reflect on these experiences and their related literatures.

Mindful of context-specific cultural-historical and geographical differences, we can learn and be inspired from living political leaders such as Marcos in Chiapas and Thomas Sankara, the assassinated president of Burkina Faso.

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