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# The Primary Colors of Environmental Ethics: Foundations for a Sustainable World

An adequate understanding of the current challenges facing humankind at the crossroads of two coupled societal processes - the increasing, yet asymmetric globalization and the profound, mostly untamed global environmental changes - requires revisiting classical social thought and well-established concepts. The fact that the combined consequences of globalization and of global environmental change threaten the very livelihood of individuals and of entire communities, and impacts negatively on their social and human rights, brings the traditional discourse on ethics to the forefront of the debate once again. As many have aptly noted, these two interconnected phenomena call into question the very foundations of civilized life under the patterns inaugurated by the Agricultural Revolution about ten thousand years ago. There are plenty of indications that global change has brought to the limit this so-called "pattern of civilization" (i.e., the incorporation of nature into human culture and productive activities), which threatens the human security of peoples in every corner of the world. The emergence and worldwide acceptance of the need for sustainable development attests to this fact and calls for a wide range of changes, from the conceptual to the policy level.

To embrace an ethical understanding of global environmental change has deep conceptual implications and may call for the foundation of a different brand of social sciences, a new Economics, a new Political Science, and a new Sociology, as even Nobel laureates have suggested. Building upon the seminal contributions of Clive Lewis, particularly in his classic *The Abolition of Man*, this project advances the hypothesis that, similarly to the "primary colors" suggested by Lewis, Ethics also has "primary" components. Even though ethical approaches to human security and environmental change may vary among different cultures, I believe there are "primary" foundations of ethics that are universal, intrinsic to human nature, and thus not culturally bounded. I intend to explore this avenue, propose conceptual and research avenues for the social sciences, and indicate the policy implications of "primary ethics" for addressing environmental change and human security.

## Recommended Reading

Guimarães, Roberto P. "Report of the World Social Situation 2005: The Inequality Predicament." United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, A/60/117/Rev.1, ST/ESA/299, New York, 25 August 2005.

-. "Waiting for Godot: Sustainable Development, International Trade and Governance in Environmental Policies." *Contemporary Politics* 10, 3-4 (2004): 203-225.

-. *The Ecopolitics of Development in the Third World: Politics and Environment in Brazil*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1991 and 1994.

## The Primary Colors of Environmental Ethics: Exploring the Foundations for a Sustainable World

Humankind confronts today challenges that place Western civilization at the crossroads of two coupled societal processes, the increasing, yet asymmetric globalization, and the profound, untamed global environmental changes. The fact that the combined consequences of globalization and of global environmental change threaten human security, the very livelihood of individuals and of entire communities in every corner of the world, and impacts negatively on their social and human rights, brings the traditional discourse on ethics to the forefront of the debate once again.

As many have appropriately noted, these two interconnected phenomena now call into question the very foundations of civilized life inaugurated by the Agricultural Revolution about eleven thousand years ago. There are plenty of indications that global change has brought to its limits the "pattern of civilization" which has characterized Western societies since then and spread worldwide. The incorporation of nature into human culture and productive activities, which have for a long time lead to progress and the improvement of life in many aspects, currently shows increasing signs of being exhausted, and calls for the "re-invention" of human-nature relationships. As the naturalist A. F. Coventry once suggested, "we have for a long time been breaking the little laws, and now the big laws are beginning to catch up with us." The emergence and worldwide acceptance of the need for sustainable development attests to this fact and requires a wide range of changes, from individual to societal choices, from the conceptual to the policy level.

Thus, to embrace an ethical understanding of global environmental change has deep conceptual implications and may call for the foundation of a different brand of social sciences, among others, a new economics, a new political science and a new sociology, as even Nobel laureates of the stature of Amartya Sen have advocated. Building upon the seminal contributions of Clive Lewis, particularly in his classic *The Abolition of Man*, I am currently exploring the hypothesis that, similarly to the "primary colors" suggested by Lewis, environmental ethics may have "primary" components as well. Even though ethical approaches to human security and environmental change may vary among different cultures, I believe there might be "primary" foundations of environmental ethics that are universal, intrinsic to human nature, and thus not entirely bounded by culture.

This colloquium aspires to explore this avenue, propose conceptual and research avenues and suggest some normative and policy implications of "primary environmental ethics" for addressing global environmental change and human security. As Lynton Caldwell aptly argues, "the environmental crisis is an outward manifestation of a crisis of mind and spirit. There could be no greater misconception of its meaning than to believe it to be concerned only with endangered wildlife, human-made ugliness, and pollution. These are part of it, but more importantly, the crisis is concerned with the kind of creatures we are and what we must become in order to survive."

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Waiting for Godot : sustainable development, international trade and governance in environmental policies

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Guimarães, Roberto Pereira (Harrisburg, Pa.,2001)

The politics and ethics of "sustainability" as a new paradigm for public policy formation and development planning (I)

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