

THE UNSUSTAINABLE MODERNITY. THE CRITICISM OF ENVIRONMENTALISM TO CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY - HÉCTOR RICARDO LEIS

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LEIS, Héctor Ricardo. *A modernidade insustentável. As críticas do ambientalismo à sociedade contemporânea*. Annablume, 2014, 236p.

The becoming of things wanted the second edition of “A modernidade insustentável” (The unsustainable modernity) to be released a few days after its author’s death – Héctor Ricardo Leis. There is kind of a mystery in this unplanned but predictable circumstance that, perhaps, says something about the work or the author.

“A modernidade insustentável” (The unsustainable modernity) is the culmination of one of the themes developed by Leis in the last third of his life, and it was coincident with the environmental issue cycle that started in 1986 with the publishing of the Brundtland Report. This cycle resulted in the consecration of the sustainable development notion and its well-known rhetorical ambiguity that combines moral appeal to the future with political realism to the present. In the midst of this ambiguity, a vector, the ethical and normative one, called civilization to responsibility for their ecological negligence, while another vector, the pragmatic one, worried mainly about accommodating interests facing a transition that should happen sooner or later and by the force of circumstances. Nowadays we realize that the pragmatic vector not only was accommodating the interests, but also unduly delayed measures that should already have happened in many aspects. That negligent delay makes this reissue far more than timely.

The book, first published in 1999, was conceived as a subsidy to environmentalism and an invitation to critical reflection on the trappings of modernity in this historic moment. In it, the ecological crisis would be the main expression of such traps, but would also represent the best evolutionary transition opportunity (not evolutionist, as explained by the author). With this message, the book became one

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of the most read and cited theoretical reflection works in Brazil, as noted by Eduardo Viola in his prologue.

However, this second edition, fifteen years later, can be read in a new perspective. It is no longer just a subsidy for the environmentalism to understand modernity, but a mirror so it can see where it has failed, or has been failing. This reading track is given by the author himself in his preface to the second edition. In it, he argues that while environmentalism seemed to question the dominant paradigms of the world few decades ago, nowadays fragmented into thematic pieces, it only seems focused on pragmatically fixing the most deleterious aspects of human activity. By doing this, environmentalism would have ceased to sustain attractive thesis, even difficult ones, in public spaces, which would help to explain the warm character of the current debate. And incisively, he warns,

It would be a mistake to attribute the environmentalism vitality loss in recent years to external factors to its own dynamics. Although throughout history it has always been attacked by numerous actors and interests, *the explanation of its current deadlock causes should be sought in strategy changing, insensitively held, to an inscribed intent in the field of instrumental action, which is a characteristic of the contemporary political and economic actors.* Without a clear perception of course changes, environmentalism is forgetting a past of hardworking struggles for the turn of predatory, materialistic, consumerist and individualistic values of the prevailing culture in modern societies. (LEIS, 1014 P 16). [*Emphasis by me*].

Although this message was implicit in the original intention, there is the impression that Leis considered that tendency to have greater possibilities of reversal at that time than at the present time. The title of the last chapter “O ambientalismo está morto. Viva o ambientalismo” (The environmentalism is dead: Viva environmentalism) expresses clearly the cheerful pessimism¹ with which Leis faced such issue. In this chapter, one of the brightest and boldest ones, Leis condenses his analysis of the environmental ethos going through aspects of social theory that, even not being coined as “environmental” ones, bring significant contributions to examine the split between nature and society. Leis reaches that point, after exploring and basting, with remarkable boldness and creativity, very rich reflections on the dimensions that he identified as fundamental: aesthetic, scientific, civil society, state, market and religious spiritual. Along this way, the author invites us to regain what constitutes the environmentalism reflective forces. Leis’s purpose was to build a wedge for the service of the ethical and normative vector in the environmental field, after Rio 92, aiming to rescue and deepen the criticism to the civilizing project that has always been in his bases and, in Leis’s point of view, is environmentalism lifeblood.

But Leis’s work is not only that, to the extent that by reconstructing environmental ethos components by means of the mentioned dimensions, it examines the obstacles and recovers the indication of possible overcoming ways. The role of science, civil society and spirituality are especially highlighted as elements of a new political rationality that should unite sensibilities, not necessarily rational ones, in a sense of good life, to the classic

mode, now shared by a political community that recognizes the planet's ecological limits and rearranges their aspirations by giving centrality to love and to a new contract among individuals, cultures and species. To elaborate this proposition the author, goes through the contributions of the Frankfurt School, the work by Michel Serres, Hans Jonas and others in the search of values and practices that help overcome the political impotence which currently characterizes the environmental problems.

At the core of the analysis, Leis identifies the dualism Nature and Society as the foundation of both modernity and ecological crisis. Aiming at that, he goes deeply in the examination of religious concepts that are the foundation of modernity, finding in monotheism the symbolic environment in which this dualism can gestate and procreate. In the chapter "A globalização e espiritualização do ambientalismo" (Globalization and spiritualization of environmentalism) Leis carefully focuses that point. Not satisfied with mere enunciation of the dualism problem, he analyzes the Christian theological attempts to avoid the disastrous implications of the literal interpretation of the Genesis' passage "grow and multiply and dominate ... the creatures of the earth." Here Leis finds interesting attempts in the pursuit of non anthropocentric theological readings, among which those by Leonardo Boff. Those, however, in Leis's view, face theologians' difficulty of overcoming the division between God and his work, getting ultimately captive to the mentioned dualism.

This dualism is what is behind the formula that links the anthropocentrism to a purely instrumental view of nature and the world in which environmentalists actors also get imprisoned, despite the auspicious contents evidenced by many of them in the conference parallel to Rio 92. In the late 80s and 90s, those actors wore elements for the recovery of the classic ethical-political sense of good life pursuit, lost to the detriment of instrumental politics that colonized the political life especially after World War II. The fall of the Berlin Wall would also represent an opportunity in which the need for new forms of cooperation could gain space and in which environmentalism would bring, in its ethos, some rational and non-rational knowledge of unique importance for that transition.

Leis's enthusiasm is explained not only by what he saw in the events (several of them highlighted throughout the text), but also for the global political situation and the author's past experiences. The fact is that Leis found himself in Rio, in 1992, being in the right place, at the right time trying to understand what that moment meant for human kind, in terms of both challenge and opportunity. This reflexive attitude also brought in its luggage a reinterpretation of political utopias and activism of the 70s, in which he was also a protagonist in Argentina. This combination of factors, in addition to his philosophical and political training, resulted not only in the environmental aspect of his work, of which "A modernidade insustentável" (The unsustainable modernity) is an expression, but also in the most incisive public self-criticism made by a former guerrilla in Argentinaⁱⁱ.

Analyzing the connections between the former guerrilla's self-criticism and Leis's policy and environmental reflection goes beyond the scope of this review, but it is a warning for us to be aware of some tensions and impulses that give depth to reading Leis's work. Indeed, the experience in the 70s made Leis understand that claiming for the world to fit what we would like it to closes a totalitarian matrix as the subjects fail to see the fallibility

of their views. So, for Leis, an external political action also becomes an internal task in which the honest self-criticism plays a key role. Internally, by reviewing and undressing power concepts and conveniences. Externally, by boldly communicating to the political community, inviting them to make their own reflection.

Leis's attitude is not different regarding environmental ethics. He provokes the claim to support a solution for the ethical challenges by simply applying equitable criteria to other species

The challenge facing humanity is not so much to find solutions that take for granted an imaginary equality among human beings and between them and the rest of the species, but to accept reality as it is understanding as such the complexity of existing hierarchical reciprocity. There are few who see correctly that the anthropocentric reductionism was reinforced in modern times because individuals have become subjects of law when all were considered relatively equal, being then impossible to assign the same right to those who obviously are not "as equal". The increase of the separation from the natural world occurs, therefore, because the modernity tends to obscure (or take as transgression) any non rational relation among human beings.

The provocation, based on the reading of Luis Dumont's *Homo Hierarquicus* is, perhaps, the thorniest one of the entire book as it touches a taboo of modern politics. Unfortunately, the author does not explore the various ways in which the equality issue is or can be understood (in an ontological way, with consideration of interests, rights, etc.), so as to clarify the nature of his objection, which would have facilitated things for his readers. But that does not prevent one from establishing that one of the difficulties to conceive more loving relationships, not only among humans but among all categories of beings, may reside in this question.

This is, I think, a characteristic of Leis's work - making us think about what we did not imagine we would need to think. And now, unfortunately, we have to do that without him. Héctor Leis is dead. Viva Héctor Leis!

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Notes

- i I borrow this expression from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, which he uses to refer to the attitude by those (in the case, the indians) who do not lose their joy facing finitude and understanding the world that is getting increasingly worse (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO e DANOWSKI, 2014).
- ii This self-criticism is expressed in his last three works. They are two books (LEIS, 2013a and LEIS, 2013b) and a documentary (AZZI and RACIOPPI, 2014). The documentary was also published in book form (FERNANDEZ MEIJIDE and LEIS, 2015).

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