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ARTICLE

The Rhino, the Amazon and the Blue Sky over the Ruhr: Ecology and Politics in the Current Global Context[1]

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ABSTRACT

The past half century has witnessed major socio-political transformations across the globe. The end of formal European colonialism, basically achieved except for small pockets in the aftermath of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974, was followed by the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 in parallel to the one of Keynesian organized capitalism in the Northwest and of "state-led development" in much of the South, but also the rise of Asian economies, starting with Japan and now featuring China. The subsequent era of globalization and individualization was short-lived and has given way to the notion of a "multi-polar" globe marked by the at best half-intended withdrawal of the US from hegemony and the loose association of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa under the name of BRICS. What has not changed across this half century is the depletion of the earth's resources and the pollution of the environment. This article retraces the rise of ecological issues to become a global concern, and it does so by relating shifting

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interpretations of the issue to assignments of political responsibility in the changing global context. Emerging from a comparative research project on Brazil, South Africa and Europe, it draws its examples from these regions, but aims at developing a more general argument about the current impact of historical power asymmetries on ways of dealing with the ecological crisis.

KEYWORDS
Brazil, climate change, ecology, Europe, industrialism, responsibility, South Africa

Introduction

The past half century has witnessed major socio-political transformations across the globe. The end of formal European colonialism, basically achieved except for small pockets in the aftermath of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974, was followed by the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 in parallel to the one of Keynesian organized capitalism in the Northwest and of "state-led development" in much of the South, but also by the rise of Asian economies, starting with Japan and now featuring China. The subsequent era of globalization and individualization, associated with the "Washington consensus" and neo-liberalism in politico-economic terms, was short-lived and has given way to the notion of a "multi-polar" globe – a counter-intuitive image that will need to be rethought – marked by the at best half-intended withdrawal of the US from hegemony and the loose association of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa under the name of BRICS. What has not changed across this half century is the depletion of the earth's resources and the pollution of the environment. This article retraces the rise of ecological issues to become a global concern, and it does so by relating shifting interpretations of the issue to assignments of political responsibility.

Taking a global perspective and focusing on asymmetries, the article is situated in the context of the debate about "ecological debt", exploring the notion that the early industrializing countries are indebted to those countries, from which they drew their natural – and also human – resources and on whom they imposed the negative external effects of industrialization (for a recent overview, see Warlenius et al., 2015). The concept of "ecological debt" arose from within environmentalist social movements from the 1980s onwards, including at major global environmental debates such as the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. To some extent, it has also been taken up in academic debate, mostly either in economic and financial terms, trying to calculate the debt, or in legal and moral terms, trying to assess responsibilities and needs for remedy. Beyond these terms, the focus is here on political and social aspects of the ecological crisis in a global context, in which interconnectedness has considerably increased, thus also ecological relations with their specific asymmetries have become more dense,

but in which states remain the key actors and the only ones potentially able to assign responsibilities.

To assign responsibilities, one needs to provide an interpretation of the problem that is both adequate and convincing. To resort to remedial action, actors have to be capable of acting according to such interpretation. In the current global constellation, the consequences of resource depletion and environment destruction keep being experienced to highly different degrees across world-regions, even though the threats to living conditions on the planet have become global. However, any plausible interpretation will identify a large discrepancy between the sites of causes and the sites of consequences, making effective action difficult to achieve. One of the paradoxes of the current situation is that this discrepancy at the core of the current ecological crisis tends to become more problematic the more accountable state governments are to the domestic citizenry, as we will try to show.

Emerging from a comparative research project on Latin America, Southern Africa and Europe, this article draws its examples mostly from these regions (for more detail, see Mota & Wagner, 2019, on which this article builds), but it aims at developing a more general argument about the current impact of historical power asymmetries on ways of dealing with the ecological crisis. Let us add immediately that, for want of better terms, we will sometimes use the expressions “global South” and “global North” to identify spaces and actors, even though they do not neatly describe the current global divide (for reflections on locations in global space, see Wagner, 2016). Considering the BRICS members Brazil and South Africa, for instance, one needs to add, first, that these countries are the base of companies in the areas of agriculture and mining that operate in rather the same way as those with a base in the North; and, second, that these relatively powerful members of BRICS have themselves acquired some capacity to displace conflicts elsewhere in the South, a move otherwise more characteristic for Northern societies.

A Truly Global Issue

What we now call environmental concerns used to be very local issues. Industrial factories and urban agglomerations were sites of high emissions of pollutants. These pollutants usually stayed close to the sources of emission and caused environmental impact there, mostly endangering human health. The air pollution in London in 1952, called the Great Smog, using the neologism coined by combining “smoke” with “fog” in the early twentieth century, was among the first events that both caused a public outcry and triggered quick and rather effective action. Obviously, it was not the first one to cause major health effects. Air and water had increasingly been used to dilute pollutants, but in many cases the pollutants only become less easily perceived, but not necessarily less poisonous, especially over the long- and medium-term. Furthermore, when the people whose health was affected were from the lower classes, such as mineworkers or agricultural workers, their situation used to cause little concern and even much less action. Thus, the reason why the London event stood out in terms of publicness and action was that it took place in a capital city of metropolitan Europe. As

such, it also was an important event in terms of emerging discrepancies in perception and interpretation that would persistently haunt the environmental debate.

After the Great Smog, environmental issues rose quickly to become an important part of public debate in Europe. In 1960, the Social Democrat candidate for head of government in West Germany, Willy Brandt, included into the national election campaign the slogan about "the blue sky over the Ruhr", a river in the main coal and steel region of the country, referring to the ambition to reduce air pollution. Thus, he made environmental concerns a key issue of the national policy agenda (we return to this campaign below)[2]. In 1962, Rachel Carson published her book *Silent Spring in the US*, pointing to the large-scale consequences of the use of pesticides, even far away from the source. In 1972, the Club of Rome published its report *Limits to Growth*, emphasizing the risk of depleting the natural resources of the planet earth, thus developing a fully global perspective on the consequences of industrialization.

These two last-mentioned books are often referred to as turning environmental issues global, the one in terms of large-scale damaging impact on the environment, the other in terms of resource extraction. In 1986, the accident in the nuclear power station at Chernobyl (Soviet Union, now Ukraine) had radioactive fall-out that stretched far beyond given state borders. From the 1990s onwards, and increasingly so, the effects of emitting so-called greenhouse gases into the atmosphere have moved into the centre of attention. By now, climate scientists largely agree that there is a long-term change of the planetary climate due to humanmade emissions. Current environmental phenomena like the increasing number and strength of hurricanes, or the steady rise of average temperatures in some world-regions are attributed to humanmade climate change. With this debate, a point has been reached where a diffuse global phenomenon, not traceable to a single source like a nuclear power station, has a diffuse global impact. Thus, the identification of causes and the assigning of responsibilities has become as complex an issue as the assessment of damages. At the same time, there has been a drastic increase in the significance of the problem, namely the risk of making large areas of the planet uninhabitable together with the long-term nature of the process and the difficulty of halting it, not to speak of partially reversing it. Climate change has become a prime example for demonstrating the high degree of interconnectedness of world-regions today.

Shifting Responsibility: the Rhino and the Amazon

It is peculiar, though, that the apparently recent "globalization" of ecological issues along the main lines of debate was preceded by a specific North-South discourse. After 150 years of industrialization in the North and domestication of Northern flora and fauna, well-intended Northern observers recognized that nature was at risk in the South. An early example is the engagement of the German veterinarian and zoo

[2] The Social Democrats lost this election, but Brandt remained their candidate and was successful in 1969. During his period of office, the government adopted a comprehensive environmental programme, passed several laws for the protection of the environment, and created a Federal Agency for the Environment.

director Bernhard Grzimek and his son who focused on the Serengeti region in what is now Tansania. They did not deny the marvels of civilization, including industrial civilization, but underlined that everything humanmade could be reproduced whereas natural wildlife, once extinct, could not[3]. Their film "Serengeti shall not die" from 1959 was a great public success and won the US Academy Award for Documentary Feature in that year. It had the form of a documentary and an appeal, suggesting the need for outside intervention, thus implying that the local authorities – both colonial and post-colonial – would neither have the intention nor the capacity to do so. This kind of Northern ecological discourse that focuses on Southern regions that require intervention for reasons of environmental protection has since then become very common. Two of its more recent examples, addressing Latin America and Southern Africa, are the Amazon rainforest and the rhinoceros.

The Amazon region contains the largest contiguous area of rainforest on the globe. It is inhabited by a great diversity of fauna and flora, with many species being unique to the area. Furthermore, it acts as the "lung" of the planet by reducing the carbon-dioxide content of the atmosphere. Thus, there are good reasons to see the region as of global interest, and not of interest for Brazil and neighbouring countries alone. At the same time, the forest is threatened by deforestation and dispossession of small land-holdings to allow for large-scale agricultural use and for mining. In the course of these acts, the livelihood of indigenous communities is also threatened. It is common to see reports about the threats to the rainforest and their global impact in Northern media. Often it is accompanied by the observation that the national authorities – with Brazil at the centre – are unable or unwilling to stop the destruction. However, it is less often added that much of the invasive production is oriented towards exportation to the North, the incentive thus being provided by Northern economic "pull". Nor has the fact been much observed that the close connection of the Brazilian environmental movement with the governments led by the Workers' Party (PT) under president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2011) and, to a somewhat lesser extent, his successor Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016), resulted in a considerable slowing down of deforestation.

Something similar can be said about rhino poaching in South Africa, in which there has been a sharp spike over the past years. Eighty percent of the 80,000 rhinocerosses in the world live on South African territory. While in 2007 thirteen of them were killed, the number rose to 1,214 in 2014 and has not fallen below 1,000 since. The spike is connected to rising demand for rhino horn, in particular in Asia where it is believed to have aphrodisiac and medicinal qualities. The demand is driven, in turn, by rising incomes in Asia and by the fact that, with greater market integration across the globe, such demand is relatively easy to meet in today's world. While the rise in killings has been associated with corruption of government officials, South Africa did intervene quite forcefully in suppressing poaching and has been able to stabilize the rhino population (Bale, 2018).

[3] In some way, they may be proven wrong at some point: human hubris has started entertaining the idea of "de-extinction", that is reproducing extinct animal species based on retrievable DNA information.

If we look at Northern discourse on these topics, we recognize that Brazil and South Africa are seen as being responsible for key aspects of global sustainability. At the same time, especially the left-leaning governments of PT in post-military dictatorship Brazil and the African National Congress (ANC) in post-apartheid South Africa have been critically observed with regard to their capacity of enhancing economic activities. In the latter regard, the material, substantive core of natural-resource extraction and land dispossession disappears behind the numerical, statistical contribution of these processes to economic growth. Thus, these governments are placed under the dual prerogative of protecting nature for the whole globe's sake, on the one hand, and enhancing economic performance, on the other. They risk being criticized of neither doing the one nor the other to the required degree. To paraphrase what former president Dilma Rousseff, then still in office, once said to the Spanish newspaper *El País*: Here "they detain you for having a dog and for not having a dog" (Jiménez Barca, 2016).

Northern Complacency: the Blue Sky over the Ruhr

In these discourses, Europe holds multiple positions. First of all, its voice is the one of the guardian of the common good. Europe recognizes the peril of environmental destruction and urges for action. This voice is often not free of paternalistic, neo-colonial overtones: it is Europe that recognizes the necessity, and it is the South that does not fully recognize it and/or fails to efficiently act according to this insight. Secondly, Europe may contribute to solving the issue, but it would do so voluntarily, since this is not within its responsibility. This is so for two reasons. First, both the right and the responsibility for environmental protection action resides with the sovereign powers over the respective territory. And even in global terms, secondly, the responsibility to act lies elsewhere because Europe has already done its duty (for the general shift in discourse within European development policy, see Karagiannis, 2004). The London air is relatively clean because effective action was taken in the Clean Air Act of 1956 and its followers. The sky over the Ruhr is blue again, and one can even swim again in the river after 46 years of bathing prohibition (IWW Water Centre, 2017). Generally, air and water quality has considerably improved in Europe since the beginnings of explicit environmental policies. Materials are more and more recycled for re-use; and energy production is increasingly based on renewable sources.

Statements like the above can be found abundantly in official publications from the local level of municipalities to the supranational one of the European Commission. And they are largely true. They allow European governments at all levels to present themselves "at the forefront"[4] of all action to save the planet and to improve human living conditions on it. However, this discourse is also extremely complacent. It seems to say, true, we have created the problem due to industrialization, but we

[4] See, for instance, the European Commission on the Paris Agreement to combat climate change: "The EU has been at the forefront of international efforts towards a global climate deal". Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/international/negotiations/paris_en

have also recognized it in time and, there where we are responsible, have largely resolved it.

At the same time, the discourse ignores – or claims to ignore, since the knowledge is not lacking at all, – that the reasoning only holds if the results of environmental policies are attributed to individual world-regions and their state actors and, at the same time, the chains of action that cause environmental damage are ignored. If we look again at the case of the Ruhr river, the first successes were reached by using so-called end-of-pipe technologies, such as filters placed on the chimneys of coal-fired power stations and steel production plants, but they were very limited. Breakthroughs in the improvement of environmental quality were achieved when the German iron and steel industry was largely closed down. In public and scholarly debate, such closing down of plants was seen as part of a general tendency towards "de-industrialization", a radicalization of the earlier theme on the transition towards "post-industrial society"[5]. Within Germany, de-industrialization and the concomitant improvement of environmental quality were accelerated with the dismantling of industry in the former German Democratic Republic from 1990 onwards.

Globally, though, there is no evidence of de-industrialization at all. Global industrial output has been steadily rising over the past decades, with the only exception of a rather minor dip in 2009, namely with the onset of what is now called, with Western bias, the Great Recession after the default of Lehman Brothers in the US. However, the sites of industrial production have changed radically, being almost stagnant in Europe after a steep decline in 2010, at only slightly higher levels in the United States after three years of decline from 2007 to 2009, and uninterrupted growth at high rates in China[6]. Thus, rather than "de-industrialization" what happened was industrial relocation from sites in the formerly so-called "advanced industrial societies" towards other regions, predominantly in Asia (in a way, already starting with Japan much earlier), but increasingly also elsewhere. The observation of these shifts has given rise to the term "emerging economies" and also to the acronym BRICS, followed by the creation of an association between those five countries, indicating a possible shift in economic power relations. Our concern here, though, is that the industrial relocation also entails an externalization of environmental damage.

At a closer look, namely, the improvement of environmental quality in Europe, is directly related to the deterioration of environmental quality elsewhere. While producing less, Europe remains a high consumer of industrial products, and they are produced elsewhere with most of the environmental charge arising at the site of production or earlier at the site of extraction of raw materials. The sky over the Ruhr is blue because iron and steel for industrial products used in Germany are no

[5] The "post-industrial society" theorem already arose during the 1960s, but it was then seen as a relative shift from employment in the industrial sector towards the third, or service sector. Under assumptions of high general growth rates, typical of the 1960s, the advent of "post-industrial society" did not necessarily mean less industrial employment in absolute terms. In contrast, "de-industrialization" is at least partly a crisis discourse, as it requires adaptive measures often not welcomed by those concerned (for a recent discussion see Pichierri & Pacetti, 2016).

[6] South Africa had high growth until 2009, but considerable lower ones since then. Brazil had moderate growth rates before 2009, and faced a second recession in 2016.

longer produced in Germany. Such externalization occurs across the whole chain of production and consumption[7]. Thus, Europe uses an enormous amount of global soil for the production of foodstuffs required to feed animals for European consumption of meat. Decades after the end of formal colonialism, it keeps "occupying" space outside its own territory for its needs and purposes. At the other end, China used to accept a large part of European recyclable waste materials since the early 1990s, mostly paper and plastic. But it has recently refused to continue to do so, taking European policy-makers by surprise and without any effective response. It is an indication that relations of power have started to change to such extent that externalization becomes more difficult.

Climate Change and Historical Injustice

The problematic of asymmetric externalization becomes particularly clear when one looks at the debate about climate change and policy action with regard to it. This is so because the global dimension is immediately central with regard to the contemporary consequences of the instrumental transformation of the earth. Let us briefly summarize the argument introduced earlier. Industrialism in all its aspects – mass production, mass consumption, transport infrastructure – is the main cause for climate change and its likely consequences in terms of deteriorating living conditions on the earth. It was developed by the early industrial powers in North-Western Europe and later North America for their own benefit, but dependent on the creation of an Atlantic division of labour involving African labour and American soil in the European "take-off" of industrialism (this is a broad debate, see recently Stråth & Wagner, 2017; Mota & Wagner, 2019). When the environmental effects of industrialism were recognized from the 1960s onwards, they were seen as health risks caused by pollution in the vicinity of industrial production and consumption. Remedial action through environmental policies was effective, but it stayed close to these sites. In addition, the emerging new global division of labour from the 1970s onwards entailed the dislocation of heavily polluting industries as well as nature-transforming extractive industries to other parts of the world.

This is the constellation that we have outlined. For a long time, it was largely assumed that it could be analysed in politico-economic terms, underlining not least that the industrial dislocations were an important cause for economic growth in the so-called "emerging" societies and the dangers to the environment a "price to pay" for this growth. Then, "externalization" would be nothing else then the application of market logics. The "comparative advantage" of many societies of the South would then be the fact that they have the soil available to provide the North with raw materials and foodstuff, as well as to dump the garbage of the North. The earnings from these activities might lead these societies to "emerge" in the future and then deal on a par with the earlier industrialized societies. Once climate change comes into the picture,

[7] Stephan Lessenich (2016) coined the term "externalization society" for a constellation, in which one type of society systematically shifts the negative consequence of its production and life-style onto other societies.

however, that interpretation, doubtful as it always was, can clearly no longer be sustained. Climate change radically alters the perspectives for the future. As such, it imposes an interpretation that recognizes that the instrumental transformation of the earth is strongly related to past domination and appropriation.

Therefore, the interpretation of the issue as temporal is what is new in the present. "Modernist" and colonial discourse had relegated the colonized societies to a "not yet", had denied them coevalness in the present, as anthropological and postcolonial scholarship has long critically pointed out (e.g., Fabian, 1983; Chakrabarty, 2000). The argument had been displayed in a variety of forms – reaching from immaturity to be overcome by education to the missing institutional preconditions for an industrial take-off. It did not normally include the notion that the "backwardness" was induced by the relation of domination between colonizers and colonized (as dependency theory would underline). Whatever the past had been, the discourse of the "not yet" suggested an exit from this situation in the future. But the climate change debate has altered this situation: because of the urgency, so the argument goes, emissions in the South cannot be allowed to rise to Northern levels. Apparently, the benefits of industrialism that were historically reaped by the "advanced" societies need to be denied to the "emerging" societies for the sake of keeping the earth inhabitable. Thus, societies that had been confined to the "not yet" during colonization and the hegemony of modernization discourse are now condemned to a "never". If so, in this respect, historical injustice could no longer be remedied in the future.

As of today, the debate on climate change has two official points of reference. The state of knowledge on the phenomenon is monitored and summarized by the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which by now brings together the common assessment of the overwhelming majority of competent scientists in the field, opposed only by a small number of persons who deny the existence of climate change or at least of its humanmade nature. And the state of action has been formulated in the so-called Paris Agreement of December 2015, by now signed by almost all states on the globe and in effect since November 2016. The Paris Agreement is in many respects an amazing achievement. It brings together the almost entire global political community to agree on a complex scientific diagnosis, itself operating with considerable degrees of uncertainty and indeterminacy, and to accept the urgency of acting in common by radically limiting the so-called greenhouse emissions, and thus avoiding significant future increases in global temperatures. All signatories of the agreement, furthermore, commit themselves to quantitatively specified targets for emission reduction. The agreement does not foresee any mechanism to enforce these targets, but it includes not only a monitoring process, but also further steps to be taken to increase the target levels and to concretize them in line with future observations and estimates on climate development by the IPCC.

Next to praise, the agreement has also received criticism, mostly because of setting the targets too low and lacking enforcement mechanisms. While both of these critical observations are pertinent, emphasizing them risks losing out of sight the enormous change in discourse brought about by the contract. With this document,

the international political community moves away from the assumption that all states are equal and are equally called upon to act in this highly urgent matter. Rather, it is recognized that "developing countries" need to take longer in reaching the moment when emissions will fall, and it commits "developed countries" to provide resources for developing countries to protect themselves from, or compensate, damage due to climate change. Even though the agreement avoids being explicit, this is *de facto* a recognition of historical injustice done by developed countries to developing countries[8]. A sense of this may have provoked the fury of US president Donald Trump, his announcement of the withdrawal of the US from the agreement, and the insistence that a better deal for "America" was needed.

The problems with the agreement reside less in its quantitative insufficiency and its non-binding nature, because both of these are recognized within the agreement itself. Germany, for instance, which prided itself to be "at the forefront" even within Europe, is falling behind in reaching its self-set target objectives for 2030, and there are calls by politicians to be more "realistic". But this falling behind has triggered a wide critical debate with reference to the Paris Agreement. The fact that the commitment for 2050 has been explicitly made within a formal international agreement makes it discursively difficult to just renounce fulfilling it. Thus, this implementation hesitancy was expected and is part of the explicit monitoring and adjustment process set in motion by the agreement. The more crucial problems reside rather in that which is significant yet not formally recognized. Three such elements are rather easily identifiable at a closer look.

First, the Paris Agreement counts emissions according to the territorial site where they occur. This seems reasonable in light of the fact that governments can control more easily what occures on their territory. However, this way of accounting attributes the emissions for products always at the site of their production, not of their consumption. This means, as hinted at above, that the commodities exported from China for use in Europe are "counted" in the environmental balance sheet of China, whereas it would be more appropriate to count them there where the realization of their value occurs (using Sadian's 2018 terminology). In the externalizing "consumer societies" of the North, the difference between "consumption emissions" and "territorial emissions" is considerable (McManus, 2015).

Secondly, there is a rather great reliance on voluntary action in the agreement, certainly due to the fact that the explicit and specified commitments fall short of what is considered necessary. However, voluntary action by unspecified volunteers is difficult to achieve, in particular in situations, in which the advantages and disadvantages fall to different actors. We can give one example that also goes back to a theme addressed earlier. Globally, it should not be too difficult to renounce the exploitation of some oil reserves, given that oil is at the moment rather abundant and that the climate objectives foresee an exit from the use of fossil sources of energy. It is a much more difficult question to decide, which reserves are to be exploited and

[8] The wording is "common but differentiated responsibilities", *Paris Agreement*, preamble and article 2.2, 4.19, 4.3. The notion goes back to debates at the Stockholm and Rio de Janeiro environmental summits of 1972 and 1992 respectively.

which not, given that they are found in states of very different forms of government and levels of wealth and inequality. Reasonably, one should aim at renouncing the exploitation there where important counter arguments to it exist. This is the case in Ecuador, where considerable exploitable oil reserves were discovered in a territory that is both an important natural reserve – a rainforest area of very high biodiversity – and the area, in which two indigenous "isolated" societies live, the Yasuní National Park. The government of Ecuador headed by then president Rafael Correa proposed in 2007 that the area would be left untouched if the international community provided half the income that the state would renounce. The proposal was active until 2013 when Correa withdrew it after only a tiny fraction of the requested money had been promised (Murmis & Lorrea, 2015; see also *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2018). The reserves are currently exploited by the Ecuadorean national oil company Petroecuador. Hardly any Northern volunteer felt a sense of responsibility for contributing to reach this sensible and rather feasible objective.

Thirdly, quite understandably given its nature, the agreement underestimates the possibilities of displacing the issue. Once signed, and even before, many of those concerned by it started considering what can and needs to be done to continue doing the same and living the same way. A case in point is the German motor industry. Cars built by nominally German manufacturers are predominantly up-market products, which contain numerous special features. They are rather heavy and expensive, but are successfully sold on world-markets to more well-to-do customers. It had been known for a long time that it would be difficult to make these cars meet more strict emission standards. Successive German governments intervened at the European Commission to avoid standards getting too tough, but this was apparently not successful enough. In 2015, the US Environmental Protection Agency detected devices to manipulate emissions under test conditions and started investigating the cases. At the current moment, numerous legal cases are still ongoing in various countries. Considerable fines have already been imposed. However, little attention has been given to the increased number of casualties and illnesses due to air pollution and the contribution of millions of cars to climate-change emissions. All of this was happening while the international negotiations that would lead to the Paris Agreement were ongoing.

Environmental Action under Adverse Circumstances

Thus, as we see, environmental crime in Europe is very much "white-collar" crime. It happens in the managerial offices of the large companies, and the intention is to secure sales and profits despite existing regulations that aim to protect the environment. As the car emission scandal shows, some of this activity is truly criminal, and once discovered, it is being prosecuted by the competent judicial institutions. While some executive officers violate environmental laws, others merely ignore or neglect the rising environmental concerns. They pursue projects of resource extraction or of environmentally and/or socially detrimental agricultural production, often on large scale and with high impact. Much of this activity is planned in the

North but executed in the South. Thus, the politics of externalization operates by a territorial displacement of conflicts.

Environmental protection laws in Brazil and South Africa are today very similar to those in Europe. The high degree of global interconnectedness has given many environmental threats a global significance, as argued at the outset of this article, and it has also facilitated the rise of global environmental consciousness. The – relative and temporary – success in slowing down deforestation in the Amazon region and protecting the rhino in Southern Africa is testimony of the strength of environmental action in the South. But such success is achieved under highly adverse circumstances. Illegal deforestation and illegal killing of rhinos happen every day. These are not white-collar crimes; they are committed by local people, often in need of the resources being made available through those deeds. As a consequence, a picture emerges, in which the combination of poverty and social inequality with the inability of Southern states to enforce their laws, in particular in more remote regions, are seen as the cause of uncontrollable anti-ecological activity. Put like this, the issue is firmly placed in the South, and the North is nothing but a concerned onlooker.

However, this is a highly distorted picture. True, in some cases deforestation and poaching are driven by local interests. In many more, however, a global chain of responsibility is attached to them. This is particularly clear in the cases of assassinations of environmental activists, an increasingly frequent phenomenon, of which knowledge and awareness have risen not least thanks to the systematic reporting of the UK-based daily newspaper *The Guardian*. In most of these cases, the killers acted not on their own behalf but for the interest of companies, often with a base in the North, developing large-scale agricultural or mining projects (Watts, 2018). Thus, the picture above, while not false, needs to be placed into a larger frame, in which two elements of the global context become visible: the capacity of Northern societies to displace environmental damage to the South while maintaining corporate profits and general way of life, and by and large the incapacity of Southern societies to effect a similar displacement, because very often there is no space in reach, towards which the conflicts could be displaced.

Little Innovation on the Path to "Social Progress"

As hinted at above, the PT- and ANC-led governments after the end of dictatorship in Brazil and of apartheid in South Africa embarked on rather ambitious programmes of social transformation (for detail, see Mota & Wagner, 2019). In particular, the social-policy programmes have reduced poverty and – to a minor extent – social inequality and have created a new "middle class" among the formerly poor and excluded. At the same time, these programmes showed social limits due to the lack of addressing the entrenched structures of inequality that date from the long historical periods of formal hierarchy and exclusion. For our purposes here, we underline further limitations inherent to the projects of political transformation as designed by these actors.

One pillar of the transformative programme in both countries was economic growth. Such growth was meant to increase tax revenue, and a part of this revenue

was to be redistributed with a view to alleviate poverty and enhance the income of the lower classes more generally. Given the world-market conditions in the early twenty-first century, economic growth in Brazil and South Africa could mostly be achieved through the intensification of ecologically "heavy" production in the primary and, to some extent only, secondary sectors. In Brazil, one even talks about a "re-primarization" of the economy after the relatively successful industrialization through import substitution policies earlier in the twentieth century (Paulani, 2016). This observation concerns the production side, and another problematic feature emerges from the consumption side. A considerable part of the social-policy programmes consisted in increasing the amount of money in the hands of the lower classes. This emphasis has some sound reasons. On the one side, handing out monetary benefits is relatively easy. It does not place high demands on public administration. On the other side, it is immediately positively perceived by the beneficiaries. Thus, it is likely to enhance "mass loyalty" towards the government, according to a widespread theorem in political science (see already Narr & Offe, 1975, for an overview). However, the increased availability of money leads to an increasing demand for consumer goods, especially durable consumer goods. Both in Brazil and in South Africa, private cars have come to be seen as a sign of upward social mobilty, enhancing life satisfaction and serving as a status symbol, the latter particularly in South Africa. In production and even more so in use, though, cars are a significant contributor to environmental damage. This aspect of the political transformation, therefore, has generated negative ecological side-effects.

The alternative would have been to achieve social progress by placing the emphasis on the improvement of public infrastructure. This objective could as well have been financed by the revenues from economic growth, but it would have required the development of the relevant administrative capacity, and not all of it would possibly have been as immediately recognizable as a benefit as the increasing availability of money. We need to underline that both the PT- and the ANC-led governments have invested considerably in public infrastructure, thus we talk about an imbalance rather than an absence. And this imbalance is more pronounced in Brazil than in South Africa, where significant effort has been made to improve the infrastructure in the residential areas of the black African population, systematically disadvantaged by the prior apartheid governments. Nevertheless, the imbalance is telling for the overall design of the political transformation. We want to illustrate this in the form of an anecdote, of which, though, we have good reasons to believe that it is true.

The first large demonstrations against the PT-led governments in Brazil were the protests against the rise of the fare in urban public transport in June 2013. These protests became significant because they were the beginning of a larger series of protests that ended breaking the hegemony that the PT programme of political transformation had acquired over more than a decade. Known as *Movimento Passe Livre* (Free Fare Movement), the protests started out as a clear single-issue contestation, and as such they could have been addressed rather easily. Even before the rise of these protests, a proposal had been made by a leading member of the PT to keep the fares stable by subsidizing the cost of public transport through raising the

gasoline tax. The proposal came fully budgeted, demonstrating its feasibility and even calculating the effect on the official inflation rate, of constant concern for governments, to be minimal. Nevertheless, it met full and immediate rejection by the PT presidency, even refusal to discuss it.

An Unholy Alliance

From the late 1970s onwards, sociological value research suggested that material values would give way to post-material values once material needs are largely satisfied (Inglehart, 1977 and elsewhere). This has been seen as another step of "modernization" and was congruent with the ecological debate, assuming a linear trend towards greater ecological consciousness. Like for other general aspects of global social change, there is considerable validity to this insight. At the same time, the picture gets distorted owing to the fact that the survey research findings, on which the theorem is based, work with data from individual societies that are treated as if they were moving separately across global history[9]. As we have shown throughout this article, though, this is not at all the case.

To again provide a larger picture, we need to, on the one hand, read the findings on the move to post-materialism as something that has indeed to some extent – which should not be exaggerated either[10] – taken place among the global rich, who live predominantly, but not exclusively, in the North. And they live there with the "false consciousness" of having changed their societies and ways of life by having improved the quality of the environment and decreased their burden on the planet, while as a matter of fact they continue to live over the means the planet can sustainably provide and have displaced the immediate effects of this way of life on the global poor. Framed as an evolutionary theory of modernization, on the other hand, the findings, without intending to do so explicitly, also sustain the expectation of the global poor that they would first reach the level of material satisfaction that the rich have now to later move to post-material values. In South Africa, for instance, where the benefits of material affluence had formally been denied to the majority of the population for a long time, any suggestion of "jumping over" the material phase is easily denounced as a new form of neo-colonial imposition. In a very implicit way, such evolutionary staging is expressed in the assumption of the Paris Agreement that the peak of greenhouse emissions will occur later in the "developing" countries than in the "developed" ones. It is difficult to object to such assumption, since it marks a recognition of historical injustice, as argued above. But at the same time, it shies away from any attempt of a more profound rethinking of the ways, in which material needs can be met, a rethinking that is urgently needed.

The capacity of the North to displace its ecological impact to other regions of the globe combines with the incapacity of the South, until now, to develop a different

[9] Such methodological nationalism, it needs to be underlined, is not a conceptual assumption in this approach, but an effect of data and methodology.

[10] The average per capita use of resources and impact on the environment remains considerably higher in Europe than in most other parts of the world, with the main exception of the United States.

path to social progress than the one regionally taken in the North earlier to an unholy alliance that endangers the living conditions on the planet earth. The 1972 report on *Limits to Growth* did not lead to reduced consumption of resources, but to intensified search for extractable raw materials. The current risk is that the climate change debate will not do so either, but that instead technical solutions will be searched for that, on the one side, protect those who can afford to install them but not others, and on the other, that mark another step in the combination of technological hubris and economic expansion for expansion's sake.

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