

Rio Reflections and Ethical Considerations

(Article requested by **Network News**, N.S. Environmental Network, and others)

Two of us from the Green Web (Helga Hoffmann and David Orton, plus our daughter Karen), spent a month in Brazil from the end of May until the end of June 1992, during the period of the Earth Summit – the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro. Brazil is a vast country, the fourth largest in the world, with a rich biodiversity of plant and animal life, as well of peoples from many ethnic and racial backgrounds. The population is about 160 million. Through interacting with Brazilian environmental activists, we gained some knowledge of past and ongoing environmental destruction. But it was with our own eyes that we saw the overwhelming poverty and destitution. If you are poor, you are likely to be living in a slum called a “favela”, clinging to a hillside in a city. There is also ostentatious wealth and a squeezed middle class. An inflation of twenty percent plus a month is another factor the people have to contend with. While Brazilians consider the military dictatorship to have ended in 1985, for a Canadian visitor, military and police muscle was far too evident. The actual Summit saw Rio militarized and sanitized, so that, for example, the street children were swept away from their usual sleeping places.

Planetary Meeting of Green Parties

The first meeting we attended in Rio, was the two-day “1st Planetary Meeting of Green Parties”, on May 30th and 31st. We took part as “movement”, not party, greens and although we had pre-registered in Canada, there was some reluctance to give us observer credentials for the Planetary Meeting. The Brazilian Green Party, which was formed in 1986, had a large number of delegates at this green meeting, and we made contacts with some people who were involved in concrete struggles. Because of interventions in the meeting by various people, we came to meet greens who were interested in ethical issues and a deep ecology perspective. This resulted in a morning gathering on the beach, where we took part in several rituals led by Mexican greens, to bring our spirits closer to nature.

An outcome of the Planetary Meeting was a document called “Final Statement of the First Earth Meeting of Greens in Rio de Janeiro”, dated May 31, 1992. This document, in our view, is uninspiring, rhetorical, and reflective of a parliamentary, bureaucratic perspective. Its appeal was addressed to the “heads of state and government”, rather than to the people of the world. “Sustainable development” was endorsed. The general tone of the document was self-congratulatory.

For us, sustainable development is a recipe for global ecological disaster; an open-ended formula for endless human-centered economic growth, with the obscene consumption-oriented lifestyle of the “developed” world as the carrot. What is really needed is “sustainability”, which can be defined as “carrying out an activity indefinitely, without undermining ecological or community foundations, and with due attention to social justice”. We are talking of a tremendous redistribution of wealth, if the global ecological commons is to be protected. We are also talking about a new Earth-centered ethics, which ends the spiritual separation of most people from the natural world; ending the assumptions of anthropocentric dominance; and *alternative* economic,

political, social and cultural models for the peoples of our planet, which are rooted in respect for the Earth, basic democracy and cultural diversity.

The Global Forum

Our major focus in going to Rio was the Global Forum, held from June 1st-14th. The Global Forum described itself in a 170-page Official Calendar, as “A series of simultaneous events that provides an opportunity for all sectors to express their independent views at the time of the Earth Summit.” We have seen reports that there were over 17,500 registrants from 167 countries at the Forum. It was experienced by us as an exciting, and at times overwhelming intellectual, smorgasbord of talks, meetings, demonstrations, and literature distribution, which was impossible to adequately sample. This was particularly true, if one became involved, as we did, in the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) treaty negotiations, which were part of the work of the “International Forum of NGOs and Social Movements”, a distinct group within the Global Forum, for which it was necessary to register separately.

Forest Treaty

We worked six days on the alternative NGO Forest Treaty negotiations. This produced a progressive six-page forestry document, which is now being distributed around the world by activists, as a forestry guide to action. We developed, in the process, warm personal relationships, as well as forestry and pulp mill contacts and networks, with delegates from many different countries. Three working languages were used in the forestry discussions: Portuguese, the language of Brazil, Spanish, and English. Discussions were often heated, and there were different perspectives, e.g. on plantation forestry, to listen to and reconcile. But, ultimately, all decisions were made by consensus, and people came to trust each other, as the basic identity of interests became clear. When funds ran out at the Forum for interpreters, (there were many organizational problems during the Forum), Helga stepped into this role for the Forest Treaty group. (After returning to Canada, at an informal get together in Saltsprings, attended by about 30 persons, on July 4th, people received a copy of the Forest Treaty and took part in a discussion of the Brazil trip.)

Treaty negotiations were a major NGO activity during the Global Forum. As well as the Forest Treaty, we brought back with us copies of most of the treaties that were negotiated. For example: “Treaty on Alternative Economic Models”, “NGO Sustainable Agriculture Treaty” and “Citizens Commitment on Biodiversity”. The list of these treaty topics is quite extensive. The list, or individual copies of treaties, is available to interested activists if they contact the Green Web. The list and treaties can also be consulted under “unced.treaties”, through the WEB computer network.

Other Activities and Issues

We also took part in other discussions at the Global Forum. Helga contributed her views on the relationship between population and environment at the very lively Women’s Forum, “Planeta Femea”. But the non-anthropocentric perspective was not reflected in the final “NGO Treaty on Population, Environment and Development”. I took some initial part in the marine treaty discussions, but time conflicts with the forestry discussions forced choices of where one could be. A common problem which surfaced in both the marine and forestry discussions and apparently in other treaty discussions, was “What is an NGO?” Thus the Halifax-based Oceans Institute of Canada, which would appear from its literature to be a think-tank serving governments and corporations, was at the center of the NGO marine discussions in Rio. Similarly, a person from the B.C. Ministry of Forests tried, unsuccessfully, to present himself as a NGO forest treaty negotiator. This, even though the forest industry and its clone the “share

groups”, and the Canadian and the NDP B.C. governments, had a high profile presence through booths and displays within the Global Forum, creating myths about Canada’s “sustainable forests”. Of more general interest, but reflecting such experiences, is that one of the documents in the package of NGO Treaties, which delegates took away with them from the Global Forum, was a draft for a “Process to Prepare a Code of Conduct for NGOs”, for national and local groups, in the North and the South. This draft raises the ethical and accountability principles which the environmental and alternative movements have to face, to honestly serve their constituency base. As the draft Code noted:

Because development groups in the North get most of their funding from their national governments, many of them do not question the policies and activities of their governments in the South. On the contrary, some of them have become accessories to the hidden agendas pursued by their governments and transnational corporations.

We took part in a workshop for “A New Ecological Socialism”, organized by Norwegians, but with participants from a number of countries. The text used as a basis for the workshop discussions reflected a critical socialist thinking, but the ecological component was minimal. The largest demonstration in Rio, during the Earth Summit, was organized by the Brazilian labour movement, under the banner “The Cry of the Oppressed”. We also took a “field trip” along with many Brazilians, plus a few people from other countries, to look at the pollution of Rio’s Guanabara Bay. We attended a meeting organized by Brazilian activists on the problems of pulp mill pollution and eucalyptus plantations in their country. At this meeting we made an intervention in support of their struggles but also spoke against the myth that Canada has “clean” pulp mills, or that there is a technological fix. We listened to a number of people talking at the “Open Speakers’ Forum”, like Wangari Maathai, from the Green Belt Movement in Kenya; Vandana Shiva from India, associated with the Chipko movement; and the Brazilian fired Minister of the Environment, José Lutzenberger. We dropped in at many meetings whose topics interested us. We were introduced to concepts like the “ecological debt”, which Northern countries are responsible for, in the eyes of many Southern NGOs. Another commitment of time was participation in the Regional Canada/United States Meeting of NGOs. Helga was on the Steering Committee. A “Canada and United States Statement” was initially put out, which synthesized the various views for the International NGO Forum Plenary.

After the Global Forum, we spent some time in Petrópolis, a town in the mountains outside of Rio; plus four days in the Amazon rainforest, at an “ecological hotel” on the river Negro, three hours by an old African Queen-type riverboat, upstream from the city of Manaus. In Rio we lived with Helga’s mother, about 45 minutes by bus from the Global Forum, in the district of Ipanema, close to the beach. We swam each morning just after daybreak, before heading off to the Global Forum, from which we returned late in the evening.

Preparing for Rio

As the existing governments bear a large responsibility for the ecological problems we all now face, we wondered, how could such governments sort out anything in Rio? We became further concerned through following computer discussions on WEB, about the role being played out by the government-funded “Canadian Participatory Committee for UNCED”, supposedly representing Canadian non-governmental sectors, as a *legitimation* of governmental processes. We saw minimal public discussions within the Canadian environmental movement on UNCED and the Global Forum alternative in Rio. At this stage of the environmental struggle in Canada, the main threat to the movement is co-optation, not repression.

We become very aware of the blocking role played by the United States in government-to-government preparatory meetings; how this country wanted no constraints on continued

economic growth and that so-called market forces and the trans-national corporations should have free reign. Later in Rio, we learnt about the influence on the agenda of the Earth Summit by the “Business Council for Sustainable Development”. This Council, composed of leading corporate giants, was put together by Secretary-General Maurice Strong’s principal adviser Stephan Schmidheiny, a Swiss industrialist billionaire.

It was surprisingly clear in following the pre-Rio computer discussions, that there was lots of opposition, North and South, to U.S. positions on issues. But the general tone of the discussions was “growth” oriented. The “dilemma” played out, was trying to milk the existing economic system and its conceptual apparatus, e.g. “sustainable development”, “intellectual property rights” in matters of biodiversity and the use and transfer of biotechnology; or, coming to terms with the perspective that the basic theoretical models were anti-environmental and anti-people. Can the “bottom line” be responsible for transgenic “developments” – playing God with evolutionary processes – when we are unaware of ultimate consequences? Can one “compensate” for genetic material, stolen by trans-national corporations from the rainforests?

Key Question

A key question we went to Rio with was: what is the agency of progressive ecological and social change, if it isn’t existing governments? Is it the emerging green parties, the non-governmental organizations – the NGOs – or some other form of organization yet to be born or waiting to be “discovered”? We came back from the Global Forum with the feeling that, notwithstanding all the real existing problems, it is the alternative movements, not governments or corporations, or the green parties as presently constituted, from which the needed new thinking and actions will come forth, if the Earth is to be saved.

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