

Rob Pirie studied IR from 1997-2001 with time out doing voluntary work in Jamaica. This experience changed some of his assumptions and prejudices and his attitude to studying IR. All in all he was transformed as a person and as a student. This essay was part of a profile which earned him a first class honours degree. This is what I had to say about it. "This is a very good essay which attacks the environmental problematic in an unusual and engaging way. It clearly and consistently presents a very convincing case and shows that this student has really engaged with the aims of both their degree and this specific module. In terms of getting a higher mark, it is significant that the student mentions Bourdieu and hints at Linklater but neither appear in the bibliography. There is clearly more to read and ideas to develop. Excellent! 72%"

Indigenous Knowledge: a critique of Westocentrism

*'Because each [culture] realises a limited range of human capacities and emotions, and grasps only a part of the totality of human existence, it needs others to expand its intellectual and moral horizon, and to guard against the dangerous temptation to absolutise itself.'*¹

Potentially the largest problem to face humanity in the 21st Century will be that of environmental destruction on a grand scale. And yet this destruction is a direct result of the process of industrialisation that has occurred in Western states and consequently encouraged in others. Indeed, other knowledges, and other ways of looking at the world *except* our own 'growth paradigm' have been subordinated in the belief in, and quest for economic expansionism. This paper aims to examine this issue of 'westocentrism' within our discourse² (and consequent practice), in relation to other 'world views' – particularly those of indigenous peoples, whose varying knowledges represent possibly the starkest contrast to our own. The problematic defined here is clearly philosophical – showing linkages between environmental destruction, anthropocentrism, the enlightenment, modes of progress, as well as historical and religious specificities. Alongside the quote at the head of this paper it is argued that we (the West) need a plurality of cultures in order to understand our own existence, and realise a more secure environmental (and societal) future. The potential for a non-absolutist philosophy will also be briefly examined.

As a point of departure it is worth recounting briefly some of the environmental destruction occurring in the present-day. The issues faced globally, which led Sachs to assert the purpose of today's ecology as 'the business of saving nothing less than the planet', indeed look serious.³ Unsustainability has become more easily defined than sustainability: ozone layer depletion, greenhouse gas build-up causing climate change and sea-level rise, fossil fuel depletion, toxic build-up / acidification in land and water, loss of bio-diversity, as well as population growth (in certain areas if not overall)⁴; it is these unsustainable factors which require sustainable solutions. In turn, defining this sustainability has become the preoccupation of green theorists, whether

¹ B. Parekh, *Towards multiculturalism*, New Statesman, 16 October 2000, p. iii.

² Term coined by B. Parekh, *op. cit.*

³ W. Sachs, *Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development*, Zed, 1999, p. 43.

⁴ Listed in R. Ayres, *Turning Point: The End of the Growth Paradigm*, Earthscan, 1998, p. 136.

'deep' or 'shallow' forms of environmentalism. For Sachs, sustainability must comprise 'ecology and social fairness', ideas which are 'incompatible with the worldwide rule of economism.'⁵ The Development idea, formulated initially after the Second World War in President Truman's inaugural address, called for 'greater production' for the 'improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas'.⁶ The new binary of developed / underdeveloped, created in the North, was now a universalised phenomenon which legitimised our own model of progress above any alternatives. As Sachs makes clear:

'the United States projected its self-image onto the rest of the world. And as a consequence, sure enough, all other cultures suddenly appeared to be deficient, even defective.'⁷

And yet this growth paradigm, particularly the present dominance of neo-liberal economics, would maintain that sustainability lies in continued growth – as we gain in material wealth the environment gains in value. As Ayres notes, 'commodities' such as clean air become 'superior goods' in need of protection.⁸ Despite the awareness of economic growth as *the* cause of environmental degradation, a continued path along this road (alongside the proliferation of new technology) will somehow lead us out of it. More likely, this 'empirical correlation between prosperity and environmental improvements' is 'sheer fantasy'.⁹ Ayres goes on to note the lack of technological capability to solve or prevent critical environmental problems. For instance: to lower sea levels, to remove greenhouse gasses, or in addressing the loss of extinct species.¹⁰ True sustainability therefore, must 'require a major eco-restructuring and radical dematerialisation'¹¹, an idea that surely must draw on the experiences of those other cultures already dismissed as 'deficient, even defective' (above) by a tradition of westocentric thinking. As an enlightened scholar of the South Pacific has noted:

'We may have to start thinking small instead of big. This delusion that we have to 'catch-up' with more advanced societies by importing uncritically their technology, their culture, institutions and ideas of solving human problems requires a reappraisal...Culturally and economically Fiji is not a poor backward country...They begin to undermine our traditions, cultural identity and confidence...[and yet]...we begin to realise that 'modernity' may not after all be the better alternative.'¹²

Suddenly, the idea of 'development as progress' becomes a political construct. That is, the contextual nature of 'development' lies within a westocentric experience. Although these ideas may 'appear self-evident and universally valid, they are nothing of the kind...they invariably carry traces of their origins'.¹³ So if sustainability requires reanalysing our mode of progress and an end to the export of such ideas, is this to back up the ecologists' critique of modernity as anthropocentric? Sylvan defines anthropocentrism as any idea that 'does not move

⁵ Sachs, op. cit, p. x.

⁶ Cited in G. Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*, Zed Books, 1997, p. 249.

⁷ Sachs, op. cit, p. xi and 7.

⁸ Ayres, op. cit, p. 139.

⁹ Ibid, p. 139-140.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 147.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 161.

¹² J. Dakuvulu, *Developing Fiji*, in R. Moody (ed.), *The Indigenous Voice*, Zed Books, 1998, p. 182.

¹³ Parekh, op. cit, p. iii.

outside a human-centred framework, which construes nature and the environment instrumentally, that is, simply as a means to human ends and values.¹⁴ Indeed, western existence focuses very much on individual advancement over planetary considerations. But Dobson doubts this philosophy of deep ecology, primarily due to the ‘failure [of the philosophy] to make itself practical’.¹⁵ For Dobson, there is a fundamental difference between ‘human-centred’ and ‘human-instrumental’ – the former becomes evident at every level (the search for ‘truth’ is a human search) and does not necessarily imply the latter. Moreover, the former ‘weak’ sense of anthropocentrism is seen as, for Dobson, ‘an unavoidable feature of the human condition.’¹⁶ But are these statements about human life to be read as universally applicable? Dobson advocates a Marxist-style focus on the ‘rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice’ as a way forward.¹⁷ But perhaps this very notion of rationality is another way of reinforcing a westocentric position. This leads us to the question of whether we have any chance at all in understanding the wider social life with its inherent and multiple practices. Is ‘relativism’ here to mean the impossibility of understanding?

Looking at other cultures in a comparative analysis with our own is a help here. Specifically, indigenous cultures are examined – the relationship between man and earth as a formation of knowledge is an important aspect of indigenous philosophies. Churchill notes, there is a:

‘symbiotic, relational – or, more appropriately, inter-relational – approach to understanding. This fundamental appreciation of things, the predicate upon which worldview is established, is common to all American Indian cultural systems. Further, it seems inherent to indigenous cultures the world over.’¹⁸

There is certainly a point here, as there are recurring themes throughout indigenous beliefs / philosophies about man’s place in the natural world. The western idea of ‘rationality’ is a good place to start. European thinking has been dominated by an inherent belief in rationality as the virtuous signifier of our ‘superior’ position in the universe, indeed our ownership of it. Hegel had initially noted the similarity between rationality and actuality, arguing that they were one and the same thing – or that the truth of actuality can be discovered through a rational thought process.¹⁹ The central ethos of western thought is based on this belief in a search for absolute truth through ‘logic, reason and independence.’²⁰ In the modern world, ‘rationality’ has become synonymous with ‘productivity’, whether we look at a liberal or Marxist framework of analysis – ‘the ability to produce demonstrates human rationality, thereby distinguishing human beings as superior to all other external relations, while rationality leads unerringly to proliferate productivity, thereby establishing the latter as more important than any other among humans’.²¹ If an unquestioned belief in the proliferation of production has led to environmental destruction, then the unquestioned belief in our own rationality is central to the problematic.

¹⁴ Quoted in A. Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, Routledge, 1995, p. 54-55.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 61.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 51.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 60.

¹⁸ W. Churchill, *False Promises: An Indigenist Examination of Marxist Theory and Practice*, Fourth World Journal, August 1999, Vol. 4, No. 1, cited in website: www.cwis.org/fwj/22/falsep.htm

¹⁹ See R. Osborne and B. Van Loon, *Introducing Eastern Philosophy*, Icon Books, 2000, p. 17.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 14.

²¹ Churchill, *op. cit.*

In American Indian culture, Churchill notes that 'rationality is viewed as being a facet of humanity, which must be consistently leashed and controlled' in order to prevent disruption of the inter-relational understanding noted above.²² That is not to say any indigenous cultures are not 'rational', more so to assert that rationality is a relative term – the American Indians 'have long since developed functional and functioning methods of keeping their own rationality meshed with the rest of the natural order.'²³ It is therefore evident that rationality is indeterminate; our own rationality is unlikely to be able to explain their existence, and the same applies vice versa. The same idea can be examined in relation to Indian philosophy. Whereas western rationality is vividly exemplified in our scientific enlightenment – logic triumphing over the old religious order – Hindu philosophy emphasises that 'truth recedes further' in the face of a unity between science and materialism.²⁴ Eastern philosophies therefore stress enlightenment through reflection on the 'underlying unity of all things', which ultimately leads to self-deliverance. The aim of all being is thus self-definition, but from within the interconnectedness inherent in the environment.

To mention one more example of indigenous relations with the natural world, the traditional philosophies of the Maori of Aoteroa present perhaps the most complex. Patterson notes the wide vocabulary associated to their place within their ecosystem: the term *mauri* roughly translates to 'life force', where all human beings are joined together with the earth to create 'one interdependent whole'.²⁵ He goes on, 'the underlying philosophy is in sharp contrast with the familiar background to Western thinking, the biblical idea that humans are superior to the natural world, that we have a God-given sovereignty over other creatures'.²⁶ In many ways this is reminiscent of the Indian idea of *karma*, which relates to your place if you don't conform to the demands of interconnected spirituality. Rather than facing heaven or hell depending on your level of worthiness, your 'level' of karma can have good or bad results *before* death, and moreover *after* death in terms of reincarnation within Indian society. Thus religion and philosophy become inextricably linked.

The kinds of spirituality identified here go beyond our idea of rationality, and hence it is noted that the construction of Indian society (based heavily on their own religious philosophies and historical specificities) remains largely incomprehensible to the Western outsider.²⁷

These ideas reflect markedly on our own sense of objectivity – the way in which we view the world has always been perceived as objective rationalism, everything can be explained through our own modes of thought. Bourdieu is enlightening in this respect, in his analysis of the 'objectifying standpoint' that 'grasps practices from outside' rather than inside their accomplishment.²⁸ However, rising above this objectifying standpoint is the central problem, as Parekh has asserted:

'students must learn to rise above cultural biases. They can do so not by moving to a 'view from nowhere', but only by being exposed to other cultures, and by using each to interrogate and explore the strengths and limitations of others...A dialogue between cultures alerts them to their biases – a gain in itself – and

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Osborne, op. cit, p. 15.

²⁵ J. Patterson, Respecting Nature: The Maori Way, in *Ecologist*, Vol.29, No. 1, 1999, p. 33.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 36.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 32.

²⁸ See D. Robbins, *The Work of Pierre Bourdieu*, Open University Press, 1991, p. 105.

enables them to reduce such biases. The dialogue is possible only if each culture accepts others as equal conversational partners.²⁹

This statement is interesting in its call for 'equality' in dialogic relationships. This throws up questions of the possibility for achieving a reduction in biases. Parekh himself notes the ethical problem – that of an exoticisation through attacking their offensive practices (for example polygamy, sexism, authoritarianism) – and idealising whilst at the same time externalising their 'good' points, for example a more spiritual relationship with the natural world. These ideas have been referred to elsewhere as 'narratives of illicit desire and repulsion'.³⁰ The possibility of an 'equal' relationship then begins to look doubtful in that we are unlikely to overcome our inherent notion of 'civilisation', exemplified in the modern world in our own conception of 'universal' human rights. Parekh is on the right track however, in advocating multiculturalism – he asserts '[it] is not just about tolerating or even respecting 'minority' cultures, but rather about breaking through the frozen categories of majority and minority.'³¹ Bold words, and on the face of it correct, but an 'equal' relations also implies a two-way belief in dialogue. Is it just assumed that the other party (in this case indigenous peoples) should share their insights and philosophies, and be expected to learn from our experience, as we should from them? Is this not reinforcing the time old exploitation of indigenous peoples for our own consumption? Do they not maintain the right to resist the global in defence of their local, when indeed the environmental destruction is a result of our own misendeavour?

And yet somehow we still need to overcome the westcentrism that runs deep into our subconscious, and to find long-lasting solutions to environmental problems. In consolation to the problems noted above, it can also be said that an inherent characteristic of westcentrism – that is universalisation – must be avoided. Cultures vary and each one has a different relationship with the outside world. It is important not to romanticise cultures alongside the notion of 'illicit desire', where relations between mankind and the natural environment are seen as desirable, in being diametrically opposed to our own existence. Indeed, the idea of romanticisation is a central critique of the post-development literature that Sachs is positioned alongside. Pieterse critiques Sachs vision of 'frugality' in indigenous societies – an idealisation of 'cultures free from the frenzy of accumulation.'³² The worry is a homogenisation of poverty, which 'equates it with purity (and the indigenous and local with the original and authentic).'³³ It must be noted here (albeit briefly) that cultures are not static entities: they respond to internal and external pressures constantly; hence, the way in which we view them as 'authentic' may well be again asserting a westcentrist design for power. For example, the impact of foreign media may open a culture to ideas of consumer capitalism imported from the West, but it should never be assumed that exactly the *same* values would be transposed or internalised as a form of cultural imperialism. This is not to defend global media and communications domination by Western countries, but moreover to warn of westcentric idealisation of those cultures as corruptible and vacillating, and maintaining no judgemental powers of their own to check external forces.

²⁹ Parekh, op. cit, p. iii.

³⁰ See S. Chan, *Social development in Africa Today: Some Radical Proposals*, Mellen, 1991, chapters 6-7.

³¹ Parekh, op. cit, p. iv.

³² Sachs, op. cit, p. 10.

³³ J. N. Pieterse, *After Post-Development*, in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2000, p. 177.

Again, the message from all this should be non-universalism – clearly societies / cultures / indigenous peoples have the right to their own destiny, whether it be ‘frugality’, localism and subsistence, or whether they open their arms to the forces of globalism. But the fact still remains that the westocentric standpoint neglects any other interpretation of progress or existence, with all of the environmental destruction associated with it, not to mention the increasing societal problems of ‘deterioration of social and family life’³⁴. Multicultural dialogue, despite the doubts raised, seems to offer us the best chance of attaining any ‘real’ progress.

To conclude on a positive note, Ayres notes the inevitability of the ‘turning point’ – the growth paradigm that has become a central part of the westocentric mode of thought must end – either in catastrophe, or in ‘the human capacity for anticipation and avoidance of future problems.’³⁵ This is the critical question. The ‘human capacity’ may require multiculturalism (over westocentrism) to seek anticipation and avoidance, issues this paper has aimed to highlight. In the words of Ward Churchill:

‘We must reject anything [less than dialectical understanding] as an unbalanced and imperfect view, even a mutilation of reality. We must continue to pursue our traditional vision of a humanity within rather than upon the natural order.’³⁶

What Parekh advocates to achieve multiculturalism is intercultural dialogue: ‘an introduction of non-western ideas in a dialogical and critical manner’.³⁷ This certainly seems worthwhile, but as I have mentioned there may well be limits to how much intercultural dialogue or understanding we are able to achieve. Whatever the limits, this remains, for me, the only feasible and rewardable way forward. To quote the primary principle of the ‘Centre for World Indigenous Studies’: ‘Access to knowledge and peoples’ ideas reduces the possibility of conflict and increases the possibility of cooperation on the basis of mutual consent. By democratising relations between peoples, between nations and states, the diversity of nations and their cultures will continue to enrich the world.’³⁸

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³⁴ Ayres, op. cit, p. xi.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 10.

³⁶ Churchill, op. cit.

³⁷ Parekh, op. cit, p. iv.

³⁸ See website: www.cwis.org/

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