

RESISTANCE TO CORPORATE BIOCOLONIZATION

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Vandana Shiva. *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*. London: Zed Books, & Cambridge, MA: South End, 2006.

Patrick Hossay. *Unsustainable: A Primer for Global Environmental and Social Justice*. London: Zed Books, 2006.

Just as the spinning wheel was the symbol of Gandhi's cultural resistance to British rule, so, in an era of corporate biocolonisation, the seed is Vandana Shiva's symbol of *Earth Democracy*. And just as Gandhi's politics was about economic self-reliance and cultural integrity, so the focus of Shiva's ecofeminism is the affirmation of life in all its variety. As she observed in the early days of her inspirational journey, the protection of biodiversity and protection of cultural diversity go hand in hand. But with neoliberal globalization, a monoculture takes over and its enclosure and commodification of living resources know no bounds. First, forests are enclosed, then farm lands, then rivers, and then the very flesh of seed itself is turned into saleable property in a ruthless competition for profit driven by a few powerful men. Shiva dates the beginning of this biocolonisation from 1995 with the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights legislation. The capitalist patriarchal solipsism of TRIPS legalised the corporate biopiracy of indigenous intellectual property simply by terming it "trade related" (Article 27.3b).

After three decades of writing and resistance on behalf of livelihood, Shiva has established *Navdanya*, a learning centre at Dehradun. *Navdanya*, meaning nine seeds, is also the name of an India-wide network of seed-saving farmers, mostly women. She has helped build the worldwide "movement of movements" against globalization, working with local peasant groups and transnational ecofeminists like Diverse Women for Diversity. At the same time, she has brought out several books, including *Staying Alive* (1989), *Biopiracy* (1997), and *Water Wars* (2002). The latest, *Earth Democracy* (2006), is a synthesis of reflective fragments, possibly a compilation from impassioned lectures and addresses given over the years. But what I find most interesting and fresh in the book are its accounts of political activism. With Linda Bullard of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture and Magda Aelvoet of the European Greens, Shiva successfully pursued a 10-year legal battle at the European Patent Office against W. R. Grace and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, who had patented the neem tree, a traditional Indian pesticide, as their own invention. Another campaign reclaimed the germ line of basmati rice from patents held by the Texas company RiceTec. In 2004, Shiva's Research Centre for Science, Technology and Ecology, working in tandem with Greenpeace, managed to roll back a potential "terminator technology" (packaged infertile or planned obsolescent seed) in Monsanto's patent of a soft-milling Indian

wheat. Each of these political interventions liberated life-forms and local knowledge from the dead weight of corporate food fascism.

The movement struggles at Seattle and Cancun and victories of the common people “for life before commodities” are well known through media reports, but many ongoing forms of resistance to the capitalist patriarchal monoculture are less well known. For example, world food supplies may be colonised and emptied out by the likes of Cargill, Monsanto, Phillip Morris, and Nestle, but the subsistence alternative and “slow food” movement flourishes under the name of Terra Madre. Shiva describes its vibrant 2004 gathering at Turin, Italy:

There was a community of dried mango producers; entomophagous women of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso (women who harvest and sell edible insects); the Boobab community of Atacora, Benin; basil growers; makers of Liguria; nomadic shepherds from India and Kirgbity; sheep breeders from Central Asia; jasmine rice producers from Thailand. . . . (p. 161)

She urges us to grow *Earth Democracy* by keeping the pressure on global institutions and markets with *bija satyagraha*—civil disobedience against patenting seeds. The results of such public vigilance can be seen in 2004 Swiss laws requiring corporate peddlers of genetically modified products to observe the precautionary principle and to be liable for human and environmental damage under the “polluter pays” principle. Yet, this development remains a rear guard action, and I am surprised by her seeming reconciliation with piecemeal bureaucratic management solutions. I find it curious, too, that the book does not mention the almost unanimous vote of the 2004 World Conservation Congress in Bangkok, demanding an international moratorium on the release of genetically modified organisms until demonstrated safe. After all, she understands better than most how the side effects of genetic modification are shrouded in scientific uncertainty.

Shiva’s argument moves from the theft of seed to water enclosure for privatisation and sale—hydropiracy. Like air and soil, water is a free good, and access to these commons is a fundamental human right. These are surely matters of sovereignty being undermined by the WTO’s neoliberal free trade regime. But India is beset by World Bank-orchestrated and government-compliant water projects. Consider the Tehri Dam at the source of the Ganga: Its construction has been declared unsafe by the International Commission on Large Dams, and its failure would destroy cities, farmlands, and lives across the Gangetic plain. As if this were not enough, an emergent Citizens Front for Water Democracy grapples with a further technological pipe-dream—the engineered rerouting and joining of innumerable rivers in the Himalaya Hills and others criss-crossing Peninsular India. This exercise is a prelude to corporate privatisation of the water supply, but the devastation of local ecological habitats and human communities by such irrational capital works is an alarming prospect. The Indian term for water democracy is *Jal Swaraj* and, again, Shiva tells how peasants and women lead in protection of it. In Plachimada hamlet, Kerala, women protested against the loss of their water supply to a local Coca-Cola factory, and their case for livelihood was affirmed by the court. Their success has now set a precedent for 87 more grassroots movements against Coca-Cola and Pepsi. The critical question is, How do we achieve global political recognition for these new material forms of sovereignty?

In a typically perceptive phrase, Shiva notes that economic globalization and cultural nationalism are two sides of the same coin. Thus,

when economic dictatorship is grafted on to representative, electoral democracy, a toxic growth of religious fundamentalism and right-wing extremism is the result. This, corporate globalization leads not just to the death of democracy, but to the democracy of death, in which exclusion, hate, and fear become the political means to mobilize votes and power. (p. 6)

Ecofeminists see the convergence of market fundamentalism and religious fundamentalism resulting in an overwhelmingly masculinist global value system. It will be a race against time to keep this hegemonic force at bay as the movement of movements and everyday folk, North and South, struggle to build rational life-affirming global institutions. Shiva believes that “the commons are the highest expression of economic democracy” (p. 3), and she calls for a Water Parliament—or federation of same. She does not use the term *dual powering*, but her vision is anarchist and populist. And if she would reclaim the state as a necessary lever in building an *Earth Democracy*, nevertheless, sovereign control must remain at the level of local communities. In this discussion, Shiva, the pragmatic activist, runs ahead of Shiva, the innovative theorist. And I, for one, would like to see her clarify the steps toward *Earth Democracy*—perhaps by debating George Monbiot’s (2003) parallel proposals for the realisation of World Social Forum demands.

My companion book in this essay is Patrick Hossay’s (2006) *Unsustainable: A Primer for Global Environmental and Social Justice*. Hossay teaches at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and is engaged in ecodevelopment projects in Central America. He challenges those who oversimplify “the trouble we’re in,” arguing that global population size is not the problem, for example, but food distribution is. To support this, he cites data to the effect that 78% of all malnourished children live in countries with food surpluses (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1997, p. 6). His primer is full of compelling graphs and statistics, and chapter 1 is a veritable tour de force on the question of climate change. It is worth buying the book for this thoroughly documented argument alone. We have sky-borne carbon, methane, HFCs; unwelcome emissions from peatbogs, cars, and cattle; hurricane events, melting ice, and flooded cities; desertification and landslides; destabilised habitats; new predator chains and disease viruses; displacement of human communities and starvation. And in case the affluent reader remains complacent, Hossay points out that increased air pollution in China will make it difficult for U.S. states to meet clean air standards (p. 19).

Like Shiva, Hossay is deeply concerned with the despoliation of biodiversity and of water, and he notes the implication of big pharma in both. The U.S. drinking water cycle is routinely found to be contaminated by antibiotics, prozac, pain relievers, and estrogen from birth control pills (p. 29). Likewise, the use of water as an industrial sewer brings toxic heavy metals to streams and aquifers. On the general wastefulness of high-tech provisioning, Hossay cites Shiva (2003):

Making a single six-inch silicon wafer requires 2,275 gallons of water; so, a normal-sized computer manufacturing plant requires 236,600,000 gallons of water each year. Efforts to expand high-technology in industries in India have dire potential for the country’s water crisis. (p. 185)

But when Hossay says “our” and “we,” he means North American readers, and this taken for grantedness can be disconcerting for those in the (often invisible) global South, not to mention inhabitants of the economic South-in-the-North (as so many

women are). Nevertheless, the book's target audience of middle America is appropriate in the sense that the onus is on these energy-greedy high-tech consumers to wake up to their superordinate global footprint. Hossay intimates something of this class, race, and gender complexity in connection with waste disposal and environmental racism, but on the whole, the book is not strong when it comes to sociological reflexivity. For instance, despite gains won by African American communities through the environmental justice movement, massive amounts of U.S. waste are still exported to Third World states. This form of class and race abuse gets past the Basel Convention by labelling the waste "recyclable."

In chapter 2 of *Unsustainable*, Hossay asks, "How did we get in this mess?" and here, he gives an (ungendered) account of Bacon and the rise of Enlightenment scientific ideology; the barbarism of 19th-century colonisation by European states; and the unprecedented international influence of the United States today. His treatment of the origin of the postwar 1945 Bretton Woods financial institutions—IMF, World Bank, and now WTO—is as clear and concise as any I've read. He goes on to explain how Nixon's release of the U.S. dollar from the gold standard set a cumulative economic force in motion and how this was followed by the rise of an unhinged speculative cybereconomy. Hossay's anecdotes on the manipulation of global market policy by successive Washington presidents are illuminating, as is the list of early administrative appointees by Bush, Jr. (www.lcv.org):

- Chief of staff = former president of the Automobile Manufacturers Association and chief lobbyist for General Motors.
- National security advisor = former Chevron board member.
- Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality = lawyer for General Electric.
- Secretary of the interior = national chair of the industry group representing timber and chemical manufacturers.
- EPA deputy administrator = former vice president of Government Affairs at Monsanto.

It is plain to see why the United States stalls on the Biodiversity Protocol and Kyoto and why free trade agreements like NAFTA have such eco-unfriendly content.

The impressive collection of facts and figures in Hossay's book, *Unsustainable*, backs up Shiva's observations on rural impoverishment. A WorldWatch graph shows that farmers' share of food profits declined from nearly 40% in 1910 to less than 10% in 2000. The profit share of food marketing companies increased from slightly more than 40% to nearly 90% in 2000 (p. 151). It is no surprise, then, to find thousands of farmers leaving the land each year or to learn that many commit suicide, unable to meet loans for agro-tech seed and equipment. Hossay details the World Bank's involvement in rolling forward innumerable destructive projects, and he outlines the related role played by export credit agencies. One such "corporate assistance" program, the planned settlement of Javanese (ostensibly as labour) in resource-rich Papua, now exposes its full ecocidal and genocidal cost, as boatloads of displaced and brutalised indigenous refugees try to make it across the straits to Australia's northern coast. I like Hossay's definition of modernization as "adoption of the social, political, and economic systems of the wealthy, as well as the acceptance of their cultural values and priorities" (p. 128). He goes on to observe that, in practice, modernization has meant that "slavery is far more common now than it was at the height of the transatlantic slave trade" (p. 139).

When it comes to addressing what is to be done, I am a little disappointed at the modesty of Hossay's proposals. Although he is adamant that individual lifestyle changes like recycling and carpooling are not enough, his big picture

appears to be a sort of environmental welfare state, whereby public institutions exert control over unruly corporations. Given the ubiquitous revolving door of capitalist patriarchal political economy, this idealistic welfarism on the part of global elites is not a convincing scenario. Shiva's *Earth Democracy*, written from the global South, prefigures a stronger materialist alternative, but it is one that Hossay overlooks. When he writes that "nearly half of the earth's population survive on less than \$2 per day" (p. 2), he appears to adopt the monocultural logic of the UN, IMF, and associated financial institutions. On the other hand, Shiva's ecofeminist approach to protection of biodiversity and cultural diversity prefigures "another way." By this logic of the commons, poverty is revealed to be not so much about getting money, commodities, or even jobs in the waged labour sense. There will never be enough of these things to go around under capitalism, because the system itself is premised on the creation of scarcity. In an *Earth Democracy*, what counts is the human right to livelihood—sovereign access to land, water, and the free seed of nature's bounty. This ecological reckoning calls for a fundamental epistemological break from economics as we have known it.

Academics looking for analysis that builds on the literature of ecopolitical theory in a systematic way will not find it in Hossay's *Unsustainable*, nor in Shiva's *Earth Democracy*. Nevertheless, these two books, one authored by a committed teacher and the other by a charismatic global activist, each make important contributions to our understanding of social and ecological crisis. Shiva and Hossay will be invaluable reading for students, citizen activists, and the occasional caring politician.

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