



Think Piece

The World without Deposit and without Precaution From Rachel Carson to the 4th WEEC: A journey of learning in a changing world

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Signs of Collapse

My environmental commitment started long ago. Those were the years of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, when the concern of more sensitive people focused (not necessarily in order of importance) on water pollution caused by detergents, on the carcinogenic effects of pesticides in agriculture and artificial colourings and preservatives in foods, on nuclear danger, on hunger in what was then called the Third World, where decolonisation was in progress. Television brought into homes black and white images of tanks in the streets or crowds in revolt; of great personalities sending out messages of peace and justice and feeding the hopes of democracy. Today the images of the first come in colour, but those of the second are in short supply.

They were the years of great change in countries that are now part of the G7 or the OECD.¹ Cement and asphalt were on the rise, supermarkets were opening and small shops closing, loose foods (sold by weight and wrapped up on the spot) were disappearing from the shelves and ready-made foods were taking their place. For one Italian writer (Pierpaolo Pasolini, murdered in 1975), those were the years of the 'disappearance of the fireflies' – that charming insect that no longer lights up the hot summer nights because of the pollution and the urban sprawl. To paraphrase Rachel Carson, we had entered the era of the 'dark summer'.

For me, a young boy at the time, it was also the era of the 'no deposit/no return' disposable bottles of beer or milk, etc. For the wealthy world this was the sign of achieved affluence. Millions of people were breathing a sigh of relief. After two world wars, after the difficult 1950s (which millions of immigrants had spent in mine shafts or on assembly lines), it was the sign of liberation from sacrifice and woes.

Instead, it was the sign of the next collapse.

Taking a closer look, in these aspects of a changing world we find everything: imbalances and social injustices, violence, political dramas, ecological disaster, the loss of biodiversity, the non-application of the precautionary principle, the enormous and senseless waste of financial resources in armaments and luxury, a superficial lifestyle, the waster who is attentive to enrichment and image, to competition and conformism ('keeping up with the Joneses').

Today the list of dangers and devastations is longer, not shorter, because new ones have been added and we are more familiar with the old ones.

Back then I loved the mountains (where my parents took me on vacation) and watching the cows at pasture. I saw the sea for the first time only later and loved it as well (so much so that years later I wrote a novel whose main characters were dolphins and whales). Having reached

the age of majority, I made two decisions that were a silent dissociation from the affluent society: to study philosophy, especially the humankind–nature interrelationship, and to teach.

The Teaching-Learning Process in a School (and in a University) Viewed as Environment

My starting point for arriving at a nearly total commitment to environmental education was the idea that the educational process cannot be separated from the environment–school and its ‘ecology’. As a practical field I took what was closest to me: the *school ecosystem*. Learning is a co-learning and therefore a common research method that brings into play both the teacher and the student, but also the construction of a ‘sustainable’ coexistence in contra-position to the loss of sociality and relationships in civil society.

‘Sustainable education’, which is the subtitle of the monthly magazine ‘*eco*’ that I edit, is attention to the ecology (and to the global coherence) of the aim and mission of educational systems, contents, methods, reciprocal relations, administrative management, overall organisation, physical spaces, behaviours, school consumptions (or, why not, university). Schools and universities are made of contents and methods, but also of concrete places, buildings, with their problems of livableness, ergonomics, pollution, energetic efficiency, contribution to entropy, etc.

Even in the schools, however, models that are based more on *having* than on *being* lead to a vision of the world that fuels competition, marginalisation, dissatisfaction, etc. Schools must propose a different, inclusive model that is respectful of diversities, yet at the same time involved in creating equal opportunity; a model that is open to creativity and to the emotional involvement of youth, and founded on the critical spirit and on a familiarity with the uncertainty, interdependence and complexity of all processes, social as well as natural.

This model finds a series of indications in the idea of the ‘ecological’ community and the ‘environment–school’ (an environment in tight continuity with the environment–planet). It is at such schools where one can, one must (by making them laboratories for research and concrete applications) try to ‘be well’ in terms of human relationships, where there is no discord between stated values and acted-upon values, where one learns to develop the knowledge and the skills to be a participant in a changing world, where one discusses and shares values about taking care of others and the Earth, where one reasons in terms of the future.

Sense of Place and Citizenship

The next step was to extend the view to the territory. In my opinion, the key concept to follow here is that the environment must be perceived and experienced, known and protected, in all of its aspects, without distinctions between nature and culture or between ‘high’ culture and ‘material’ culture, and by starting from one’s own ‘surroundings’. The pursuit and the recognition of one’s roots concerns everyone and is posed in terms of new challenges in a world affected by strong and rapid changes due to migration, to the galloping invasion of every residual space, to global warming, etc.

The sense of place needs to be rediscovered and reconstructed in ways that are not xenophobic or bitterly ‘parochial’, both by the native inhabitants of a territory, assailed by globalisation and exposed to the standardisation of mass culture, and by the migrants, who must become active and responsible citizens of the new communities they have become a part of through precise policies of reception and intercultural exchange.

Moreover, since more and more territories are being assailed by the movement of tourists, which has a very serious social and environmental impact, we need to encourage an ecological approach to travel, a different and more relaxed relation with time, an integrated interpretation of the landscape, an education for respecting the territory that appeals to the idea of beauty, the collective care of shared assets, the relationships among citizens based on participation, sharing, solidarity.

International Breadth

In addition, very soon my collaborators and I looked further afield for collaborations in Europe, the Mediterranean and the rest of the world. We created networks, organised congresses and cross-border and international projects.

We have seen, and with the World Environmental Education Congress network have brought to the attention of everyone, how environmental education changes language and topics from place to place to adapt to the various contexts. The greater the distance, the more environmental education changes (the wealth of the thousand ‘environmental educations’ in the world is one of the things we have learned from the WEEC congresses) – even though there is a shared vision and fundamental mission and the reciprocal enrichment of having a network of methodologies, reflections, best practices.

The complexity of the phenomena of the inextricable culture–nature, human society–environment *continuum* urges us to accept the uncertainty and interdependence of the human condition, the limitations, the impossibility of dominating nature, and thus to appreciate lifestyles that, in addition to reducing humankind’s ecological footprint, can also restore values like the re-enchantment of the world, reciprocity, silence, slow movement, rest...

Work and Knowledge

Environmental education – as expressed in my university teaching and the way I feel it is becoming established in the world, at least in its more advanced formulations – offers catastrophism the hope of a necessarily gradual, yet urgent and effective transition. Thanks in part to the cross-cutting nature of environmental education, diverse analytical doctrines must go beyond the disciplinary barriers that separate them; the dichotomy between declared ‘high’ ideals and narrow-minded models affecting concrete choices must be reduced; wiser approaches to the problems of the contemporary world must be established through knowledge.

In this way, work and the economy should become increasingly in line with the environment thanks to eco-design, the re-designing of the entire life cycle of products, the birth of bio-regional economic systems, etc. And this could offer workers, designers and entrepreneurs new

opportunities, new personal satisfactions, and new ethical legitimacies.

The formation of theoretical and practical, relational and organisational skills is, in fact, the primary tool of an ecological revolution of the socio-economic system.

Communicating the Environment

The numerous courses, seminars and publications I have actively participated in these years trained hundreds of trainers. My story has therefore also been a story of involvement in communication, in what is called 'informal' education, by contributing – I hope – to 'educating' thousands of people also by way of the magazine '.eco', its web site www.educazionesostenibile.it and the other related tools (including 'Il Pianeta Azzurro', a specific project dedicated to the world of fresh water and salt water). The story of '.eco' is absolutely unique in Italy because of its continuity, the breadth of the topics it deals with, the number of authors and interviewees involved and the fact that it is a monthly magazine.

However, as long and as culturally and scientifically important as it is, the story of '.eco' is only a small part of the system of communication. The role of mass communication, and now that of the 'new medias', is a theme that research in environmental education must examine more closely, both to understand and 'dismantle' the inauspicious influence of mass media and advertising on the collective imagination and on lifestyles, and for all of us to learn to communicate in a more effective, original and 'ecologically correct' way.

The Importance of the Network

Communicating also means being in contact. The word 'communicate' comes from the Latin 'cum' plus 'munus': 'carrying out a task together'. Together we must give each other strength. Together we must carry out the task of contributing to cultural change and thus to a socio-economic transformation and to eco-development. Although there are encouraging signs of becoming more aware, the need for a 180° turnabout has still not been sufficiently understood.

A Final Note ...

When I was a young boy (I live in a large industrial city, and back then a thick layer of coal dust used to cover the windowsills) I would wonder how the earth could keep from suffocating, covered as it was by a shroud of asphalt.

Today all of us, human beings and bacteria, butterflies and blades of grass, are suffocating under the plague caused by humanity. And I ask myself how we can fail to hear the suffering cry and how we can delude ourselves into thinking that we can consume everything – space and lives, resources and the future – without deposit and without precaution.

Notes on the Contributor

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Endnote

- 1 G7 is the Group of Seven (seven industrialised nations of the world). OECD is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development