MA Ecological Anthropology SANT 512

LECTURE 8

ELIAS ALEMU

..... MAY 2019

Topic: Environmentalism in a global context

Introduction

- At the beginning of the course we examined the idea in environmentalism of collective responsibility, meaning that humanity as a whole is responsible for environmental degradation and damage and therefore responsible for preventing further damage.
- As such, environmental campaigns to raise awareness of the current condition of the environment and to encourage people to be more environmentally responsible, have come up with the slogan “think globally, act locally” (cited in Milton 1996: 142).
- These aspects of responsibility and awareness are also present in environmental campaigns and the work of organisations and states.
- For example, large environmental NGOs like Greenpeace and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) have projects and interventions around the world, from the Amazon rainforest to the rubber plantations of Indonesia to American Indian fishermen in Alaska.

The ‘global’ in environmentalist discourse

- This “sense of the global” extends to the definition of the environment as the entire planet, meaning Earth.
- This idea of the planet “as ‘one place’ has fuelled the development of environmentalist discourse as a global phenomenon” (Milton 1996: 171).
- This means that discursively the Earth is viewed as one ecosystem with various inter-connected parts so occurrences in one place affect events in other places.

The ‘global’

- For instance, “forests and buildings are damaged by acid rain sent on the prevailing winds by distant power stations. Industrial pollutants are found in the bodies of Arctic mammals living many miles from the source of pollution. The populations of island states, such as the Maldives, feel threatened by rising sea levels brought by changes in climate, which are seen as a consequence of industrial development and intensive agriculture elsewhere” (Milton 1996: 176).
- In other words, “what is done on land affects the quality of water and air, so industry and agriculture affect marine life and, therefore, the quality and quantity of fish stocks for consumption by human beings and other species…Industrial development in Europe and America, the destruction of forests in Brazil, are seen as having consequences for the climate of the entire world (cf. Yearley 1995b)” (cited in Milton 1996: 176).

The role of technology

- Remember that technology has a significant role since it is largely through the mediums of books, magazines, television and internet that “environmentalist messages” are spread among people in different locations across the world.
- For instance, with advances in technology satellite images of the planet Earth from space can be taken, and in doing this “scientists can monitor the rates of deforestation and desertification, the spread of intensive monoculture farming, changes in wind speed and direction, cloud patterns and temperatures…In short, it may take days or weeks to walk through a rainforest, but satellite pictures reveal how quickly it is diminishing” (Milton 1996: 177).

Global environmental management

- If we are all responsible for the state of the environment and inter-connected processes affect all human beings, conservation, resource use and development must be negotiated and regulated between national governments, different interest groups and organisations (like activist groups and NGOs) and regional blocs (like the EU) through policy and legislation.
- Some international meetings that brought together participants from different locations and specific interest groups include the Biosphere Conference in Paris, France (1968), the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden (1972), and the Rio Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (1992).

continued

- For example, communication “takes place among NGOs (for instance at the Global Forum that accompanied the Earth Summit), between NGOs and governments (as when environmental groups lobby governments in their own and other countries in an attempt to influence policy), between NGOs and commercial companies (as when environmental groups lobby companies to reduce the environmental impacts of their operations), and between all these agencies (NGOs, governments, companies) and the public” (Milton 1996: 170).
- These kinds of agreements are necessary “to assess and sanction environmental activities” precisely because of this cause and effect relationship of events taking place around the world (Milton 1996: 187).
- They lead to international agreements such as the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) which came out of the Rio Summit.

Global ecology

- Along with the idea of a single ecosystem there is another important idea that humanity is a “single moral community” in which all individuals are entitled to the same rights and have the same responsibilities.
- These ideas converge (or come together) in the notion of a global environment. “The global environment is held to be both a common resource to which all, ideally, should have equal access, and an object of common responsibility for which all should care” (Milton 1996: 178).
- This global ecological approach takes a “holistic view…of human-environment relations (and) of all the biosphere’s component processes and relationships” (Milton 1996: 176).

Moral responsibility

- This aspect of a shared moral responsibility in environmentalist discourse is, however, not accepted by all. As Milton notes,
- “the involvement of a large number of actors in an industrial process makes it easier for each to abdicate responsibility for the outcome of that process; there is always someone else to blame…Awareness of this difficulty has prompted environmental campaigners in recent years to concentrate on increasing people’s understanding of the distant consequences of their actions, and persuading them to take personal responsibility for those consequences, particularly through the choices they make as consumers” (Milton 1996: 153).
- A simple example of this would be to choose to put groceries in a paper bag that can be recycled than in a plastic bag.

Globalism and anti-globalism

- The ideas about the causes of environmental damage, the increased connections between locations and processes in the world, and moral responsibility can broadly be classified into two categories, the globalist position and the anti-globalist position.
- While both positions recognise these connections, they take different approaches to stopping environmental destruction.
- Globalism works to combat environmental damage “within the structures of industrial society” whereas anti-globalism “demands a fundamental change to those structures” (Milton 1996: 205).

Anti-globalism

- The globalist position is largely exemplified by the discussion so far about collective responsibility.
- Anti-globalists, on the other hand, focus more on the root causes of environmental damage, which are economic and political “in order to identify the appropriate social arrangements for generating sustainable use” (Milton 1996: 193).
- For example, the unequal hierarchical economic-political relationship between the Global North and Global South where countries of the South export their raw materials like timber that comes from rainforests to build kitchen cabinets in houses in the North, is a big factor in environmental damage.

Globalism

- Globalists demand a more equitable distribution of money and technology in order to advance sustainable development in the Global South.
- In other words, “globalist environmentalists advocate the continued expansion of the global economy in order to involve all communities in the quest for sustainable development” (Milton 1996: 206).
- For globalists, it is very important to understand the physical causes of environmental damage like “the processes of global warming, ozone depletion, species extinction, and pollution in order to devise the appropriate technological and managerial solutions to these problems” (Milton 1996: 193).

Environmentalism and development

- In the globalist perspective, development is the solution to environmental problems which means that poverty resulting from a lack of development needs to be addressed.
- The relation between poverty and environmental conservation is evident in the discourse of sustainable development. For example, “Indira Gandhi, in her address to the Stockholm Conference in 1972, stated that ‘Poverty is the greatest polluter’ (quoted in Strong 1994)” (cited in Milton 1996: 183).

Environmentalism and poverty

- For the World Commission on Environment and Development and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) “development was consistently presented as the means to alleviate poverty: ‘the poor need economic and social development as the only means of relieving the vicious circle of poverty in which they are caught up’ (Strong 1992b:46)” (cited in Milton 1996: 183).
- However, as you know the development paradigm is problematic.
- Anti-globalists would oppose this view since they would consider development in its current form to be a cause of poverty and environmental degradation.

END



Required readings

- Chapter 5 and chapter 6 in Milton, K. (ed.) 1996. Environmentalism and Cultural Theory: Exploring the Role of Anthropology in Environmental Discourse. London and New York: Routledge.