

Construct an argument for Sacred Activism

Everything changes, nothing remains, the waters of our lives cross time and space, manifesting waves of all nuances. Meister Eckhart symbolized our soul as a boat anchored deep in the ocean, subject to the continuous swings of currents on the surface, but faithfully anchored in the deep, in a fixed point (McGinn 2001); an immovable refuge of the spirit facing the impermanence of this divine game that we have come to unravel. So many metaphors to tell the soul, the spirit, God, Brahma, That. So many cartographies displayed before our heart and our intelligence inviting us to travel routes that awaken us to the only Reality that is. So much knowledge displayed in the horizons of nature. So many opportunities to be renewed in this eternal timeless present.

I would like to be no more than a child of the moment and surrender without fear, leaving a gap for the sacred to blow through this humble Yes that we are; and it would sound at true, at beauty, at bliss, at belonging to the great Yes that contains everything.

Yet we live in darkened times where small doubts are held before the idea that the modern – human-induced– ecological crisis represents the most formidable challenge that humankind faces in the 21st century¹. Humanity is at a crossroad as a species. In this context, talking about the future could be irresponsible if we do not modify our present lifestyles and ‘development’ models. It is more and more clear that progress, progresses alone, with indifference to life and its quality increasingly deteriorating. The more we progress, the worse we are; that is to say, a little more progress and we are lost. And while the dance of interests continues, the galloping ecocide advances in its destructive vocation, and the new generations grow with less and less probability of having better living conditions.

In the face of this situation, the activities of groups working on change and activism appear to be stagnating in a cylindrical parchment that rolls and rolls periodically, in the end offering more of the same that they were trying to change. It appears as if what we think no longer comes from personal reflection-spaces or circles where arguments are discussed, but mostly from what is said to us. We can be optimistic, but not too much, we urgently need to generate structural changes.

Allan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff of the Proteus Initiative² define this problem as ‘an activism that emphasises action to the diminution of reflection, that rewards outer effect and ignores inner awareness, that focuses on the other but occludes the self, that extols results (almost as commodities) without sufficient regard for the process of getting there’ (Kaplan and Davidoff

¹ There is a vast number of authors, books and articles detailing these lugubrious facts. For a good summary, see for example Frederic Buell’s *From Apocalypse to Way of Life* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

² For more information see: <http://www.proteusinitiative.org>

2014: 1); and, by questioning the assumption that we can change the world 'by acting on it', they offer an alternative 'radical approach to change' through a 'delicate activism' (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014: 4). 'A delicate activism is truly radical in that it is aware of itself, and understands that its way of seeing is the change it wants to see' (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014: 1). We suspect that there is a 'delicate relationship' between the world 'out there' and the sense we make and bring into it.

It suggests that the situation cannot be improved without betting on major structural transformations that, ironically, begin with internal changes. The financial crisis is behind the political crisis, which hides the ecological crisis, which has at its core the existential crisis. Maybe we have to rethink everything, change our paradigm, change even the way to change. History has proven us that external changes are insufficient; to make a revolution like the ones we have already seen, it is to stab the transforming spirit and induce people to resignation. We need a new humanity and this will be the result of an internal revolution that includes relearning how to live.

The relatively new emerging academic field of religion and ecology echoes this message³ by acknowledging the potentials and limits of science, policy, education, and economy alone in responding to the interconnected aspects of the environmental crisis; and including as well the role of spirituality for the transformations of the moral values that the crisis also requires (Grim and Tucker 2014).

Winona LaDuke, a renowned activist working on issues of sustainable development on indigenous lands in America, inquired on how a community can restore its health from devastating periods. This work led her to deepen her investigation into a diversity of practices found in indigenous communities, all of which are involved in recovering that which is 'sacred' (LaDuke 2005). One of the main conclusions she drew was that this community work on healing and recovering the 'sacred' is entangled in complex and intergenerational processes and is essential to our identities (LaDuke 2005).

But what are the qualities that make something be considered sacred? Under the light of LaDuke's work it seems to be obvious that this choice cannot be stewarded just by the same governments who are responsible for the destruction of the same areas considered sacred by native cultures; how it happened, and still happens, over the years in the Native American territories, and which makes the wound of the colonisation and genocide unable to heal.

LaDuke's activism and work experiences in these issues brought her to write about the notion of 'sacred' under the paradigm of Native American traditions; which for her differs from that of Judeo-Christian traditions, anchored in commemorating past historical events (Deloria 1998). In a different manner, LaDuke explains, the rituals of indigenous traditions 'are frequently based on the reaffirmation of the relationship of humans to the Creation', which

³ See for example Bratton 2006, Gottlieb 2010, Grim and Tucker 2014, and Tucker 2010 in the Reference list.

situates humans in a larger Creation or reality and where gratitude and paying homage are the main attitudes to celebrate to just being a part of this creation (LaDuke 2005: 12).

Understanding the deep meaning of these beliefs is requisite to understand the societies, the spiritual practices and the meaning of sacred for Indigenous People. This entails a different relationship of people to place, to animals, plants, food, and life in general, where the sacred is present (LaDuke 2005). Putting it another way, this entails a different relationship between that considered matter and that other considered agent, or entitled with agency, over matter (Karen Barad 2007).

It is this understanding of the sacredness of the land and life that can change the dominant culture that consumes more and more natural resources in spite of everything. 'Nature does not need to be conserved but rather to be seen, to be recognised, to be honoured and respected' (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014: 20).

As mentioned above, another approach and vocabulary to understanding the sacred can be that of Karen Barad, along with a whole generation of feminists who reconsidered the political and ethical implications and inequities normalised by the nature/culture binary, where nature –along with the feminine– owns a subordinated condition (Kirby 2008: 215). For these voices, the notion of matter has been key to emphasise the results created by the dominant differences established between the binary of nature/culture. Or which is the same, how the socio-political representations create the identities of that considered matter, and opening it to question.

In special consideration, is the connection Karen Barad makes in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* with the Quantic Physics world, which allows her to speak about the dynamism of matter in constituting a meaning (Barad 2007). 'Opening up the identity of nature and culture is, for Barad, an opportunity to open up the *whole* of identity, to acknowledge the dynamic and ever-shifting nature of the world in its differential becoming' (Hinton 2013: 2).

Paraphrasing Peta Hinton, under this presumption of the entangled co-constituting of the identities of nature and culture, the dynamic role of matter becomes more visible in social and political configurations (Hinton 2013). Which is to say, matter –nature– is no longer an exterior passive object, but rather our identities –along cultural and political configurations– and matter are entangled in a coemergent process that creates meanings.

According to this postulation, an approach to the work on societal change or ethics needs to be considered under the influence that matter has on it. 'How might matter reconfigure and negotiate value, to potentiate change?' (Hinton 2013: 3).

Understanding this, we become more open to change, so everything breaks open and reveals new possibilities. 'All elements become porous to each other' (Kaplan and Davidoff 2014: 20).

Bayo Akomolafe, with his queerly poetic style, talks about the physics of activism under the question *What would a Mountain do?*, title of a paper addressed at the Impuls/Smart CSOs Conference celebrated at Berlin and in which, using the theories of physicist like Werner

Heisenberg and Niels Bohr, presents a different way of being an agent of change facing the challenges of societies today (Akomolafe 2015); a Sacred Activism so to speak.

Heisenberg's 'wave collapse theory' and the 'uncertainty principle' reflected the first trembles of the solid ontology of science's approach to reality under a 'Cartesian-Newtonian worldview' (Akomolafe 2015: 2). It was through the famous double split experiment on the nature of light, behaving sometimes as a discrete particle of energy and at others as a non-localized diffracting waves spread all over, that introduced the indeterminacy as a possible main characteristic of light; and thus, of reality as a whole. It was Bohr who encouraged the questions around the relationship of the object and the observer and the meanings coming as a result of that interaction. 'A 'thing' is only a 'thing' in the 'context' of relationship. Change the relationship, and the 'thing' changes. In other words, there are no 'things', only entanglements, only relationships' (Akomolafe 2015: 2).

Under these premises, we can no longer conceive nature as something deadly approachable and knowable. A relationship or an entanglement are not determined phenomena. Reality opens to an ever-going process of infinite interactions and possibilities. Existence happens because of these relations. The world expresses itself constantly through endless relations.

Citing Karen Barad "There are no solutions; there is only the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly' (Barad 2007: X). In other words, we are mere decoders of information that creates realities through this mingled process. The reality turns when we decode it. There is no information if there is no a decoder that approaches it; and vice versa.

Bayo Akomolafe defines this as the 'insurgency of the 'other'', when our modern sense of 'individuation [...] is giving away' (Akomolafe 2015: 3); so that the sense of the world around us becomes more present due to the awareness of our entangled co-constituting business with it. Which affects entirely our identities based on the self and the identity of 'a world that can no longer be considered as Other' (Akomolafe 2015: 3). This is what Joanna Macy would explain as the 'greening of the self' (Macy 2013).

Therefore, the activist's approaches about changing the world need to be completely reconsidered. The idea of being an agent of change belongs to the worldview of humans being distant and above nature, not 'embedded in/with it' (Akomolafe 2015: 4). We cannot act upon the world if the world and us co-act simultaneously. 'What if how we think about the crisis we face is part of the crisis?' (Akomolafe 2015: 5). Again, Bayo Akomolafe talks about an ethic of 'noticing the invisible', gaining more of a sense as to 'how entangled we are with the world'; acknowledging the sacredness around and within us. This pictures what a Sacred Activism would consist of.

As mentioned above, the work of some scholars, theologians, and others within the world of religions and diverse spiritualities have been pointing in this direction during the last decades, contributing specifically, and from an interdisciplinary approach, to the complex and multifaceted tensions of the ecological crisis by offering means for the recognition of the

sacred, which would induce 'self-transformation and community cohesion within a cosmological context' (Gottlieb 2006, Tucker 2006: 399).

This view they defend is based on the belief that moral values need to be seen as an effective antidote to environmental degradation next to the political, economic or educational ones. What follows with the recognition of the potential role that the world religions can offer to the current problems, as they have been for a long time the main influence on shaping values and worldviews, which are essential to appreciate the profound relationship between the natural world and humankind, as well as the behaviour of the latter. Through for instance cosmological stories, symbol systems or ritual practices, 'religions connect humans with a divine presence or numinous force. They bond human communities, and they assist in forging intimate relations with the broader earth community' (Tucker 2006: 399).

In summary, spiritual practices bring us closer to a larger identity of interconnectedness, indeterminacy and mystery 'from which life arises, unfolds and flourishes' (Tucker 2006: 399). Our forgotten capacities to pay honour and consider sacred the relationships between human and nature have a lot to offer to the environmental crisis.

A Sufi teacher says that the presence of the saints hold the world, and perhaps I would add that sacred is a state of union with the Real that can be actualized in our days. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr has been indicating for a renewed sense of the sacred in nature (Nasr 1996), Perennial Wisdom enshrines all traditions as a thread of silver, and transcends them in their varied forms, appropriate to times and spaces, and reminds us of our sacredness, our infinite capacity to contain in our hearts the Creator and the created (Huxley 1946). 'Heaven and earth cannot contain me, but the heart of my believing servant contains Me', says the Qur'an.

We live in times of high speed that scarcely leaves us time to stop and be; the daily liturgy of attending to every little event as unique and sacred has been lost in these modern times of progress to nowhere. A friend of mine says that at the limit of the physical opens the door to the transcendent. Let us recover that attitude, let us open up to whatever practice we have chosen to recognize who we are, prioritizing with wisdom and heart what we have come to realize in this world. Let us join that army of the wise and saints, sometimes hidden and silent to the world, but of great sonority in the invisible that sanctifies the existence of all other beings. 'Go, go, go together, go beyond, go thoroughly beyond, until the last consummation' says the Sutra of Wisdom. Together, gathered, all in the One without a second.

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