Connecting Poverty and Sustainability

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V. Connecting Poverty and Sustainability

A. Introduction

The research interests which bring me here pertain to ethical and political arguments aimed at preventing deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon. I will broaden my scope to address some of the concerns about how Brazilian population expansion affects global sustainability. I would like to look at how poverty in contemporary Brazil creates conditions which threaten the local environment and global sustainability. Given the radical difference between rich and poor in the world, I want to ask, who should bear the burden of relieving threats to the planet's ecological ceiling? The burgeoning Third World, or the consumptive First World? Who should, or will, be held responsible?

B. Cultural Contexts

Not long after I was invited to speak here, I came across a brief account in Annie Dillard's autobiography which I would like to recount. I like reading Dillard, among other reasons for her insights about how much a people's class, culture, religious beliefs, etc. make a difference in who they are and how they view the world. In this particular account, Dillard was talking with her father and mother before going off to college in the early 1960s. Her father, scion of a

* Fairfield University.

wealthy Scotch-Irish Presbyterian family, was "explaining the world," expounding a version of trickle-down economics. Society and the economy work best when they build up capital at the top, he claimed. Once that accumulation takes place, wealth necessarily, by gravitation, flows downward to take care of everyone's needs.

Annie's mother interjected passionately in disagreement. What about the shacks and barefoot children she had seen in the South—ill-fed and ill-clothed children who worked the fields instead of going to school? How was this system taking care of them? "They shouldn't have so many kids," Annie's father said. "They must be crazy." "The trouble was," Annie realized at that moment, "I no longer believed him."

Annie's father's attitudes strike me as a caricature of First-World cultural attitudes toward the Third World and the poor. They may exaggerate the truth, but they also may help identify some essential cultural attitudes that we need to examine. By putting these cultural assumptions aside, I believe, we may come to see that the poor are not so crazy at all for having many children. Rather, their actions are "reasonable responses to unreasonable constraints and contingencies." If so, what ought to be changed are the unreasonable constraints and contingencies, out of an appropriate conviction that improving their circumstances will alter their responses.

I want to be rather cautious about accepting the North American value that fewer children, but greater consumption is the "right," "moral," or "optimal" tradeoff. I would prefer to begin by underlining the reality that this is not necessarily a truth, but a cultural perspective, a particular conception of the "good." Where we are born changes what we value most, and the set of "goods" we adopt probably says more about the character of our society than anything else could. Middle- and upper-class American cultural identity is shaped very heavily by, and in favor of, possessions and consumption. In contrast, the Brazilians I focus on—like many other peoples in the third world—tend to shape their identity much more through family and extended family relationships. This is not simply the result of necessity, but of value. Both conceptions of the "good" have brought mixed blessings and curses. Our solutions ought to value cultural diversity, given the differing conceptions of the good.²


³ For a fuller discussion of the issues and implications of accepting different notions of "the good" in pluralist dialogue, see MICHAEL WALZER, SPHERES OF JUSTICE ch. 1–2 (1983).
I shall argue here that those of us in the consumption cultures must bear the primary burden of working for sustainability. Before I explain why, I would like to attempt to describe some important aspects of life in northeastern Brazil, to clarify the cultural context behind this environmental scenario. After that, I can more appropriately make my case for the standards which I believe we ought to employ in proposing solutions to uphold the earth's ability to sustain life.

C. Brazil's Social and Environmental Challenges

The great majority of Brazilians (including native peoples) live in cities, especially along the coast. Very little of the usual discussion about Brazil and the environment takes this factor very seriously, I believe. Thus I shall focus on life in northeastern cities like Recife, Salvador, Fortaleza, and Belem on the coast, and Manaus in the interior. Brazil is generally considered a "middle-income" country by World Bank standards. However, because the Northeast is so much poorer than the rest of Brazil, aggregate economic figures about the Brazilian economy are not adequate for understanding the situation. Brazil is among the most highly stratified societies, both economically and socially, in the world. The discrepancy between the rich and the poor in Brazil is greater than anywhere else in Latin America.

Most Americans have probably seen images of the massive favelas, the shantytowns that encircle every Brazilian city. Most Brazilians, as I said, live in cities, and most city-dwellers live in those favelas. There, families of squatters stake out claims on small patches of land, building small huts for themselves or their families. Some of the longer-established favelas are on reasonably level and accessible land.

the fact that my appeal begins from the recognition of different sets of basic values, I think it important to affirm my belief that people of different cultures oftentimes can and should draw moral conclusions about each others' actions. Notions of international human rights, for example, have no meaning if we cannot draw such conclusions.


5 Scheper-Hughes is probably the best recent source on the life of the poor in Northeast Brazil for readers interested in learning more about the subject. Her book examines the social context and other important issues which I can only outline here. Its focus is on the sources of the region's extremely high levels of infant mortality and the troubling, passive attitudes which mothers exhibit towards the death of their infant children, apparently because of the likelihood of death. To investigate and explain that phenomenon, she provides a compelling look at the everyday realities of del rio de fome (the madness of hunger, which occurs before death), related mental illnesses, and other forms of violence that accompany the social situation. By the time they reach forty, many of the women she interviews have had ten to fifteen pregnancies, a third of which ended in miscarriages. See generally, SCHEPER-HUGHES, supra note 2.
Their main streets are paved and usually provide access to electricity and phone service if the city has decided the squatters are there to stay, but there is rarely modern sewage. Most family dwellings begin as the simplest of wooden shacks, assembled from whatever materials are available. Over the course of an entire generation, the family's ultimate goal is to construct a concrete block house, perhaps at the rate of one wall a year, to enclose and replace the former house. Securing housing of the sort most of us would consider absolutely minimal often takes a whole generation.

The favelas have expanded enormously over the last twenty years, clinging perilously to the sides of mountains, or raised on stilts over swamps and floodplains. These newer favelas rarely offer any significant social services, and their inhabitants suffer a variety of degradations, both social and environmental, that constantly threaten their daily existence. Both the mountain and low-lying favelas are regularly subject to devastation from rains. Those who live on the stilts may first spend years dumping garbage and landfill below in search of a more stable footing, which also constitutes an "improvement" to the property and thereby helps constitute a claim to possession of the land.

Hunger is a chronic problem. Scheper-Hughes estimates that the average caloric intake of workers in the Northeast region to be 1500 to 1700 a day, through a diet which consists primarily of starches (beans, cassava root, farina, rice, sugar) and fruits. Under good circumstances, a meal will include some fish or dried beef. Milk is something of a middle-class luxury. The primary victims are infants, as is clear by the high infant mortality rates of the Northeast. While one-eighth of Latin America's population lives in the northeastern states, these states account for one-quarter of Latin America's infant mortality.

Lack of proper sewage and clean drinking water in the favelas is a major environmental problem with serious, immediate impact on the lives of the poor. Fecal coliforms in rivers contaminate drinking water and lead to millions of easily preventible childhood deaths from diarrhea. Millions suffer from schistosomiasis and parasitic diseases. Today cholera is working its way back to Brazil.

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6 The figures are primarily for workers on the nearby sugar cane estates, an economic mainstay of the Northeast. Some of the favella dwellers with whom she worked labored in cane fields; most were displaced workers from the fields. She notes that inmates at Buchenwald survived on slightly more caloric intake per day. *Id.* at 157.

7 *Id.* at 31.
All of this paints a dire picture, but I would never do justice if I did not allude to the generosity and vitality of these same poor people. Their endurance and common concern yields a variety of cultural traits that I have seen firsthand and have come to admire. Primary amongst these is an unfailing hospitality and ability to share what they have and to look after the very poorest among them. It is commonplace that families will take in each others’ children, and provide food or medicine for one another when times are hardest. This is a culture which might be described as a macrocosm of one poor Brazilian’s description of his own home: “A poor house rich in children.”

The fact is, of course, that Brazil is not able to adequately meet the basic needs of half its population. The human losses seem almost unfathomable. Illiteracy remains high among the poor, nearly fifty percent in the northeast region. Violence is frighteningly commonplace. Bands of children roam the streets of cities begging, stealing, and being manipulated by criminals, often sniffing glue to assuage their hunger. The wealthy of Brazil, like most of us, very often come to see the poor masses as the source of Brazil’s problems.

Nonetheless, Brazil is fascinated by modernity. Since the 1950s the country has embraced a rush to development, pursuing an economic “miracle” that brought about rapid growth, yet left in its wake a $115 billion foreign debt and a great deal of social displacement. The benefits and costs were not equitably distributed: real wages declined for most workers, and tens of millions of sharecroppers were displaced as their lands were turned over to monoculture crops. Yet today the debt inevitably affects every aspect of daily life, siphoning off vast sums that could otherwise go to education, health care and other forms of human development.

Throughout its history, Brazil has looked to exploit its interior forests for their real or imagined wealth. With the encouragement of northern development agencies, this frontier tendency has taken on new forms in the last few decades, as trade and market possibilities expanded even further. Brazilians recognize that they have the internal population and resources to grow into a vibrant economic force. Interior exploitation takes many forms including agriculture, cattle

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8 Id. at 182.
9 Scheper-Hughes relates several anecdotes wherein people speak as if natural disasters and mortality are a natural or divine means of fixing the problems caused by so much poverty. The poor, says one man, are “making Bom Jesus [the site of Scheper-Hughes’ research] an unhealthy place to live” Id. at 94.
ranching, mining, timber, and hydroelectric projects. The scale of these projects has varied to include huge (too often inefficient) projects costing tens of billions of dollars, to smaller-scale attempts to relocate peasants and favela-dwellers on "unused" lands. The "plan," understandable but flawed, was to achieve a First World economy by exploiting the vast natural resources of the interior.

Most of us are familiar with the effect of that policy in the Amazon, and the dangers such a policy portends. At the height of deforestation in the late 1980s, Brazilian rainforest was deforested at a rate of twenty million acres a year, fast enough to destroy it in seventy-five to a hundred years. The Amazon forest is extraordinarily rich in diversity of plants and animals, yet its soil structure in most places is far too weak to support most types of agricultural development, especially monoculture. Because of the soil's generally poor mineral retention ability, agriculture usually leads to rapid soil depletion, erosion and river degradation. The slash-and-burn method of agriculture necessary for making the soil even temporarily fertile wipes out thousands of species of animals and plants. Development very often also means that tribal peoples are displaced and rubber-tappers see their livelihoods threatened.

The international effects are troublesome, as well, since destruction of the Amazon ecosystem could likely pose a threat to the whole world. Environmentalists worry especially about the potential for global warming, due to forest burning. The loss of the Amazon ecosystem will likely result in changes to world climate patterns.\(^{10}\) While the changes in global weather patterns are little understood, examples abound in history wherein fertile lands have been turned into dustbowls due to shifting wind and rainfall patterns.\(^{11}\) The loss of biodiversity may also have a global impact. The Amazon is home to tens of thousands of species of plants and animals. The extraordinary adaptability of these species to local situations indicates that the rich Amazon gene-pool may yield life-saving cures to many now incurable diseases.\(^{12}\)

\(^{10}\) Consensus has yet to be reached among scientists about the certainty of the "greenhouse" hypothesis according to the evidence currently available. Unfortunately, scientists caution, we will probably not be able to measure the real extent of the peril until the damage is far gone and irreversible. Despite the uncertainty, UNESCO claims, "carbon dioxide-induced climate change is arguably the most threatening environmental problem of modern times" The Courier, Jan. 1989, at 13.

\(^{11}\) Aside from major droughts in the United States in the 1930s and 1980s, notable examples include the desertification of once-fertile Egypt in the Roman era, and the southward spread of the Sahara today, which is a major cause of African famine.

\(^{12}\) While twenty-five percent of the medicines in use in the West today are extracted from plants (including many important medicines derived from Amazonian species), only one percent
From the perspective of international relations, the environment is a new kind of challenge, one which poses worldwide threats and will likely affect the lives of millions of people across many boundaries, but which cannot easily be targeted as aggression. Because of it, we struggle to develop a moral and political language, as well as the political structures, to articulate and determine who ought to bear the costs of preserving the earth's capacity for sustenance.

D. Who Pays?

In Leviathan, Thomas Hobbes offered an argument about sustainability which is at once troublesome and reasonable. People who cannot earn a living in their own country, he claims, have a right to move to countries not sufficiently inhabited: where nevertheless they are not to exterminate those they find there, but constrain them to inhabit closer together and not range a great deal of ground to snatch what they find.\textsuperscript{13}

For many good reasons, not everyone today is willing to accept Hobbes' assertion. Its logic seems too easily to accept environmental degradation and lack of regard for native peoples. Still, one of the major causes of encroachment is the movement of poor, displaced people into forest lands, usually to earn a small living off a patch of land for a few years, and subsequently to abandon it or turn it over for a small sum to a cattle rancher. Do those who cannot earn a living have any claim on the rest of us to help and support if we deny Hobbes' assertion? How ought we distribute the burdens of global environmental protection to people who make less than $500 a year (as do more than one-third of Brazilians)? How much can we ask of poor Brazilians or the Brazilian government when survival is precarious and development could well provide a road to economic and social stability? Deforestation takes place as much by desperately poor landless families trying to eke out a living, as by large cattle ranchers. It seems to me that we will never work out solutions to environmental

\footnote{\textsc{Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan} pt. II, ch. 30 (M. Oakeshott ed. 1946).}
degradation or overpopulation until we recognize the extent to which poverty drives them both.

Allow me to return to Hobbes again:

Every man, not only by right but also by necessity of nature, is supposed to endeavor all he can to obtain that which is necessary for his conservation; he that shall oppose himself against it, for things superfluous, is guilty of the war that thereupon is to follow.\(^{14}\)

I do not believe that the environment is superfluous, but in a certain sense, for those who live precariously close to the survival level, global sustainability seems far-off among the priorities. A 1989 Louis Harris Poll for the United Nations Environmental Program revealed that fifty-eight percent of Brazilians thought that “life in this country is so difficult that the environment is not a top concern.”\(^{15}\)

What can we do to overcome such a situation?

To help sort out these difficulties, I have found it helpful to turn to a “typology of needs” developed by David Ozar.\(^{16}\) It identifies six levels of need, based on a person’s ability to care for his or her (and his or her family’s) most basic needs—food, shelter, clothing, and security. From least to most secure, these are:

1. Utter lack of means—survival is in absolute peril, the danger of death is imminent.
2. Bare Survival—a hand-to-mouth existence, wherein one has no savings and the threat of death is always lurking “around the corner.”
3. Subsistence—more time and flexibility is available to care for other needs, and there is some buffer against disaster, but mere survival still remains a reasonable, conscious concern. Instrumental action for survival is reasonable.
4. Minimal Security—still does not provide an extensive ability to devote to ends beyond security; many efforts are necessary to prevent a decline into a lower state, but concerns for real life peril are relatively distant.
5. Extended Security—only a relatively small portion of effort, energy and attention need be expended on procuring resources necessary for survival.
6. Permanent Security—security seems so assured that the person

\(^{14}\) Id. pt. I, ch. 15.


\(^{16}\) Unpublished manuscript. Ozar is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University, Chicago.
should never at any foreseeable future moment have to worry about subsistence.

The recognition that more than half of all Brazilians live below "minimal security" ought to have profound implications for the solutions those of us at level six propose to solve sustainability problems like population and environmental degradation. It means, I would suggest, that we have an obligation to work to bring Brazilians up to the minimal security level before we can justly ask much of them for our protection. In effect, our fears about sustainability argue that the poor should be restrained from encroaching on the forest (even though it can help sustain them), or that the government should stop doing the same (even though it has a phenomenal foreign debt to repay and serious economic needs at home), or that the Third World poor, who produce ninety percent of the world's children, should be constrained or taught to bear small families (even though these children help the family function as an economic unit and may be the only form of old-age support).

I do not believe that people should bear children, or destroy or ignore the environment, in order to care for their basic needs. Rather, at the very least, I am suggesting that the rights we claim to protect from threats to the earth's capacity for sustenance carry equal responsibilities to those whose poverty eventually poses a threat even to us. Without such responsibility, these "rights" amount to asking the poor to carry the costs of protecting the sustenance of the rich. They mask very unequal power relationships. Our discourse rarely deals with the concomitant obligations we have to the poor or to poorer nations if we ask them to preserve their forests for the sake of the global environment.

Most of us believe that insofar as Amazon deforestation poses a threat to the world, the rest of us have a right to be protected from it. We can justly ask people at the top levels of the needs hierarchy to make the sacrifices necessary to prevent a dangerous outcome, and can trust that those sacrifices are not likely to affect their security (which I certainly value as a good). However, I argue that a person at the highest levels of security cannot morally ask a person at a lower level of subsistence to work for the protection of the secure person's future security.

I am not arguing, however, that society has to reduce all its members to some shared minimal level on the typology, i.e. in favor of a sort of simple equality. Neither am I arguing that the needs of the poor could best be cared for if actions are allowed that undermine their security in the long run. What I am arguing is that we who live
at the top of the hierarchy cannot impose the burden of providing for their future security on those whose own immediate security is most perilous. What is counter-intuitive about applying this principle to questions of sustainability is that it could be allowed to let the long-term security of everyone be undermined. I argue that the burden is precisely on those at the highest levels of security not to let this happen.

The evidence seems quite strong to me that forms of development which were not so inappropriately mal-distributive would result far less in forest encroachment and overpopulation among the poor. Parents higher up on the typology do not need many children to help with work, or to provide for their security in old age. People whose basic needs are cared for can (and should) be held accountable for incursions which undermine others’ future security. Taking care of these needs first is a way of leveling the moral playing-field.

I am not sure how international law can contribute to taking poverty into account. The issues seems better negotiated than codified. Negotiators, even when charged to look after the interests of their home state, can be more sensitive to issues and repercussions. United States and other first world lawmakers can work to create better aid packages and new programs that foster education and sustainable development.

E. A Better Understanding of Development

In a country with the resources and population base of Brazil, it is almost impossible to escape the conclusion that poverty is the result of political and social failure. Population increases, while higher than in the first world, in no way adequately explain the poverty of Brazil.

17 This conclusion is similar to John Rawls' "difference principle," which asserts, "higher expectations of those better situated are just if and only if they work as part of a scheme which improves the expectations of the least advantaged members of society. The intuitive idea is that the social order is not to establish and secure the more attractive prospects of those better off unless doing so is to the advantage of those less fortunate." John Rawls, A Theory of Justice 75 (1971).

18 The discussion of "simple equality" above, and "inappropriate" inequality echoes the distinction drawn by Michael Walzer, supra note 3. I am very much in agreement with Walzer's assessment that simple equality is neither achievable nor desirable. Equality is necessarily complex. When it reaches the levels apparent in the typology and in Brazil's socio-economic stratification, it becomes counterproductive and destructive.


20 Brazil's population is currently rising at the rate of 1.7 percent a year, down from 2.4 percent in 1965-80, and 2.2 percent in 1980-90. World Development Report, p. 269.
Poverty results most of all from declining real wages for laborers and displacement of tens of millions of smallholders and sharecroppers from their land over the past few decades. Today two percent of Brazil's landowners control fifty-seven percent of its arable land, while the poorest thirty percent of the population controls only one percent of the land.

The environmental problems which poverty produces extend well beyond the global Amazonian problems on which we often focus. Any development plan should be cognizant of this. The problems which have the most significant daily impact on the poor include: inadequate sanitation, poor drinking water, soil depletion, smoke from cooking fires, and urban air pollution. Most of these crises are urban problems connected with slums and overcrowding. These present-day scenarios tend too easily to be overlooked by most of us. Improved living standards would severely reduce these kinds of environmental degradation.\footnote{As income increases even to a few thousand dollars per capita, environmental degradation like sanitation, safe water, and particulate matter in the air decline quickly. Sulphur dioxide emissions peak at $2,000-3,000$ per capita, but decline quickly above that level. see World Development Report, p. 11.}

Can the development of the Amazon region and the other interior lands of Brazil help solve Brazil's massive socio-economic problems? The answer is complex. Most of the Amazon is very poorly suited for agriculture, but some of it (perhaps seven to ten percent) can and should be utilized, though rarely for cattle ranching, the use for which it is least suited. The region contains major mineral deposits, including oil, gas, and huge, high-quality iron-ore reserves. Its hydroelectric capacity is astounding. Limited, responsible forest development can provide significant resources to overcome some of Brazil's most pressing socio-economic challenges. Small-scale agriculture on appropriate land can also help the poor care for themselves, if the right support and transportation systems are provided.

What role can the First World play? Debt-for-nature swaps are one start, but so far their scale has been far too small to make a significant impact. Clearly, however, more substantial debt relief that allows national resources to be re-channeled to education, healthcare, urban infrastructure, and housing could make a real impact. Expertise is certainly important, though probably best directed towards small business start-ups and sustainable, small development projects that have an immediate impact at lower levels of society. The North ought also to be wary about the models of development its agencies transport. What seems most important is that the North consistently back
up its calls to protect global sustainability with well-targeted support that indicates its willingness to bear a significant portion of the burden. This would have to become one of the major foreign policy aims for post-Cold War governments, on the scale of the Marshall Plan, not just the sideshow it has been. In this new era, perhaps development strategies could take the form of ecologically-sensitive "barefoot capitalism."

The fundamental task for development is to build institutions in Brazil that reduce the logic of human destruction, over-population, and ecological degradation. Towards this, the North can lend encouragement and expertise, and perhaps some of the financial resources necessary to carry it out. Land reform is crucial, in terms of the political and legal principles that undergird distribution, and the state’s ability to enforce titles. "Improvements" made to stake claims to land ought not depend on clearing, but on sustained use and investment. Legal concepts of land tenure must be redeveloped to focus not on absolute rights to manipulate land, but on obligations to protect land, or even to make it available to those who can use it well. Rights in this framework carry correlative duties to society.

A whole network of resources needs to be developed to help smallholders obtain not only secure tenure, but credit and other resources necessary (e.g. reliable transportation systems to market, etc.) to work sustainably the portions of the land that can be farmed. Expectations need to be formalized; assistance and support needs to be available. And of course, the vast lands not suited for agriculture need to be protected.

Corruption is a major source of many of the problems I have detailed, and needs to be addressed as well. The state may likely be better off reducing its ownership of industry and developing its regulatory and support capacity, since it has proved unable to adequately regulate the industries it owns. Competing institutions—regulatory and private—are likely to work out better conceived and more ecologically sound development solutions.

22 Ricardo Godoy of the Harvard Institute for International Development claims that the widow of murdered rubber-tapper Chico Mendes, on receiving a settlement, went out and purchased cattle as a way to invest the money. In an economy whose inflation often hovers at 900 percent, and in a region where better forms of investment are not reliable, investment in cattle seems logical. Anecdotes like this indicate the kind of basic structural development necessary to support non-destructive solutions. In an unreliable economy, land or tangible goods like cattle always constitute a safe investment compared to the other risks. Likewise, market transportation and agricultural support systems need to be in place to prevent the kind of failures that have taken place in past resettlements.
Brazilians seem infatuated with modernization: “Progress” is half the national motto, a driving force behind Brazilian life. A realistic approach to sustainability demands that development be taken as a given. So do the needs of the poor. Ironically, the solution lies in one of the major characteristics that differentiates humans from the rest of nature. Humans have the ability to share ideas and goods on a huge social scale, without being reduced to misery as the favela dwellers demonstrate. Our failure or success at that political task will determine whether we can counter unsustainable development. Otherwise, the poor remain both victims and perpetrators of environmental degradation.

Connecting poverty and sustainability seems to make a difficult problem more complex, rather than working to solve problems one-at-a-time. Caring for the needs of the poor, or raising the living standards of countries like Brazil seems an inefficient process to resolve the sustainability crisis that justly worries us. But failing to address poverty at the outset adopts the same stance Annie's father chose: benefits will trickle down later, once we solve the big problems. In the case of the environment and population control, time factors are important, but in the lives of the people of the favelas, time is equally important and costly.

I am not sure there are any real shortcuts around the kind of approach I suggest, having already seen the human and ecological results of many of Brazil's other shortcuts to development. Poverty is a human construction in Brazil as anywhere else, the result of political decisions and peasants being pushed off land in a variety of ways. I am more and more convinced that the ecological crisis demonstrates the interconnectedness of human lives and actions, and shows how one kind of degradation has all sorts of other results. Sustainability, we may well find out, depends not on halting or reducing development, but on development of a much better sort than we have learned so far. We cannot benefit from putting the genuine needs of people aside.