

Beyond Western and Indigenous Perspectives on Sustainability: Politicizing Sustainability With the Zapatista Rebellious Education

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Abstract

This article discusses the contributions of different worldviews to the debates on what a transformative sustainability education could be. It focuses on mainstream and alternative strands of thought present in the West, as well as Indigenous worldviews, taking the Zapatistas as an example. The Zapatista social movement of Mexico fights for the autonomy of Mayan communities and the preservation of their culture, social organization and relationship to nature, all of which centers on traditional Mayan cosmovision. To secure the survival of the culture and of the movement itself, these ecological values are included in the education system. The Zapatistas remind us that it is possible to rethink the world and the ideologies underlying the discourses on sustainability and suggest that taking a stand and organize politically should be at the center of an education for sustainability that aims at being transformative.

Keywords

education for sustainability, worldviews, Zapatista organization, social change

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Introduction

The current ecological crisis calls for a reorientation towards more sustainable ways of living together and with the world. It calls for a deep transformation of the ways; we as humans understand and envision our place within the world and the ecosystem, a transformation that implies changes at epistemological, ontological, and relational levels (Williams, 2018).

Internationally, education for sustainable development—often erroneously used as synonymous to education for sustainability—is promoted as the kind of transformative education necessary to cope with the ecological crisis (UNESCO, 2017). There are, however, fundamental differences between the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development, with implications in the realm of education. The two concepts remain ambiguous (Arias-Maldonado, 2013; Bonnett, 2003b). Although some argue that sustainability is a product of the anthropocentric modernist ideology where nature is necessarily exploited and oppressed (Taylor, 2017), others view sustainability as concerned with the long-term relationship between humans and nature (Arias-Maldonado, 2013) or as a frame of mind (Bonnett, 2003b). The UNESCO associates' sustainability with the long-term, abstract, goals of living sustainably, while it defines sustainable development as the concrete means to achieve such goal (UNESCO, 2021).

In this article, the differences between sustainable development and sustainability and their associated values and strategies will be discussed using lines of thoughts present in the West and in some Indigenous communities. These present tensions and dilemmas, but also possibilities: that of fostering greater understanding by moving beyond taken for granted assumptions and practices, and stimulating imaginative and constructive ways of going forward in the debates and practices surrounding education for sustainability (Four Arrows, 2016).

Sustainability, associated to the ideal of a good life, is inevitably linked to moral and value-based judgments. Worldview is intimately related to the relationship with nature and attitudes towards sustainability that people hold, and there seems to be an increasing interest for learning from Indigenous worldviews (Bonnett, 2003a). In fact, “achieving true sustainability will require both a fundamental redefinition and restructuring of development, *and* a greater sensitivity and respect for local perceptions and knowledge of nature.” (Walker, 1998, p. 141).

This is taken further by transformative sustainability education, which advocates for a radical transformation of humans' ways of being in the world. It envisions an education that would participate in a shift of consciousness through learning principles and experiences that would foster an embodied sense of entanglement with nature (Williams, 2018). This implies challenging the underlying ideologies that play out at global and local levels and have led us to the ecological crisis we are currently experiencing (Lange, 2018; Williams, 2018). The social movement of the Zapatistas in Mexico are an inspiration in that respect. Their defense of Indigenous Mayan

worldview is paired with an explicit anticapitalist position, shedding light on the epistemological, ontological, ethical, and political implications of sustainability.

After presenting the roots and underlying discourses of the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development, the Zapatistas of Southeast Mexico will be introduced together with the importance they give to beliefs and traditional knowledge for environmental and cultural preservation, social organization, and political empowerment. Although this is a theoretical article, the author draws her reflections on both literature and her direct experiences of visiting Zapatista communities. Finally, inspirations from both Western and Indigenous worldviews and their possible contributions to a transformative education for sustainability will be discussed.

Sustainability and the Western mind

Nature and the Anthropocene. In the West, Nature has always had ambivalent meanings. Sometimes associated with the original, authentic way of life, an ideal to get closer to, it is still often associated with the negative connotation of the uncivilized and underdeveloped (Straume, 2016).

Foundational for Western civilization and modernity itself, is the grand narrative of the rational enlightened Man, featuring a Cartesian divide between nature and culture, and justifying Man's superior right to examine, conquer, and exploit the natural world (Straume, 2016; Taylor, 2017). This culminated with the industrial revolution and the heavy exploitation of natural resources made possible by the development of heavy machinery and capitalist modes of production. Today the impacts on the planet caused by human beings are so deep and long lasting, that a new geological era has been coined: *the Anthropocene* (Crutzen, 2002).

As much as it is the product of a Cartesian dualism and the symptom of a crisis, with the Anthropocene, natural and social phenomena are no longer separate; they are discussed together (Straume, 2016). This can be viewed as a potential redirection of humans' efforts to understand the world.

Sustainability and Sustainable development

The impact of human activity on nature has been the object of worries and criticism for centuries (Du Pisani, 2006). Already in the 17th century, the holist philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, who has inspired modern philosophers such as the Norwegian Arne Næss, defended the importance of acknowledging humans' interrelatedness with nature and environment as a whole (Hansson, 2012). The term sustainability itself was first used in the early 18th century by German von Carlowitz regarding forest conservation (Waas et al., 2011).

The long-term ideal of sustainability is commonly conflated to that of development, making sustainable development a rather new, but already mainstream concept, leading international policies and agendas. Over the course of history, progress, with which the idea of development is associated, went from connoting moral and ethical betterment of

humankind to the idea of modernity and economic growth. Linking material and economic growth to ideas of the good society helped legitimize the domination and exploitation of nature by humans (Du Pisani, 2006).

The concerns for environmental conservation that became more salient towards the 1970s emerged mainly from the realization that an endangered environment was a threat for human beings' future on the planet and called for a model of development that would mitigate economic growth with conservation of natural resources. This led to the first international conference dedicated to the ecological crisis, held in Stockholm in 1972 (Waas et al., 2011). In 1987, the Brundtland Report underlined the multiple dimensions inherent to sustainable development, with social and environmental dimensions living alongside an economic one, with growth as the leading economic model (WCED, 1987).

As mentioned earlier, distinguishing between sustainable development and sustainability is crucial. Both are linked to value judgments of the desirable relationship between humans and their environment and of the good society (Arias-Maldonado, 2013; Bonnett, 2003b), and are in the West framed by the modernist anthropocentric paradigm. How these terms are defined reflect the central values one wishes to be the foundation for research, policies, and practices. The UNESCO defines sustainable development as composed of four dimensions: a political dimension (referring to the promotion of democracies), a natural dimension (natural conservation), a social dimension (peace, social justice, and human rights), and an economic dimension (the creation of jobs and economic growth) (UNESCO, 2010). According to this framework, the four dimensions are interrelated and equally important. However, whether they have or should have equal weight in the quest for sustainability is questionable.

Criticisms of Sustainable development

The adoption of sustainability—framed as sustainable development—as a global strategy has thus far failed to successfully mitigate climate changes and other environmental disasters (Benson & Craig, 2014; Waas et al., 2011).

A major critique raised towards the mainstream model of sustainability is how it projects a capitalist economic model for development as the only appropriate one. In this weak understanding of sustainability, the laws of a market economy and the neoliberal ideology it builds upon are taken for granted, legitimized, and even institutionalized, implicitly leading discourses, policies, and practices, as if operating outside of this framework was simply impossible (Berryman & Sauv e, 2016). Instead, critics argue that real sustainability—one that puts the environment first—requires challenging the underlying neoliberal values that permeate societies globally and promote an instrumental view of our relationship with nature (Kopnina & Cherniak, 2016). In fact, weak sustainability, attached to the idea of development, takes for granted human beings' right as species to exploit nature to its advantage, thus reproducing the same patterns of domination that engendered the Anthropocene and the ecological crisis (Bonnett, 2003b).

In practice, the four dimensions of sustainable development mentioned earlier are subject to trade-offs where the economic dimension is given priority at the expense of the natural one (Waas et al., 2011). Such separation of social and natural realms is problematic, as it does not propose new and transformative ways of understanding sustainability as interlacing nature with culture. Rather than merely interrelated, these dimensions should be viewed as integrated, placing humans within environment, as will be discussed later (Waas et al., 2011). This is what a “strong sustainability paradigm” entails, nesting humans within an ecological equilibrium and seeking to transform the ways humans and more-than-humans relate to each other (O’Neil, 2018, p. 370). This goes hand in hand with a profound reconsideration of how humans organize socially and envision their place in the world, as well as of the crucial role of education in this endeavor (O’Neil, 2018).

Sustainability is thus a pluralistic concept that builds on different values and entails a variety of understandings and paths to it. As such, some have argued that sustainability should be open to discussion and deliberation. Such democratic spaces would allow to engage politically with the question of our relationship with nature and the good society (Arias-Maldonado, 2013).

Sustainability in the Indigenous worldview

A challenge to a dualistic worldview. Although generalizing may be dangerous, Indigenous beliefs about the relationship between humans and nature would mostly qualify as ecocentrism, which acknowledges the intrinsic value of nature, independently of the use humans may make of it. Instead of separating humans from nature, Indigenous worldviews interlace the two in a reciprocal relationship (Frisancho & Delgado, 2016). Dichotomies such as nature and culture, or mind and body, are irrelevant and even absurd in most Indigenous cosmovisions, as the level of identification with nature is high (Berkes, 1999). The relationship with nature has a moral character, at the striking opposite of anthropocentrism and instrumentalism that view nature as a commodity. Common to many Indigenous peoples are the qualities given to the land and the ecosystem, which foster an environmental ethic and lead social behaviors. A strong sense of place and belonging to the land goes hand in hand with spiritual beliefs that give meaning to interactions, socially and with nature (Berkes, 1999; Williams, 2018).

Indigenous epistemologies and ways of thinking challenge the modern Western views on science and truth stemming from positivistic epistemological traditions. These Western views tend to dismiss the spiritual component of Indigenous knowledges as a threat to rationality, proof of their illegitimacy. As if Western epistemologies were not themselves embedded in a belief system (Berkes, 1999). Besides, as will be further discussed with the case of the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, the preservation of traditional knowledges and practices is a matter of survival and empowerment for Indigenous peoples, and is thus political (Berkes, 1999).

The Zapatista Uprising

The Zapatista movement made itself known on January first, 1994, the day that the international free trade NAFTA agreement between Mexico, the United States and Canada was enforced. Opening for the privatization of lands which were until then protected by the traditional Ejidal system—allowing community-owned lands—, this agreement was viewed by the already marginalized Indigenous people as an additional threat to their rights, traditional social organization, and very existence (Harvey, 2001; Martínez-Torres, 2001).

With their armed uprising, the Zapatista and their army (the EZLN) demanded for their dignity and rights as Mexicans, Indigenous and peasants to be acknowledged (Barmeyer, 2008; Harvey, 2001). The demands voiced by the EZLN in the aftermath of the uprising were work, land, shelter, food, health, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace (EZLN, 2016). Several failed attempts of dialogues led to the San Andres Accords in February 1996. However, the Accords were never legally implemented by the government, and the Zapatistas declared their autonomy unilaterally. They started redistributing land among peasants, creating autonomous municipalities organized in a complex democratic network (Baronnet et al., 2011; Van Der Haar, 2005).

Resisting decades of state education policies, accused of homogenizing, marginalizing and erasing Indigenous peoples, language and cultures, the Zapatistas started building their own autonomous education system, one born “from below,” that would preserve Indigenous worldviews and practices, and honor communities’ real needs, while offering tangible opportunities and future prospects to its youth (Gómez Lara, 2011; López, 2017).

The Dimensions of Sustainability Reflected in Zapatista Life

Environmental preservation. The struggle for autonomy and self-sufficiency has strengthened ecological concerns linked to the use of land for agriculture, but also as “motherland,” placing the environment at the center of Zapatista communities’ politics. Prohibiting pesticides, GMO crops, limiting hunting, and making use of traditional agroecological knowledge, are some of the measures taken by these communities. Traditional beliefs about the earth and humans’ relationship to nature, such as the myth of creation where humans were made from corn, also deepen protective and respectful ecological behaviors (Gómez Bonillo, 2011).

To face the deterioration of the environment, the exchange of experiences, knowledge and strategies between communities is vital. Older generations play an important role in passing on their knowledge of preservation as they are living witnesses of environmental changes (Gómez Bonillo, 2011). Besides, the Zapatistas link environmental degradation to social, economic, and political strategies of the State and paramilitaries viewed as aiming to weaken the communities’ quality of life and destabilize the EZLN. These include the systematic exploitation and social inequality

indigenous people have endured, and the burning down of forests on Zapatista territory. Besides, historically, Mexican developmental projects, including ecotourism, have not taken into account the voices and needs of local populations, and are viewed as engendering destruction in the natural environment, fragmentation of the territory and threaten the cohesion of communities. (Gómez Bonillo, 2011).

By redefining their interaction with their habitat, their territory, the Zapatistas are resisting the politics of the government and its model of sustainable development. In that sense, cultivating the land and cultivating agricultural, ecological, and political knowledge go hand in hand (Baronnet et al., 2011).

An anticapitalistic movement. The Zapatistas are an anticapitalistic movement and contest a neoliberal understanding of sustainability (Stahler-Sholk, 2011).

Resistance to the capitalistic economic model is materialized through a social restructuring where the economic capital is replaced by social capital: In this collectivist framework, the social subjects are the foundation of the community's reproduction and of its environment (Baronnet et al., 2011). Labor is generally unpaid, to avoid monetizing the relationship between service providers and the community (Stahler-Sholk, 2011). Starting at the microlevel, the Zapatistas intend to change the structures of the neoliberal model that threaten the community and the environment. The Zapatistas are thus showing the capacity of peasants to organize and provide alternatives to neoliberal organization. Anticapitalism is further embodied through a relationship with the environment where nature is not merchandised, which challenges the neoliberal discourse that measures sustainability in terms of profit and thus frames subsistence economy in rural Mexico as unsustainable (Gómez Bonillo, 2011; Stahler-Sholk, 2011). Besides, the autonomous system is mostly self-financed, thanks to "collectives" of production and cooperatives (Van Der Haar, 2005). This ideal of self-sufficiency implies material sacrifices and challenges, but also fosters a sense of collective identity and pride (Stahler-Sholk, 2011).

Communitarity as social organization. Dating back to traditional Indigenous modes of living together and central to the Zapatista organization is the notion of community (Stahler-Sholk, 2011). The community has always been the Mayan central space of encounter and interaction between families, with their assemblies and different functions, territory, services etc. (Paoli, 2003). In a Zapatista context, solidary and participatory practices are fostered by the collective sharing, experiences and culture of the land (Stahler-Sholk, 2011). The redistribution of land following the 1994 uprising—from rich landlords to poor peasants—was a way to reorganize socially, building communities whose land would depend on unity and cohesion for their protection (Stahler-Sholk, 2011). Zapatismo explicitly acknowledges diversity as the foundation for an ethics of solidarity (Evans, 2009). "The first task for any new politics" is to "recognize that there are 'differences between us all' and that in light of this, we aspire to a politics of tolerance and inclusion." (Subcomandante Marcos in Evans, 2009, p. 92). This acknowledgment of difference and diversity as a strength is represented in their now famous phrase: "A world in which many worlds fit" (Olesen, 2004, p. 262).

Another feature of the Zapatista social organization is its decentralization. Embedded in local realities, municipal councils and local assemblies differ greatly depending on local characteristics and needs (Van Der Haar, 2005). This decentralization applies to the education system, with curricula being developed locally through participatory processes where all members of the community are involved (Baronnet, 2010; Núñez Patiño, 2011). This will be further discussed later.

A democratic organization. Unlike other Latin American social movements of the 20th century which have heavily relied on the armed struggle, the Zapatistas have favored democratic processes and the efforts of civil society to bring about social change (Máiz, 2010; Olesen, 2004). The Zapatistas' understanding of democracy is a hybrid between political Marxism of the first revolutionaries and Indigenous worldview and decision-making processes (Martinez-Torres, 2001; Olesen, 2004). The current democratic system, associated with the neoliberal ideology, in Mexico and the world at large, is deemed elitist, corrupt, and oppressive to the Indigenous and the poor; hence the urge for a new way of doing politics (Máiz, 2010).

The interrelatedness of the economic and the political is explicit in Zapatista anticapitalistic discourse that views capitalism as fundamentally antidemocratic. Their democratization project takes form through revisiting institutions, including the economic ones, from within and from below. Unlike other revolutionary movements, the Zapatistas do not aim at taking state power (Marchart, 2004). Instead, they are about a reorganization of power giving the population an actual say in the decisions concerning their lives within an alternative system. This materialized with the creation of the *Caracoles*—administration centers—and decentralization, allowing the decisions on the use of the land and resources to be in the hand of local actors (Gómez Bonillo, 2011; Stahler-Sholk, 2011).

This builds on a common culture of political participation shared by the majority of rural Mayan families in Chiapas, through socialization arenas such as the assembly and other meeting spaces (Baronnet, 2010; Evans, 2009). The Zapatistas claim that “Democracy is that, independently of who is in office, the majority of the people have decision-making power over the matters that affect them (...) Democracy is something that is built from below and by everyone, including those who think differently from us. Democracy is the exercise of power by the people all the time and in all places.” (EZLN, 2000).

Beyond the four dimensions: Politicizing sustainability

Thinking in terms of separate dimensions does not do justice to the integrated complexity of sustainability—in its strong sense—nor does it allow grasping the worldview underpinning the Zapatista organization and discourse.

At the striking opposite to a mechanistic and separationist view of the world and humans, this worldview—or cosmovision—is based on a holistic vision of the universe, on unity and interconnection. These principles, essential to ecology, suggest that true sustainability is not about connecting separate dimensions but integrating them into

a whole, a mode of living together (Duenkel & Pratt, 2013; Retamal Montecinos, 1998).

Embedded in Mayan worldview, a key value and ideal of life of the Mayan people, and of the Zapatistas, is that of autonomy. Autonomy permeates all levels and arenas of life—the individual, the family, the community, and the wider Indian people (Paoli, 2003). This ideal of life can be summed up by the phrase *Lekil Kuxlejal* meaning “the good (or “worthy”) life.” According to Mayan cosmovision this ideal of life is not utopic, but was a reality in remote times, and can be restored, through autonomy, an ethics of intersubjective relationships between all beings—humans and more-than-humans—sustaining the community. Building autonomy is thus both a right and a responsibility, and is linked to the survival of culture itself (Paoli, 2003).

Autonomy is strategic to conserving local decision-making processes over the environment and its resources, but also to preserve local identities and cultural practices rooted in cosmovision (Gómez Bonillo, 2011). As noted earlier, preserving traditional ways of interacting with environment, is viewed as a mode of resistance to the politics of development led by the government (Baronnet et al., 2011; Gómez Bonillo, 2011). Political action and cosmovision are thus interlaced.

Further, these beliefs inform and regulate aspects of the group’s social organization and cohesion. In fact, the Zapatistas, reclaim traditional symbols in order to strengthen peasant and Indigenous identity. They also incorporate new elements to them, thus adapting them to the present realities of the communities and the struggle (Gómez Bonillo, 2011). The Zapatistas view culture as dynamic and adopt a critical position towards traditions. They acknowledge that a lot of what is now known as traditions is in fact a product of the influence of the Spanish conquest. An example of this is the Zapatistas’ gender politics, which breaks with traditional gender roles and give women a prominent position in the organization (Stahler-Sholk, 2001). Traditional customs partly regulate the social organization and institutions, but the context and systematization of the fight for the land has contributed to alter these customs and beliefs. Evolving identities and evolving beliefs affect each other reciprocally (Gómez Bonillo, 2011). The Zapatista worldview thus actualizes ancient cosmovision through critical political thought, placing autonomy, self-determination, and reflexivity at the center: “Not all traditions are good. The important thing is, we want to choose what we want to accept from outside and how we want to live.” (Zapatista community leader in Stahler-Sholk, 2001, p. 515).

On January 1st, 2021 the EZLN released a communiqué, a “declaration for life,” translated in 18 languages and that has gathered hundreds of signatures from collectives and individuals around the globe. This declaration states “That we make the pains of the earth our own, violence against women; persecution and contempt of those who are different in their affective, emotional, and sexual identity; annihilation of childhood; genocide against native peoples; racism; militarism; exploitation; dispossession; the destruction of nature” (EZLN, 2021). This declaration makes explicit the interdependence of all dimensions of life, social, and natural, and the impossibility to address the ecological crisis without simultaneously resisting systems of oppression at a wider

and global scale. In other words, this call for a struggle for Life as a whole and in all its complexity, reminds us that sustainability ought to be politicized.

From worldviews to an education for sustainability

The Zapatista Rebellious Education. The Zapatista education aims at strengthening the political engagement of its members, on which the survival of the movement depends. It is precisely in this sense that it is transformative, as it both offers prospects of a better future for indigenous communities, and intends to create an alternative to the hegemonic system (Baronnet, 2010).

To do so, the Zapatista education system is embedded in local participatory practices and community life, promoting a highly integrated social structure and making the education process a collective responsibility involving both students, families, assemblies and authorities.

For the Zapatistas, education encompasses all areas of life, in and outside school (Gómez Lara, 2011). The *milpa*, the field, is one of the main pedagogical spaces where children from an early age are brought to “work” with their parents, as the cultivation of corn is fundamental to community life (Pinheiro Barbosa, 2015). They also participate in the daily domestic tasks, such as making corn tortillas. The family is thus a fundamental didactic space where children develop skills crucial to community life, as well as for understanding the integration of the community’s social fabric (Gómez Lara, 2011; Paoli, 2003). Besides, rather than being a separate space, the school is integrated to and interwoven with the community (Baronnet, 2010; Núñez Patiño, 2011): The practices within schools adapt to the rhythms of the community, its resources, and the knowledge of the elders. They develop in continuity with the informal learning arenas of the family and community (Paoli, 2003). This fosters a sense of belonging in children, to the land, the community and the movement itself.

Opening the pedagogical space to arenas other than the school situates experience, everyday life, at the center of the learning process, the construction of concepts and epistemology, and of an identity as community member (Pinheiro Barbosa, 2015). It also enables lifelong learning processes, through which all members, including adults, engage in a continuous process of reflexivity. In fact, from early childhood, members of the community are encouraged to develop their individual autonomy and self-awareness. These qualities are crucial to the autonomy of the community itself, as they enable its members to participate in decision-making processes (Pinheiro Barbosa, 2015). Assemblies are the meeting point where all members of the community, across generations, define education experiences, and that allow the knowledge of the elders and the experience of families to find their way into classrooms and curricula. The direct participation and influence of the community members on the education system allows developing relevant education practices adapted to local needs, contributes to strengthen a sense of dignity as people, and strengthens the resistance movement. (Gómez Lara, 2011).

Indigenous—Maya—worldview plays an important part in that matter, and is included in the education model of the Zapatistas (Pinheiro Barbosa, 2015). For instance, the person's development and learning process is understood as *Ch'ulel*—a Mayan concept relating to the formation of conscience and soul, and which is present in all entities on earth (Gómez Lara, 2011). The concept reflects an understanding of social life, encompassing all relationships, in between humans and with nature, transcending material, and immaterial planes (Pinheiro Barbosa, 2015). As it will be further discussed later, the fundamental values an alternative and transformative education for sustainability would build on thus promote communality as a social organization and as a form of living between humans and more-than-humans.

Beyond the dichotomies of a modernist worldview

If the objective of The Brundtland report was to create a bridge between the needs and interests of the countries of the North and the South (Waas et al., 2011), it was on the premise of one particular developmental paradigm and did not succeed in including other worldviews in its conceptualization of sustainability. Indigenous worldviews and relationship to nature are still exoticized, which undermines the potential transformative learning process that a true dialogue between worldviews could foster. Such dialogue would build on an awareness of power relations and inequalities, and seek to share and learn from each other in a reciprocal and horizontal manner. (Frisancho & Delgado, 2016).

The prejudice which depicts Indigenous people as irrational and uncivilized because of the importance they give to the affective in their knowledge formation is still strong (Frisancho & Delgado, 2016). The Mayan concept of *Ch'ulel* mentioned above contests and transcends the classic dichotomy between the intellect and the heart, the rational and the natural. This stands in stark contrast with the Cartesian dualism foundational to the Western modernist worldview and education system. Similar understandings of the need to look at the mind and nature in unison rather than as opposition can be found in the West too, as in the work of Spinoza, who viewed the world as an integrated whole (Hansson, 2012). These holistic perspectives have become central in the discussions on sustainability. They acknowledge the need to overcome a distantiated relationship to nature and promote experiential embodied knowing developed from direct contact with nature. This kind of knowledge is not value-free, but embedded in an ethics of care, and is thus argued to be fundamental for a radical and meaningful change in the human-more-than-human relationship (Bonnett, 2003a). Challenging the standard of value-free, rational knowledge, it brings in experience, the senses and affect, where nature becomes an integrated part of humans' life, and vice versa. This understanding views the relationship as reciprocal, with an acknowledgment of nature as subject and agent (Bonnett, 2003a; Taylor, 2017).

In its weak sense, education for sustainability reflects a modernist worldview. It thus does not break with the very fundamentals of the challenges we face (Taylor, 2017). In the West, various initiatives propose alternatives to mainstream education, based on

pedagogical principles that acknowledge interactions between children and the natural environment as fundamental. Deep ecology, common world pedagogies and transformative sustainability education, for example, propose that humans engage in a form of collective thinking with more-than-humans, acknowledging that they too exert agency upon us and upon the world (Næss, 1976; O’Neil, 2018; Taylor, 2017). However, the question of the practical feasibility of such alternatives remains. Can we really separate ourselves from the modernist framework with which we are so deeply entangled? If not from our human subjectivities, then how can we act? (Stables & Scott, 2001).

Latin America is the scene of multiple cases of Indigenous resistance to the Western project of modernity. These constitute an alternative modernity, that combine the rejection of the capitalist worldview, and a cosmivision based on the interrelatedness of humans and more-than-human world, as described earlier. The classic dichotomy between modern and Indigenous can thus be challenged. Indeed, the Zapatistas do not fit within the stereotypical image of the naïve Indigenous, victimized, and powerless in the face of modernity. The way they make use of the internet to make themselves heard and network with civil society at a global scale, is an example of their engagement with modernity (Martinez-Torres, 2001). They build on their Indigenous identity to redefine what modernity means to them, a modernity that does not conform with that of the Western capitalist world (Rojas, 2018)—aiming at replacing “the monoculture of modernity” (Esteva et al., 2014, p. 5) with “a world in which many worlds fit” (Olesen, 2004, p. 262).

Resisting the modernist worldview also implies positioning oneself critically towards the modern, hegemonic school system, designed to fit the needs of Nation States in their capitalist and industrial development (Retamal Montecinos, 1998). Multiple educational programs are being launched worldwide with an emphasis on teaching children about sustainability, developing skills, values and attitudes that would help foster a sustainable future and fulfill the global development goals (Siraj-Blatchford & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2016). However, these alone are not enough to really foster a sustainable future. They need to be accompanied by a reconsideration of the structural conditions these pedagogical activities are embedded in. To break with the mechanistic vision of the world, sustainability education will not only have to reconnect humans with nature; it will also have to build on a radically different social structure (Retamal Montecinos, 1998). An adult education that supports teachers in reflexively engaging with the socio-cultural context influencing their practice and role is crucial in that respect, so that they can effectively become the agents of change that a transformative sustainability education calls for (Freire, 2005).

The way forward: the educator as political actor

It is now clear that sustainability is a complex concept and can be used ambiguously. It is also embedded in a worldview that serves a global agenda. Education for sustainability is thus in danger of losing its meaning to serve these global agendas,

including the interests of neoliberal international organizations, which have become the framework within which educators must negotiate their work. The dependency of educators on the ground to these agendas weakens and limit the scope of their work with environmental education (Jickling & Wals, 2008; Koprina, 2012).

The bias posed by operating within a specific worldview that is not reflected upon is a form of indoctrination where what to think becomes more important than how to think. Becoming aware of this bias may make encounters between multiple and disparate voices, essential to a reappropriation of the meaning of education for sustainability, possible (Jickling & Wals, 2008; Koprina & Cherniak, 2016). However, if the plurality of ethical perspectives is often encouraged, it can become paralyzing if it comes to serve relativistic positions that prioritize pluralism at the expense of pro-environmental attitudes (Koprina & Cherniak, 2016). Rather, a critical environmental education that advocates for the environment would be oriented “towards both human and more-than human interests, simultaneously, and not with one subordinated to the other” (Koprina & Cherniak, 2016, p. 836). This could bridge the gap between anthropocentric and eco-centric positions, and, by redefining humans’ ways of being in the world, education for sustainability could then become truly transformative.

Furthermore, Indigenous worldviews and modes of living should be explicitly acknowledged and made space for in educational practices. This would contribute to decolonize the discourse on sustainability, and to awaken practitioners and learners in the West to the possibility of thinking and acting “outside the box” of the totalizing epistemologies and ontologies dictated by the hegemonic capitalist model (Williams, 2018). As an Indigenous and peasant movement, the Zapatista struggle for territory, land, and community, is testimony that the notion of place, belonging and community are crucial to a strong sustainability. An education for sustainability should then seek to ignite in both teachers and learners a deep sense of interpersonal connection with place, fostering an engagement, both affective and cognitive, with the material and cultural contexts and realities as well as the communities, constituting the place they are situated in (Lange, 2018). This implies a decolonizing process whereby sustainability education seeks to expand horizons, make space for multiplicity and question one’s own assumptions, by listening to and learn from indigenous groups without disconnecting their practices from the cosmovision and cultural context they are embedded in. (Harmin et al., 2017).

Although the Zapatistas are an inspiration for many activist groups around the globe and are engaged in a vast network of solidarity, they do not seek to “Zapatize” the world. Rather, they call for people to engage with their own socio-cultural realities in order to develop modes of resistance that are locally relevant (Olesen, 2004).

In the face of a neoliberalism, that favors technical questions at the expense of critical ones, and “seeks to de-politicise life” (Moss, 2007, p. 8), a transformative education requires the critical engagement of educators—citizens—in matters concerning sustainability (Waas et al., 2011). This means that for education to enact its transformative functions, space must be found—or taken—for educators to reclaim their role as citizens, capable of autonomous thinking, and of acting as democratic

agents of change. If the interest for representative democracy is decreasing in the West, engagement in alternative forms of democratic politics such as civil society initiatives and activist organizations is growing. This growing interest could inspire to think of other spaces, such as the school, as political spaces. This implies looking at education institutions as places for the collective reflection and action of citizens, where community, and bridges between what happens within the schools' walls and on the other side of them, are built (Moss, 2007).

Conclusion

This article has aimed at describing, contrasting, and discussing the contributions of different worldviews to the debate on sustainability and more specifically to education for sustainability. On the one side, mainstream Western worldview underpins the discourse on sustainable development exported globally. It frames the relationship between humans and nature as a utilitarian one and has led to the present environmental crisis. On the other side, Indigenous worldviews are presented in their main traits as eco-centric, based on principles of interconnectedness and reciprocity between humans and more-than-humans. They represent a challenge to the Western capitalist ideology, which has become so mainstream that it is taken for granted as the only possible way to understand and relate to the natural world. As Berkes (1999) argues, "Perhaps the most fundamental lesson of traditional ecological knowledge is that worldviews and beliefs do matter" (Berkes, 1999, p. 163). Critical reflection on the discourses and values that underpin practices are thus fundamental to an education for sustainability that seeks to be both transformative and decolonizing. These can become meeting points where learning not only *about*, but first and foremost *with* other worldviews can spark action and change. For that purpose, the development of attitudes and values within the educational institution should be paired with an engagement of the adults in charge with the implicit and explicit discourses that their practices are a part of, as well as concrete attempts to organize in political grass-root initiatives that can strengthen the democratic capabilities of local communities. This means that an education for sustainability that is truly transformative should make space for the contestation of hegemonic worldviews when they do not make the fulfillment of values and practices that are consistent with sustainability possible. The Zapatistas of Mexico remind us that educating is a political act that require of educators to engage politically with societal issues, take a stand and challenge what is taken for granted, as citizens who take ecology, democracy and action—Life—to heart.

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