Through the promotion of South-South intellectual and philosophical dialogue, UNESCO seeks to encourage the development of diverse views by supporting and promoting the philosophical traditions of the metaphorical “South”, traditions which are still little known. What better way to do this than by providing sound educational resources aimed at teaching young people about the diversity of philosophical thought?

This manual, produced with the support of Saudi Arabia, is an innovative and high quality tool for young people in secondary and higher education and in non-formal education. The manual not only allows the discovery of philosophical texts from Africa, the Arab region, Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean, but also promotes their full understanding through a critical apparatus which enables easily adapted educational use.

As well as being informative, the manual provides a comparative reading of texts with a view to broad and diverse reflection on the key questions which span world philosophy.
Philosophy Manual

A South-South Perspective

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ENVIRONMENT AND NATURE

ECO-PHILOSOPHY OF LIBERATION, ACCORDING TO LEONARDO BOFF

INTRODUCTION

Leonardo Boff was born in Concordia, southern Brazil on 14 December 1938. He was a liberation theologian and philosopher and a key figure in the development of Latin American environmental thinking (thanks to his original Franciscan concepts and his hard work to disseminate environmental issues and proposals to resolve them). His work was based on three sources that are woven throughout his thinking and life, and that have pedagogical value for our modern society. First, his life experiences in Brazil were as a member of a family of Italian immigrants, with parents who taught him to live with members of indigenous, mulatto and black communities (who were often marginalized by other European immigrants). Boff clearly remembers the virtue of accepting differences and sitting together at school and around the table. This source teaches us the value of non-discrimination and openness to the other. Boff’s second source was entering the seminary at the age of 11, where his education was strongly influenced by the Franciscan spirit of fraternity, love of nature, sensitivity towards the poor, and simplicity. Boff’s perspective reconnected the religious experience (and more generally the experience of everyday life) with nature. Feeling the trees, birds, water and roots where we live shows us how to overcome the duality between human beings and other beings with whom we share the planet. The third source was his interdisciplinary training integrating the theory and practice of philosophy, theology and science. During his theology doctorate in Munich, he attended classes by Werner Heisenberg, who was one of the founders of quantum physics. At the same time, he was one of the creators of Liberation Theology with Latin American and Spanish priests in 1968. This type of integration makes it possible to link the human with nature and the transcendental, beauty with the pain of hunger and poverty that we face in the global crisis that is bio-cultural as well as environmental. Boff’s book *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm* (English version published in 1995) is a reference point for a holistic and eco-social approach to environmental ethics.
All modern societies across the world are structured on the axis of economy. But economy in its modern sense has lost its original significance: the administration of the fair and modest means necessary for life and well-being. Rational application of scant income is the central activity of most households in the Third World. That is economy in the true sense of the term. But that is not the kind of economics practiced by the institutional economists, who serve a very different. … At the end of each year the country has to show that there has been growth over the previous year. This imperative has given rise to the notion of unlimited growth that, like some incubus, has come to dominate society as a whole for some five hundred years. … We lack a fundamental critique of a model of society that would promote a sustainable kind of ecological development.”

“It is also necessary to plan and introduce an ecologically sustainable form of development adapted to regional ecosystems (for example, the natural resource policy of Chico Mendes, which was appropriate to the Amazonian ecosystem). We do indeed find the ruling metaphor of ‘sustainable development’ in official documents (sustainable development was defined by the UN Brundtland Commission in 1987 as ‘that development which takes into account present needs without compromising the possibility of future generations satisfying their own needs’). In the last analysis, however, it is always development itself that counts, even at the cost of ecological disorder. When a conflict arises between development and ecology, the decision is usually taken in favor of development at the costs of ecology. It would seem that capitalist greed is incompatible with the conservation of nature. … The pharaonic projects of Henry Ford for rubber exploitation in Amazonia in 1927, and, fifty years later, those of Daniel Ludwig for cellulose and timber in Jari, and, finally, the Volkswagen projects of the 1970s, resulted in vast failures, because they did not take any account whatsoever of the ecological question. All this has been at the expense of two million hectares of forest, in the case of the Jari project; and 144,000 hectares destroyed in the case of Volkswagen in order to feed forty-six thousand head of cattle (an incredible thirty thousand square meters devoted to each head). The gigantic nature of such projects reveals the irrationality of the development model being followed and the need to replace it with a more holistic vision that also takes the ecological aspect into account.”

“A poet of long ago who experienced this mysticism of the ubiquitous Spirit put it very well when he wrote that the Spirit sleeps in stone, dreams in flowers, awakens in animals, knows he is awake in men, and feels awake in women. This is a sympathetic intuition of the cosmic ubiquity of the Spirit, as testified to by so many mystics of various cultures, such as the Sioux Indians of North America, the Bororos of Brazil, and a number of Eastern Zen masters. The Fathers of the Latin and Greek Church of the fourth and fifth centuries, especially Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, St. Basil and St. Peter Damian, express in various ways the Spiritus ubique diffuses (the universally diffused Spirit).”
As shown in the passage from *Ecology and Liberation*, Leonardo Boff felt that environmental thought was part of an eco-philosophy of liberation with a twofold task. The first part of the task would be a *de-constructive movement to be free of the myth of unlimited development*, in which society must be structured around economic growth. This myth involves oppression of most human beings and an extermination of most beings with whom we share the planet. It also implies a lower standard of living by reducing human existence to a one-dimensional economistic phenomenon. Being free of this myth enables a *re-constructive movement to recover the diversity of human and ecological existence* and the original sense of economy. Boff underlines that economics is not the unlimited accumulation of capital, but rather the sensible administration of scant resources. This meaning is closer to the origins of modern ecological sciences, metaphorically called “the economy of nature” by Carlos Linneo in the seventeenth century. Furthermore, eco-nomy and eco-logy share the same Greek root *oikos* (meaning home). One refers to laws (*nomos*) regulating administration, while the other refers to the study (*logia*) of the oikos (or home). In the twenty-first century, the planet is our shared home. Boff links together economics and ecology for sensible management.

Boff does not simply use abstract philosophy to interweave economics and ecology on a purely conceptual level, but rather does so mainly through the practice of solidarity, resistance and the protection of the poor and marginalized. For instance, he refers to Francisco Alves “Chico” Mendes, who in 1985 created and implemented the concept of extractive reserves to protect the Amazon rainforest and the rights of rubber-collecting communities to practise sustainable use. Under the leadership of Chico Mendes, Amazonian rubber collectors organized themselves as the Union of Rural Workers of Xapuri to fight against deforestation caused by “pharaonic” projects. The most infamous result of the movement was the murder of Mendes in 1988. In recognition of the value of his life and ideas, in 2007 when Boff was an adviser to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s Brazilian Government, the country’s Ministry for the Environment created the Chico Mendes Institute for the Conservation of Biodiversity (which now manages areas protected by the federal government). Boff supported many grassroots movements associated with churches, professional associations and international organizations demanding a fairer distribution of land ownership and economically and environmentally sustainable practices. Examples include the “Landless Rural Workers’ Movement” (MST) in southern Brazil and “Patagonia without Dams” in southern Chile.

Although the selected examples are from South America, there are similar cases in other world regions, as the development model underlying them has been globalized. In this context, Boff’s eco-philosophy of liberation is relevant to twenty-first century philosophical thinking for at least two reasons. First, it re-establishes the philosophical unity of theoretical and practical knowledge to tackle the global scale from and towards local histories and reality. Second, it places environmental issues at the heart of our century’s challenges, while also maintaining a transcendent sense of the natural world that precedes and succeeds the human species.
We human beings belong to the environment. The environment does not belong to us, but rather we live in community with the other beings sharing life (as stated in the third selected text). Boff’s proposed spirituality is rooted in the biophysical world, which is understood and valued by current and ancestral Amerindian, Zen Buddhist and other forms of knowledge. Boff therefore calls for ethics not to be anthropocentric (as is the case in modern society), but rather for it to consider the diversity of all life forms. At the same time, Boff calls for ecological ethics that are not Eurocentric, but rather multi- and inter-cultural. For the young generations of the twenty-first century, this invitation is an opportunity to cultivate ethics in favour of life in all its biological and cultural diversity, as well as a responsibility to forge a fairer society that avoids oppression for most life (human and non-human) forms and encourages a bio-culturally diverse planet.

**QUESTIONS**

1. What is the meaning of the link between economy and ecology proposed by Boff? What links between economy and ecology are you aware of in your region’s ancestral cultures?

2. Do you think that teaching on the environment in your region and other regions includes enough about the diversity of world views and ecological values? Explain your answer using at least three examples.

3. According to Boff’s texts, who are the causes of the environmental crisis and who are the main victims? Do you think that Boff’s analysis of the cases in the Amazon (in the selections) is relevant for your region? Would you expect to reach similar or different conclusions? Base your reply on an example that details the agents and processes that caused a socio-ecological problem underway in a place or region of your continent and the main (human and non-human) victims.

4. What is the meaning of the notion of spirit for Leonardo Boff?

**PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVITIES**

1. As a team, design and implement research about the ecological world views of several of your region’s sociocultural groups. Produce a presentation on these ancestral and modern world views, as well as each one’s implications for ecological ethics.

2. Together with your classmates, supplement the above research by preparing a photographic presentation on: (a) the links between habitats (within and outside cities) and the lifestyles associated with these habitats, and (b) the socio-ecological problems faced by these groups today, including the main causes and victims of the problems. Analyse the implications of: (a) the links between habitats and lifestyle for ecological ethics, and (b) the identification of the causes and victims of socio-ecological problems for social and environmental justice.