

Environment Across Cultures – an Introduction

Eckart Ehlers

Environment and environmental issues are high on the agenda of an enlightened and engaged public – and consequently on that of a seemingly worried international community of policy-makers. The shrinking of time and space, inherent concomitant of the globalization process, has caused new and unprecedented common concerns about the present state and past as well as future developments of our globe. If we accept the somewhat simplistic approach according to which everything that happens on a local scale has global impacts and – vice versa – that everything happening on a global scale will cause local consequences, then not only the term “environment”, but even more so the topic “environment across cultures” gains momentum. We begin to understand that our Western European perception and meaning of the term “environment” may be entirely different from that in Africa or Asia. But we begin to materialize that environmental changes anywhere in the world will cause consequences in other parts of our globe: global environmental degradation in Africa, overpopulation and urbanization in Asia, depletion of the ozone layer and increases of America’s or Europe’s CO₂-emissions and the loss of Amazonia’s biodiversity are no longer merely regional events. On the contrary, all of them have global consequences. Their effects are felt in terms of environmental refugees, in the collapse of terrestrial ecosystems and food shortages, in global warming and sea-level rise, in a global increase of natural hazards and other environmental changes on a world-wide scale.

The shrinking of time and space is a phenomenon that – for many people unnoticed and unnoticeable – has encroached on all of us. It is of physical concern to all societies of our globe, at the same time, however, it has also created new and more or less uniform world views. Nevertheless and contradictory as it may seem: global environmental change also widens the gap between North and South, between poor and rich as a result of which political confrontations, cultural disruptions, religious clashes and/or civilizatory conflicts are gaining momentum. Our shrinking globe experiences new frictions which unload themselves in the revival of historic memories, the re-emergence of forgotten and intermediately buried belief systems and the powerful renaissance of local or regional traditions, norms and values. Globalization coincides with new fragmentation.

In view of the undoubted importance of environmental themes and topics not only in present political contexts, but also – and maybe: even more so! – in our average daily lives, it may be appropriate to shed some light on more recent academic and intellectual discussions of the issues “environment” and “environmental across cultures”. While such an attempt must be selective and to a certain degree arbitrary, it nevertheless may be well suited to put intention and contents of the following publication into perspective.

From a geographical perspective (E. E. is geographer), environment and environmentalism have a long and important history. In late 19th century, the term “envi-

ronmentalism” became synonymous for a whole school of geography, arguing that “man is a product of the earth’s surface” and that she (the earth!) “has entered into his bone and tissue, into his mind and soul” (E. Ch. Semple 1911, p. 1). This approach most strongly represented by the predominantly American school of environmental determinism (cf. also Huntington 1915), is an early and somewhat simple example of an intellectual interpretation of the relationships between nature and societies. It was mainly due to French geography, esp. to Vidal de la Blache (1911) that concepts of creative adjustments of societies to their specific natural environments gained importance. The discovery of different cultures and “genres de vie” and the fact that societies have – in line with their social organization, political culture and/or scientific and technological know-how – different possibilities to cope with their specific environments, marked a major breakthrough in the analysis of nature-society-interactions (cf. Bennett-Chorley 1978; O’Riordan 1981 and others).

It was especially C. C. Glacken (1967) who, in his famous study “Traces on the Rhodian Shore. Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century“, analyzed the development and extremely versatile interpretations of people, the habitable earth and their relationship to it. Glacken’s intentions become apparent in those three basic questions that are at the bottom of his study:

- Is the earth, which is obviously a fit environment for man and other organic life, a purposefully made creation?
- Have its climates, its relief, the configuration of its continents influenced the moral and social nature of individuals, and have they had an influence in molding the character and nature of human culture?
- In his long tenure of the earth, in what manner has man changed it from its hypothetical pristine condition?

Glacken’s profound and comprehensive analysis of and answers to these questions are – as the subtitle of the book suggests – exclusively focussed on Western thoughts and perceptions. And they end at the eve of a new era between mankind and their environments: the Industrial Revolution. Although covering a wide range of philosophical argumentations and theological interpretations and going far beyond narrow disciplinary boundaries, the book remains an analysis of *Western* thoughts about environment as a stage of the interrelationships between nature and human culture. And it makes impressively clear, how and to what extent European thinking has shaped environmental thinking and interpretations. Glacken’s conclusions according to which three European-occidental ideas have been prevailing in one or another form for the 2300-year period under consideration sounds convincing: “The design argument explaining the nature of earthly environment really looked upward to the creativity and activity of God; the idea of environmental influence, to the force and strength of natural conditions; the idea of man as a modifier of nature, to the creativity and activity of man“ (Glacken 1967, p. 713). Whatever interpretation we accept or prefer, Glacken’s focus is on the physical environment.

As indicated earlier, we are aware by now that environment is more than the physical setting around us. Equally important is the emotional side. And it is in this context that the growing concerns of a world-wide public on the state of our Planet Earth, its increasing vulnerability and fragility and the role and responsibilities of its