



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Heyd, Thomas. "Themes in Latin American Environmental Ethics: Community, Resistance and Autonomy."  
*Environmental Values* 13, no. 2, (2004): 223-242.  
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5907>

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# Themes in Latin American Environmental Ethics: Community, Resistance and Autonomy

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to answer the question how environmental ethics is approached in Latin America. I begin by discussing a suitable method for interpreting the question of whether there is a culturally based ethics, given that one may focus either on theory or on actually existing moral practices. Next, I consider some of the possible sources of Latin America's distinctiveness, namely its professional, cultural, and economic-historical particularities, followed by a discussion of the practice and theory of environmental ethics extant in the area. I claim that there is a concrete environmental ethics in Latin America, which can be described by the notions of community, resistance and autonomy, and suggest that this concrete ethic may be assessed both from a culture-internal and from a culture-external point of view. I close by proposing that Latin American environmental ethics may provide illuminating models for appropriate ways of acting in hybrid communities made up of human beings *and* nature.

## KEY WORDS

Ethics, environmental, Latin America

## INTRODUCTION

Latin America has an immense geographical extension, ranging over two hemispheres, with Spanish and Portuguese primarily spoken but also French, Dutch, English, and countless indigenous languages. One certainly should not expect uniformity in any respect from such a heterogeneous region. Nonetheless, the prevalence of Iberian languages, and the common foundation of Latin American cultures in their mostly Hispanic and Portuguese colonial heritages,

*Environmental Values* 13 (2004): 223–42

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make it tempting to suppose that the area may have some common, and also distinctive, approaches to practical and intellectual matters.

Given that since the 1970s there has been a worldwide and growing concern for the state of the natural environment, and that the U.N. World Summit on Development and Environment was held in Rio, Brazil, in 1992, we may ask how environmental ethics is approached in Latin America. More concretely, we may ask some of the following questions.

Is there a distinctive Latin American environmental ethics?

If yes, what are its specificities and what are the roots of its differences?

Is it an ethic that is well grounded?

What can we learn from it, or what can it contribute to environmental ethics as it has developed outside Latin America?

In this paper I provide some guideposts intended to help us answer these questions. I begin by discussing some issues regarding the method for interpreting the question of whether there is a culturally based ethics, considering some of the possible sources of Latin America's distinctiveness in this area. In the second section I illuminate the issue from the perspective of extant practice and theory. In the third section I face the question of whether environmental practice and reflection, which I have identified as characteristic of Latin America, may indicate the existence of a concrete (particular, culturally specific) environmental ethics, and how that ethics may be justified. I close by proposing that the themes in Latin American environmental ethics identified can provide us with a significant, alternative perspective on environmental philosophy.

## I. METHOD AND DISTINCTIVENESS

### *Method*

The question regarding the existence of a specific Latin American environmental ethics might be answered in two ways. On the one hand, it may be seen as a question regarding the existence of theories of environmental ethics developed in Latin America, perhaps directed toward the specificities of the environmental conditions in the region. On the other hand, it may be seen as a question concerning the existence of a particular moral sensibility in Latin America touching on environmental matters. For both ways of reading the question there is a positive answer, and both ways of understanding the question, in fact, are reasonable.<sup>1</sup>

As Aldo Leopold suggested in his 'Land Ethic', we should not expect anything as important as an ethic to come to us ready-made.<sup>2</sup> An ethic or a morality may be understood as a form of living which recognises that certain entities in our world have a distinctive value, which, in turn, demands certain appropriate attitudes and ways of acting. An ethic, moreover, is the result and expression

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of certain experiences, of the development of particular relationships, and of the dialectic resulting from simultaneous commitment to, and critique of, one's community's (at least tacitly) agreed-upon values.

Furthermore, as Anthony Weston has remarked, a theory of ethics with regard to the *environment* presupposes a developed *practice*.<sup>3</sup> As I will point out below, conditions in Latin America are such that particular, distinctive environmental practices, which express a certain environmental ethic or morality, have developed there.

No doubt, the more common way of understanding the question of whether there is a distinctive Latin American environmental ethics might be in terms of the existence of *theories* of ethics, originating in this cultural area, which discuss the foundations or justifications of moralities dealing with human action affecting the environment; metaethical questions regarding the sense that we should give the terms used in those theories; and so on.<sup>4</sup> In Latin America reflection on human relations with the natural environment is not often pursued under the rubric of 'environmental ethics'. Nonetheless, there are significant theoretical discussions of Latin America's environmental morality or ethic from the point of view of political economy, ethnoecology, social ecology, etc., as I will show below.

*Distinctiveness*

Can we expect anything distinctive about Latin American environmental ethics, especially today, as the globalisation of cultures progresses along with the globalisation of the market place? Three factors seem relevant when we try to formulate an answer to this question: the professional, the cultural, and the economic-historical situation. Most of our attention will be placed upon the third factor.

First, as already noted, in Latin America environmental ethics, perhaps more than elsewhere, is only *partially professionalised* as such, and many contributions to the field come from individuals who, strictly speaking, work outside the academic fields of ethics and philosophy. Hence, the development of environmental ethics is correspondingly diverse, even if there is increasing communication (both across disciplines and across geographical boundaries) among those that address this subject area. Moreover, the views of those who are in fact professionals in ethics are also diverse, since, in addition to the Anglo-American tradition, the German, the French, the Spanish, and the originary philosophy which has developed in Latin America since colonisation, partially founded in Catholic theology, Marxist theory, scholasticism, etc., are also contributory to the perspectives held.<sup>5</sup>

Second, insofar as they are rooted in Latin America, certain typical characteristics of the area's *cultures* differentiate environmental ethics from its counterparts in mainstream 'Northern' cultures.<sup>6</sup> Principally we may consider the

historical links of Latin Americans with the Iberian cultures, the emphasis on the value of personal relationships with family and community, the prevalence of the Catholic faith, and the continued survival and partial integration of native, indigenous cultures. These factors point toward an orientation to ethics (and by implication to environmental ethics) which is far less individualistic and much more community-oriented than its Northern counterpart.

Third, economic-historical conditions in the Americas largely determine a distinctive environmental practice. European colonisation of Latin America had a different tenor from that in other places, such as in North America, since in Latin America the primary interest of the colonisers lay in the exploitation of the area's mineral resources (particularly gold and silver), and only secondarily in its occupation with colonists. Today economic and geographical conditions in Latin America are still significantly different from those in many other areas of the world, thereby co-determining environmental ethics and attitudes. We may consider the following three facets of those conditions.

### *1. The expropriation of indigenous peoples' lands*

In Latin America the areas that are valuable to mining and forestry enterprises are frequently coterminous with the territories of traditional owners (indigenous *campesino* and Native peoples). Consequently their exploitation, consequent to expropriation, is effective in generating a greater and more pointed awareness of the interdependency between human beings and nature than is common in areas of the world where ownership of natural areas has long been (rightly or wrongly) assigned to the State.

In the past the expropriation of indigenous peoples' lands has come about for diverse reasons, including the settling of colonists, as in Patagonia in the late nineteenth century (after the extermination by the Argentinean army of most Native people in the *Guerra del Desierto* or Desert War). Today the expropriation of indigenous peoples' productive land may be effected through the maneuvers of large enterprises, or even through the creation of natural parks by the state.

Even if, on the whole, the exploitation of Latin America's natural wealth is still primarily driven by interests from outside the region, it is increasingly apparent that this process is facilitated by local elites. Analyst David Barkin has noted that, for the last half century, 'local corporate control over productive and social processes' have contributed to the present dismal social-economic conditions of indigenous and *campesino* people, and as a result environmental justice and equity have become significant issues.<sup>7</sup> Insofar as the expropriation and exploitation of the natural environment affect indigenous peoples' very livelihoods, these sorts of actions generate considerable resistance to outsider interventions.

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*2. The introduction of global market forces into traditional rural communities*

Even in remote regions of Latin America the global market system is insinuating itself into important aspects of people's lives. Through international trade agreements, such as NAFTA, prices for basic foodstuffs such as maize may become undermined through the influx of subsidised grains, and traditional forms of agricultural production become labelled as 'inefficient'. As a consequence the state and other economic actors propose that traditional forms of production be replaced with monocultures implicating the use of biocides.

Insofar as many rural communities in Latin America have been largely self-sufficient in the generation of basic goods (such as foodstuffs), this introduction by external actors of global market factors has been perceived as a new form of colonialism. As a result people increasingly develop defensive strategies 'for organising peoples, protecting resources, and framing struggles' in order to defend their traditional ways of living *along with* the environments that make those forms of life possible. In the process they offer alternatives, which go beyond the reactionary defence of the traditional, but constitute creative experiments aimed at the protection of the foundations of their societies and environments.<sup>8</sup>

*3. Industrialisation with few safeguards/urbanisation without planning*

Industrialisation in Latin America has brought about similar problems as have been observed in other parts of the world with the difference that, given the relatively limited power of civil society in Latin America, contamination of air, water and earth has proceeded at a much more significant rate and intensity. Mitigation measures, furthermore, are slow to come into effect due to the lack of enforcement powers by policing bodies. These factors also contribute to the development of environmental justice movements.

Moreover, because of a delay in the provision of the needed infrastructure for the greatly increased urban populations, people often suffer from inadequate provision of water, electricity, or green spaces, and are subject to hazardous environmental conditions, such as high levels of dust and geologically insecure siting of their housing. These factors contribute to social ecology movements that demand greater attention to the environments in which human populations live.

The facets of the economic and geo-political conditions discussed indicate that there are important, specifiable sectors of Latin American society that have particular concerns regarding degradations of the natural environment: indigenous people, rural agricultural populations, and urban populations, especially those located in industrialised areas. Together they comprise a significant proportion of Latin American populations.

Even if the conditions that characterise Latin America are not strictly speaking unique, their particular combination with the cultural specificity of

Latin American thought and life, alluded to above, is. Furthermore, given the diversity of professional approaches to environmental ethics, these conditions point toward a distinctive environmental practice and theory.

## II. PRACTICE AND THEORY

In this paper it is not possible to be comprehensive, much less exhaustive, in the description of the practice and theory constituting environmental ethics in Latin America. Here I shall provide a few outstanding cases illustrating the distinctive environmental practice or ethic that I perceive characterises Latin America, followed by some of the key theoretical discussions that touch on that practice and ethic. I begin with a description of the environmental ethic of the Native people called Mapuche ('People of their land'), who live in the border region between Chile and Argentina, followed by brief accounts of the environmental practices of the extractivists (individuals who sustainably harvest diverse natural products found in the forest) of the Amazonian region of Brazil, and of the *campesinos* and Native people of Mexico.

### *Practice*

The Mapuche, like people from many small-scale societies that traditionally have directly depended on their natural environment for survival, exhibit a remarkable interweaving in their beliefs of the roles of human beings and nature. Historically they suffered from the conflict with the Spanish and subsequently, on both sides of the border, from conquest by respective government troops.<sup>9</sup> Although in more recent times some communities were granted, within drastically reduced boundaries, a certain degree of autonomy on their traditional lands, they have become subject to new threats to their integrity.

In Argentina they have had to suffer, among other things, from the incursions into their land, air and water sources of the activities of the petroleum industries, with consequent health problems and loss of access to important parts of their territories. In Chile their steep mountainous regions have been subjected to European settlement, and most recently, to industrial forestry practices brought in by transnational companies, which through clear felling deprive them of the traditional forest cover and its medicinal plants, and create hazards due to erosion.<sup>10</sup> Both in Argentina and in Chile the Mapuche have proudly declared their intention to resist the various incursions into their communities.<sup>11</sup>

The Mapuche explain that insults to their lands are insults to them because their community encompasses both human and non-human parts of the land. For the Mapuche human beings are just one element among many others in the universe *wajmapu* in which everything is finely balanced and interrelated with

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every other thing, including the animals, spirits, plants, waters, and landscapes.<sup>12</sup> They state that

in agreement with the values acquired culturally it is of utmost importance to continue with deep respect and understanding of [Mapuche] culture, thinking, world vision and organisation. Mountain, forest, lakes, high lands, and ... the river are [Mapuche's] lived-in landscape, the place where they were born and where they were raised. The Mapuche have always cared in a special way for the elements and forces or *newenes* of the natural world that surrounds them, the Itrofil Mongem ['all the lives',<sup>13</sup>], and have always given access to all the human beings that wish to enjoy the place as long as they respect the environment for which, as original inhabitants, [the Mapuche] act as 'natural auditors'.<sup>14</sup>

Indigenous populations and extractivists who live in Brazil's Amazonian region have had to contend not only with large corporate interests, intent on clear felling their lands and setting up cattle ranches, and the establishment of dam and mining projects, but also, perhaps paradoxically, with government departments set on creating new parks. The creation of parks, intended for the protection of biological diversity, has followed a model conceived in North America, which called for the exclusion of human inhabitants for the protection of the purity of the natural environment enclosed in their boundaries.<sup>15</sup>

In the Amazonian region (and in other regions like it), apparently untouched 'wild' areas have been inhabited since long before European colonisation, and indigenous and extractivist inhabitants practice a sustainable kind of use of rivers and forests. The creation of parks has often had serious repercussions for these people who, in the process, are displaced from their homelands. The land for them, as for the Mapuche, is part of their communities. Consequently they resist outside incursions through social environmental movements, which have been dubbed 'social ecologism'.<sup>16</sup>

Rubber-tappers, artisanal fishers, and indigenous people have joined together in organisations which demand that they not be denied access to their traditional territories. In some places they have gone as far as to establish their own 'zoning' practices, requiring differential use of the lakes in their region.<sup>17</sup> Their aim is to protect their communities, which they perceive as intertwined with their natural environments, so as to retain their physical self-sufficiency and cultural autonomy. This would likely be threatened if they were forcibly moved outside their traditional territories.

The situation is comparable with respect to diverse groups in Mexico. Situated in an area denuded of tropical forests in the state of Veracruz, where land has been turned over to pasture and monocultures, the Totonac people, for example, have provided researchers with a persuasive model of sustainability.<sup>18</sup> Recently the Totonac have become known for a significant cultural revival, which has led to a strong reaffirmation of traditional values, all the while accompanied by the adoption of modern organising strategies applied in order to achieve strengthened



autodetermination for their community in the face of powerful integrative, state policies (aimed at depriving Native people of visibility as such).<sup>19</sup>

While achieving food and energy self-sufficiency, and significant incomes, their multiple use approach to land allows for the flourishing and use of 355 diverse species of plants, animals and mushrooms.<sup>20</sup> This shows that their traditional practices, supported by the will to resist new industrial approaches to land use (while, however, ready to adopt new techniques of social action), and a commitment to the autonomy of their community, can lead to a flourishing of both the human and the environmental parts of the community.

The implicit environmental ethic found in Totonac traditional practices is not an isolated case. This story is repeated many times over among rural communities in Latin America. Especially impressive is the case of the Chimalapas, who, located in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Mexico), fight against powerful outside logging interests to maintain the last tropical forest of North America outside of the Maya territory. In fighting for the recognition of their own ecological reserve they have the double aim of preserving the biological diversity and ecological stability of the area, as well as protecting their rightful ownership of their land.

By controlling this area, and selectively assigning some portions of it to preservation and other portions for agricultural and communal, sustainable logging practices, they hope to guarantee the continuation of their traditional ways of life.<sup>21</sup> Also relevant is the environmental practice of urban groups in various countries in Latin America who, in the face of neglect by the responsible authorities, take the initiative to plant trees and establish green spaces on their own.

### *Theory*

Theoretical discussion of environmental ethics among diversely situated Latin American thinkers is naturally various and may focus on themes well known in Northern contexts, such as individual responsibility in the face of global warming, the trouble with consumerism and excessive hedonism, or the question of whether the natural environment is being ruined because of exacerbated individualism, anthropocentrism, or industrialism.<sup>22</sup> Latin American theorists, such as Antonio Elizalde Hevia or Fernando Mires, are quite aware that, while their part of the Americas is one of the richest areas in the world in terms of biodiversity, it is also one of the most threatened. To address this problem they may focus on explanatory paradigms common in Northern cultures.<sup>23</sup>

There are also theoretical discussions about practices of the sort noted above, which concern the *joint* flourishing of human beings and their environments. Those discussions are relevant for an understanding of the distinctive environmental ethics of Latin America, even if those practices are only tacitly acknowledged as related to ethics. This is because they may clarify the significance of those practices for alternative forms of life which deliberately take the natural en-

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vironment into consideration. Once again I do not claim to be comprehensive but rather seek to provide a sample of relevant perspectives.

Most striking is the development of a social ecology propounded as a properly Latin American perspective on the problems concerning the natural environment. The stated aim of social ecology, as conceived by Eduardo Gudynas and Graciela Evia, is to bring together the natural and the human sciences and, in the process, arrive at an understanding of the possibilities of *coexistence of human activity and natural diversity* in their complementarity. To reach this understanding Gudynas and Evia propose that we take note of the seeds present in the culture developed by European peoples and in that of the indigenous Latin American cultures.<sup>24</sup>

They point out, though, that it is not a matter of 'returning to an agro-pastoralist society', a mythical view of an ideal life that neither has theoretical justification nor support in the lives of actually existing indigenous people. Rather, they suggest that the task is finding a way in which the great majority of people may 're-encounter nature, respecting it, [while] retaining everything positive that our present culture has, but projecting our relation with nature toward the future in a new sense'.<sup>25</sup>

This re-encounter with nature is further defined by Roberto P. Guimarães, who points out that the environmentalism of the last fifty years is a form of 'resistance to the modernity "of consumerism"' analogous to, and a follow-up to, the resistance offered at an earlier time by socialism to "'industrial" modernity'. He points out that these forms of resistance can only be effective if they identify the particular forms of *ethics* that they represent.<sup>26</sup> In this sense Guimarães takes note that 'the situations of environmental degradation reveal nothing but the *social and political inequities* ... as well as structural distortions of the economy...'.<sup>27</sup> That is, environmental problems, from this perspective, are problems of *justice*. They are not to be conceived merely in terms of the dichotomy between humans and nature that has generally that has generally dominated discussion in North American environmental ethics.

Furthermore, Guimarães argues that it is not a question of joining or not joining in the processes of modernisation, which at the present time are expressed through the phenomenon of globalisation, but, rather, of deciding '*which sort of insertion [into the globalised economy] is convenient to us, which sort of insertion allows us to take control of growth on a national level, and which sort of insertion allows us to maintain our cultural identity, social cohesion and environmental integrity in our countries*'.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, with regard to the level of awareness regarding the degradation of the natural environment, Felipe Mansilla argues that the situation in Latin America has improved considerably in the last years, but that it has to contend with 'simplistic [neoliberal] ideologies' which still prevail in most sectors of society.<sup>29</sup> Relying on Hans Jonas' concept of an ethic of precautionary responsibility, and keeping in mind the limitations of the Earth's resources, he argues for

the importance of a focus on *quality* in development, which should be directed toward the needs of the weaker sectors of society.<sup>30</sup> By drawing attention to the intersection of social and environmental factors he thereby echoes Gudynas, Evia and Guimarães' concern for human beings in dialogue with, and *dependent on*, the natural environment.

In addition, speaking from the perspective of ethnoecology, Victor M. Toledo points out that 'in Mexico, as in the rest of the world, rural communities are permanently under siege by the destructive forces of a 'modernising development' (based on the destruction of nature and of the community and the consecration of the individualist interest)...'.<sup>31</sup> In his description of principles that may lead to sustainable development in *campesino* and indigenous communities Toledo highlights the essential role of 'the endogenous process through which a *community takes (or recovers) the control* over the processes that determine and affect it'.<sup>32</sup> Among the nine principles that the communities apply to maintain sustainability he includes diversity, *autosufficiency*, the integration of practices with landscape units and natural cycles, and *equity and economic justice*. Toledo's analysis supports the view that the unit threatened by unsustainable practices is the community composed of human beings *and* their environment, and not just a separable entity called the natural environment, and that a strategy of resistance to external domination, and an innovative approach aimed at autonomy or autosufficiency, are necessary.

In his book *Green Production* Enrique Leff argues that '[t]he objective of ecodevelopment, defined as a strategy for the production and application of knowledges and techniques necessary for the sustainable management of particular ecosystems, is a social process *inserted within the struggles of each community* for the appropriation of their natural resources and their social wealth'.<sup>33</sup> In other words, development that is appropriate to the given condition of the natural environment is conceived as dependent, not on some abstract kind of knowledge or technology, but on knowledge and techniques *which are held and controlled by the communities affected*.

In agreement with Leff and Toledo, David Barkin shows that in the rural areas of Mexico biodiversity and sustainability of the natural environment are directly dependent on the degree of autonomy of communities of indigenous people and other *campesinos*. He argues that 'it may be possible and necessary to promote a new form of local autonomy: a social structure that allows people to rebuild their rural societies, to produce goods and services in a sustainable fashion while expanding the environmental stewardship services they have always provided'.<sup>34</sup>

As an example we may consider the case of the highlands people of the Huatulco area, recently studied by Barkin. His study showed, among other things, that indigenous people and other *campesinos* are quite capable of participating in innovative new planning for environmental restoration with an outside group, even while applying traditional ways of water management. Traditional water 'harvesting' techniques primarily consist in contour terracing, check dams and

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bordered gardens. Contour terracing, which is the most common form of traditional water management, is achieved with low stone structures placed along the contours of hillsides so as to catch rain runoff.<sup>35</sup> Barkin's study made clear that the reintroduction of these water production regimes serves to restore the environmental integrity of a region increasingly denuded of forests, while also significantly reconfirming the communities' identities and raising incomes that will allow people to remain in the area instead of outmigrating to cities.<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, the reflections of José F. Gómez Hinojosa, who speaks for a philosophical and theological perspective on ecology, point toward the possibility of a 'naturo-centric' approach. From Gómez's perspective, if we pay attention to the common trajectory that human beings share with the rest of nature we should stop seeing ourselves as separate from nature, and hence we should stop exploiting it *as mere object*. Taking a hint from Ernst Bloch, Gómez explains how we may see nature *as subject*, and ourselves as part of that subject. From this he concludes that we should perceive ourselves as living *with* nature and not simply *in* nature.<sup>37</sup> Gómez's perspective confirms the good sense of the practices noted earlier, from which perspective communities are seen as integrated by human beings as well as their environments.<sup>38</sup>

The idea of conceiving of ourselves as living with nature in such a way that nature is considered as subject and not as mere object is given content, moreover, by Antonio Elizalde, who argues that sustainability requires that we move away from idealisations and abstractions and recover a 'rationality of the senses'.<sup>39</sup> Elizalde's suggestion may well be of great importance since, as diverse authors in environmental psychology have argued, direct experiences of one's natural environment, literally *incorporating* ourselves into that environment, seem to be key to a more caring behaviour toward it.<sup>40</sup>

To summarise we may say that in Latin America there is an empirically founded and highly sophisticated theoretical discussion which comments on, and gives further sense to, the practices described earlier.

### III. A CONCRETE ETHIC AND JUSTIFICATION

#### *The ethic of community, resistance and autonomy*

While in some senses the conditions generating environmental morality in Latin America and in the North are similar, in other respects they are not. A majority of the populations of the North have been subjected to increasing levels of contaminants, and have been deprived of access to relatively untouched natural spaces, just as Latin American populations have been. In modern times, few people of European descent, with the exception of First Nations peoples and visible minorities, have experienced what the Latin American people have experienced: ancestral lands which they relied on for their livelihood open to expropriation and exploitation by others; sudden exposure to the full force of global markets;

subjection to the intensity of industrial contaminants; experiencing the hazards of unsupported urban growth.

These facts explain why, to some Latin Americans, the degradation in their natural environment is not so much a result of anthropocentrism, or perhaps individualistic ethics, as the outcome of the actions and attitudes of individuals and corporations who fail to consider their effects on communities which are constituted by *combinations* of human beings and the environment that support them. So, even if there are ethicists and activists in Latin America who do echo the debates, current in the North, between anthropocentrists and non-anthropocentrists, or between individualist and holist ethics, the focus is often elsewhere, as we have seen.

People from Native as well as from other environmentally stressed sectors of society – ranging from the Mapuche of Southern Patagonia to the Zapatistas of Chiapas, from the extractivists of Amazonia to the maquila workers near the U.S. border – have declared the importance of maintaining their identities as members of particular *communities*, the rightness of *resistance*, and the urgency of recovering their *autonomy*, in the face of the degradation of their natural environments. I shall not claim that the themes of community, resistance and autonomy are exhaustive, but in Latin American environmental ethics they are represented in an important way in ethics, practice and discourse, and may be said to be characteristic of it.

So if we compare the Latin American environmental discourse we have surveyed with its Northern counterpart we can observe certain important differences. As noted, community is often defined as inclusive of the natural environment in which people traditionally live and find their livelihoods. Consequently, rather than a concern for the natural environment *as distinct from* human beings, value is attributed to *hybrid* communities made up of *both* human beings and their environments.

Instead of a search for a *new ethic* to deal with the drastic and ever accelerating degradation of conditions in their natural environment, we mostly find a re-assertion and progressive elaboration of traditional values, favouring precisely the flourishing of the hybrid communities described, and hence a commitment to *resist* anything that might undermine the basic constituents of their societies.<sup>41</sup> There may be resistance, for example, to giving a purely utilitarian market value to either the natural environment (or to the people who inhabit it). Resistance may be directed against those, both corporate and state representatives who, committed to the profit motive, seem not to understand the complexities of hybrid human-environment spaces, and thereby threaten their communities.

Moreover, instead of singling out the protection of species, or ecosystems, or landscapes as the primary aim of environmental ethics and action, as is common in the mainstream Northern context, we find that the overall objective may be to strengthen the community's *autonomy* and autosufficiency against outside forces, represented by large-scale commercial or government entities. The au-

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tonomy pursued tends to be such as would allow for the continued flourishing of the longstanding mixed ecologies in which people live (or in which they have lived until recently).

Strictly speaking, do these themes describe an environmental ethic? As noted, an *ethic* or morality is constituted by attitudes and actions appropriate with regard to significant entities, and may be expressed through a particular way of living or practice. An *environmental* ethic or morality, in analogy to a biomedical or a law ethic, is an ethic or morality with regard to actual or possible effects on significant others in the context of the natural environment, where the natural environment is considered either of direct or of indirect moral significance. Just as some actions assessed from within the medical or the law setting may be considered ethically correct or incorrect, some actions assessed within the context of the natural environment similarly may be a matter of moral praise or censure.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, an environmental ethic is expressed through a way of life or practice, which directly or indirectly takes into consideration the natural environment or certain parts of it. So, insofar as I have described a way of life that values the natural environment *qua* component of hybrid (human–environmental) communities, we can speak of an environmental ethic. Moreover, insofar as the cultures under discussion have a tendency to resist the erosion of this value, and hold as an objective or aim the autonomy of these hybrid communities in order to further their flourishing, we may think of this as an environmental ethic with a certain complexity.

If we keep the term ‘ethic’ or morality free from parochialism by defining it as above, that is, as being constituted by appropriate attitudes and actions with regard to significant entities, we have not said yet what makes for an *acceptable* ethic. That is, we can still ask whether a particular, culturally specific ethic (what I call a *concrete* ethic) is well founded or justified. So, can the ethic described above be justified?

*Justification*

Justification of an ethic or morality seems to require that its main tenets be coherent or consistent among each other and, furthermore, with the objective conditions of the world. The topic is too broad to deal with properly here, but we may take a hint from Kant who, in his examples of moral discourse, points out that a maxim (or personal rule of acting) cannot be justified if it contradicts some important principle (such as the will to survive) or an objective condition (such as any individual’s foreseeable need for help in unexpected, adverse circumstances). Though this is only a negative account of justification, we may begin with it. (A positive account of justification of an ethic might have to appeal to the congruity of the ethic with ultimate ideals of the good life, which in turn would be guided by ultimate potentialities within our reach.)

How is a *concrete* ethic or morality justified? There seem to be two ways of approaching this: on the one hand, through a culture-*internal* or particularist account, and, on the other hand, through a culture-*external* or *universalist* account. A culture-internal approach appeals to morality-justifying suppositions held within a particular society, while a culture-external or universalist account appeals to suppositions that *prima facie* are universally held (or would be universally held if considered under the relevant conditions).

The culture-internal justifications which the environmental morality – implicit in the practices and theoretical discussions just described – receives tend to have some general traits. The basic justificatory strategy relies on appeals to the value of the survival and flourishing of a particular community, both in its physical components and in its identity as it has developed over the community's history. Here community receives a double valuation, namely as 'home' to its members, such that the survival of the whole is assumed to assure (at least up to a point) the survival and flourishing of its individuals, and as an entity worthy of respect for itself, due to the good things that it represents, has occasioned, and can generate. Whether the ethic, expressed in the practices of any one of the communities surveyed, actually is culture-internally justified depends, of course, on its particularities as well as on the particular inter-societal and ecosystemic nexus at which the society finds itself.

We can also ask whether such a concrete ethics can be justified from a universalist or culture-independent perspective. The field of inter-cultural ethics still is rather undeveloped,<sup>43</sup> but we may suppose that inter-cultural justification functions in the manner of inter-subjective justification as developed, for example, by Kant. So, if one is to know if a concrete ethic or morality may be justifiable on culture-external grounds one may ask if it might be endorsable *cross-culturally*. Certainly only an abstraction of any concrete ethic can be a candidate for such culture-external justification, since many circumstances defining a particular, culturally specific ethic will necessarily be absent in another. Hence, much depends on the way the ethic is described, and in this way it again parallels the approach outlined by Kant regarding interpersonal ethics.

So, if we are to ask whether an environmental ethic focused on the integrity of the hybrid human–environmental community, demanding resistance against processes that would undermine it, and aimed at its autonomy, is justifiable on universal or culture-external grounds, we are asking whether such an ethic would be endorsable by people from other cultures who imagine that they find themselves in relatively similar circumstances.

Obviously the description of the circumstances would need to overcome certain objections as to its universalisability. For example, it may be argued that an ethic that focuses on community as the relevant unit of considerability is dangerously neglecting the *individuals* that comprise it. Or it may be claimed that resistance to outside influences, and the aim of attaining autonomy, essentially are *conservative*, and that the present, globalising times demand an openness

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to interdependence, even despite the risks. It may be replied, however, that a fine-tuning of the ethic can take care of such difficulties.

It may be pointed out, for example, that individuals and the whole always tend to be in some tension, but that commitment to a community, if it is to have any sense, (at least in the normal case) needs to be motivated by, and directed toward, the flourishing of the individuals comprising it. Hence there need not be a conflict between a focus on community and individuals. The commitment to resistance and the aim of autonomy, moreover, may justly be relativised to the particular conditions that the community is exposed to, since the aim is the generation of best consequences for the community.

Returning to the question of whether the type of ethic illustrated by the themes community, resistance and autonomy may be justifiable within a broader, inter-cultural context, we may note that it does find echoes in certain, relatively similar, communities outside Latin America. In India, for example, there has been a strong reaction to the creation of national parks that exclude the resident people, and resistance to the suppression of indigenous peoples' traditional forest uses through the intrusion of industrial forestry into their lands. The result has been a mobilisation for the preservation of local people's interest in their lands, epitomised by the Chipko women's movement. Their example has spawned a wider movement aptly known as 'social ecology', which precisely propounds the importance of protecting human communities *with* their environments.<sup>44</sup>

In the North, furthermore, of late there is a new turning away in theory and action from a focus on environmental degradation *tout court* toward an approach that also takes note of the differential human communities affected in the process. This sort of approach has its theoretical forerunner in Murray Bookchin's theory of social ecology, which argues that generalised oppressive structures are the culprits of environmental degradation and not anthropocentrism or individualistic ethics *per se*.<sup>45</sup> More recently the thesis has taken a more concrete form through the focus on environmental justice and environmental racism.

As Eugene Hargrove has said, the North American 'environmental ethics literature, for the most part, reflects [North American] environmentalist concerns, and these have not included concerns for human welfare'.<sup>46</sup> Now, however, there are a number of voices, primarily from certain minority populations, that call for an alliance between those who oppose the oppression of human beings *and* those who oppose the degradation of the environments that they inhabit.<sup>47</sup> Typically people from African-American and Hispanic communities have begun developing practices of resistance to the mostly corporate, entrepreneurial forces that impose environmental burdens jointly on people and land.

In California's Kettleman City the Latino community struggled to prevent the construction of a hazardous waste incinerator, Cesar Chávez's farm workers' community fought against the use of DDT and other poisons on table grape growers, the Madres del Este de Los Angeles fought plans for the placement of an oil pipeline through their community, and the Chicano farmers of Colorado's



San Luis Valley fought the clear cutting of their watershed.<sup>48</sup> These struggles are not uncharacteristic of the Hispanic or Latino/a population, at least in California, since a recent poll determined that Latino/a people are significantly more concerned about environmental issues than the rest of the voters in that state.<sup>49</sup> These are the seeds of a wider environmental practice and ethic focused on community. Just as in the Latin American or in India, the ethic at issue concerns people-in-their-environment, not human beings considered separate from the environment.<sup>50</sup>

Given this brief overview, one may say that an environmental ethic focused on the themes of community, resistance, and autonomy is indeed endorsable by at least some peoples from outside Latin America.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

There is a distinctive Latin American environmental ethics which can be characterised by the themes community, resistance, autonomy, and it obtains its specificity from the distinctive features of its professional, cultural and socio-historical context. An environmental ethics relatively similar to that which is distinctive of Latin America can, in fact, be found elsewhere. But this should be small surprise given that the circumstances of certain populations may be relatively similar to those of Latin Americans who are pressed by powerful outside forces, private or governmental. Latin American environmental practice and theory still stand out in contrast with their main Northern counterparts.

The question of whether it is well-grounded must receive its answer in a dual way, namely by assessing whether it is consistent with the other moral tenets of the particular culture in which it arises, and whether it is endorsable more generally. To address the first part of the question would require consideration of the multiple cultures extant in Latin America. Regarding the second part of the question, I have pointed out that an ethic focussed on community, resistance and autonomy is indeed also found in other places, including certain communities in rural India and among certain minorities in North America.

It may also be argued that the themes which I detected in Latin American environmental ethics may have been anticipated in Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic. He wrote that we should consider the biotic community, in which we thrive and on which we depend, as our own. Leopold called for a focus on the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community in our actions affecting the land. As such this approach is much like the focus on resistance to harmful change and the safeguarding of autonomy in the particular hybrid communities constituted by people and their natural environments. If this is correct then environmental ethics, as practiced and theorised in Latin America, perhaps can serve as a guide to a better understanding of the implications of Leopold's ethic of land.

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What can we learn from this ethic? Perhaps that thinking of the natural environment as *distinct* from people is the result of privilege and possibly alienation. That is, on the one hand, the tendency to think of nature as separate from human beings might have to do with the *privilege* of living at arm's length from environmental degradation, such that the condition of the natural environment does not constitute a direct concern. On the other hand, it may have to do with psychological alienation from nature, since the thought that nature needs to be conceived separately from human beings may be based on the supposition that nature can be fully itself only if human beings are *absent*. Coming to see environmental ethics as a matter of finding our place in the hybrid communities made up of human beings *and* nature may perhaps lead to a way of living that treads softly on nature wherever it is, be it in the nature reserve, the corn field, or the back alley, while, at the same time, perceiving nature as our home.<sup>51</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Heyd (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Leopold 1995, p. 151, 'nothing so important as an ethic is ever "written"'.

<sup>3</sup> Weston 1995.

<sup>4</sup> As Immanuel Kant had argued, although such theories by themselves are not likely to serve as motivators for change in behaviours, they certainly can constitute an important backup for the application of principles of action that otherwise might run afoul on skeptical doubt.

<sup>5</sup> For a review of Latin American philosophy see the special issue of *The Philosophical Forum*, Vol. 20, Nos. 1–2 (Fall–Winter 1988–89), especially Jorge J.E. Gracia, 'Introduction: Latin American Philosophy Today', 4–32, and Iván Jaksic 'Sources of Latin American Philosophy', 141–57.

<sup>6</sup> I follow common usage by utilising the terms 'North' and 'Northern cultures' in order to make reference to the cultures of European peoples, as they exist in Europe and wherever European peoples have migrated (principally in North America, Australia, and New Zealand, but also in parts of Africa and Asia).

<sup>7</sup> David Barkin, correspondence (13 February 2002).

<sup>8</sup> For the ideas and the quote in this paragraph I am indebted to Barkin, correspondence (13 February 2002).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, 'Patagonia'; <http://www.tadox.net/index.php>

<sup>10</sup> David MacKinnon y Sara McFall, 'Pueblo Mapuche, Expansión Forestal y Poder Local'; <http://www.mapuexpress.net/biblioteca/sara1.htm>

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, <http://www.soc.uu.se/mapuche/>

<sup>12</sup> Sara McFall, 'Wajmapu: Territorialidad Mapuche y Medio Ambiente', (October 2000); <http://www.mapuexpress.net/biblioteca/sara2.htm>

<sup>13</sup> The Spanish translation of these two terms sometimes straightforwardly is '*biodiversidad*', that is, 'biodiversity'.

<sup>14</sup> 'Quienes son los hijos de la tierra: Los Mapuche' (this and all translations from Spanish are by myself); <http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/Andes/8976/mapuche.htm>. The belief that human beings are deeply entwined with the other elements of their environment, including the alpacas or the maize, but also '[t]he river, the stones, the stars, the wind', and so on, is common among diverse peoples in Latin America, for example the Quechua; see Rengifo 1996. Eduardo Grillo (1996) speaks of a symbiotic community such that, 'those which live here in the Andes raising [animals] and those [animals] who allow our raising them, form a family'.

<sup>15</sup> Diegues 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Toledo 1994.

<sup>19</sup> Albert L. Wahrhaftig and Bruce (Pacho) Lane, 'Totonac Cultural Revitalization: An Alternative to the Zapatistas'; [http://www.sonoma.edu/anthropology/Totonac\\_Revival/Totonac\\_Revival.html](http://www.sonoma.edu/anthropology/Totonac_Revival/Totonac_Revival.html)

<sup>20</sup> Toledo 1994.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/chimalapasmx/>; also see <http://csf.colorado.edu/mail/elan/apr97/0026.html>

<sup>22</sup> On the problem of extreme individualism, consumerism and excessive hedonism see Hevia 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Hevia 1998; Mires 1990.

<sup>24</sup> Eduardo Gudynas and Graciela Evia, 'EL CONCEPTO DE ECOLOGIA SOCIAL', <http://www.ambiental.net/claes/Conceptos%20Gudynas%20Evia.html>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Guimarães 1999, p. 158.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.181.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., emphases added, p.160.

<sup>29</sup> Mansilla 1999.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid..

<sup>31</sup> Toledo 1996, p.2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Leff 1995.

<sup>34</sup> Barkin 1998.

<sup>35</sup> Manuel Anaya Garduño, 'Ancient And Contemporary Water Catchment Systems In Mexico'; [http://www.cpatas.embrapa.br/doc/worldwide/2\\_4\\_Manuel\\_Anaya.doc](http://www.cpatas.embrapa.br/doc/worldwide/2_4_Manuel_Anaya.doc)

<sup>36</sup> Barkin 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Gómez Hinjosa 1990.

<sup>38</sup> Also see Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian liberation theologian, who claims that '[t]he earth has arrived at the limits of its sustainability. Our task is not to create sustainable development, but a sustainable society – human beings and nature together'. [http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Heroes/Leonardo\\_Boff.html](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Heroes/Leonardo_Boff.html)

<sup>39</sup> Elizalde 1999.

<sup>40</sup> See Heyd 2003.

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<sup>41</sup> I am indebted to Barkin, correspondence (13 February 2002), for ways of expressing these ideas here.

<sup>42</sup> See Heyd (forthcoming).

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., Norbert Bilbeny, 'In Search of an Intercultural Ethics', <http://www.pcb.uv.es/eticaintercultural/recercaan.htm>

<sup>44</sup> See Sarkar 2001. Obviously there are theoretical similarities, as well as differences, among the various perspectives represented by the term 'social ecology' in Latin America, India and North America. They cannot be disentangled here, though.

<sup>45</sup> Bookchin 1993; 1980. Also of interest in this context is Norton 1995.

<sup>46</sup> Hargrove 2001, p. ix.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Laura Westra and Bill E. Lawson, 'Introduction' in Westra and Lawson 2001, xvii–xxvi, and *passim*.

<sup>48</sup> Figuera 2001.

<sup>49</sup> See Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates, 'Environmental Attitudes Among California Voters with a Special Analysis of Environmental Attitudes Among Latino Voters and Voters of Color', May 2001. [http://www.sonoma.edu/anthropology/Totonac\\_Revival/Totonac\\_Revival.html](http://www.sonoma.edu/anthropology/Totonac_Revival/Totonac_Revival.html)

<sup>50</sup> Also relevant are the environmental practices and implicit ethics of Native people in North America. See, for example, Dennis Martinez, 'First People—Firsthand Knowledge', Chapter 5.2 in OLIFE, *Can We Restore Paradise?*; <http://www.efn.org/~forestry/>; reprinted with changes from *International Journal of Ecoforestry*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1997).

<sup>51</sup> For very important help in finding references and materials, and for illuminating comments, I am indebted to Felipe Mansilla, Henri Acselrad, Eduardo Gudynas, Alan Holland, two anonymous referees, and especially to David Barkin, Víctor Toledo and Antonio Elizalde.

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