ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE AND THE MATTER OF FAIR DISTRIBUTION

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Abstract: - The paper starts from Wissenburg’s assertion according to which we should consider nature and the future generations as moral subjects in order to apply the concept of fair distribution to the environment. After a short introduction on the matter of fair distribution within the theories on social justice, the concept of ecological justice is analysed, as well as the way in which distributive justice may be extended to environmental issues.

Key-words: - ecological justice, social justice, fair distribution, ecological space, ecological footprint, environment.

1 Introduction

According to the classical theories of social justice that deal with the issue of fair distribution, unjust is the state of things in which a certain good is distributed among the members of the same social group so that the result of this distribution makes the existence of great inequalities possible. To correct this situation, a first solution – agreed to by a series of both liberal and socialist theories – would be to impose restrictions on the persons that hold a greater quantity of the respective good so as to restrict their possible greater ownership of that good. Thus, others could also have access to the good in question. It is important to mention herein that the goods aimed at are the default ones and compensating for the lacks generated by their absence without a serious concern on the causes that led to this state of things. An exception to this is Marxism whose concern for the establishment of causes leading to the occurrence of inequalities is fed by ideological assumptions. In the case of the other theories, especially those that draw on social contract, causal explanations are reduced to procedures that allow us to update the implications of certain premises that refer to the moral equality of individuals.

An extremely peculiar situation is that of the inequalities generated by human negligence that bring prejudice to large groups or communities of individuals, including the ones far in distance and time from the accident. We are mainly dealing with ecological problems (but we can include any type of calamity that affects humankind such as wars, the uncontrolled development of technology or world financial crises). We notice that, in these situations, the issue of the fair distribution of goods between the members of the damaged group intervenes as we are dealing with situations in which goods (e.g.: food, drugs, water) that were largely supplied before, are no longer enough. Without any shred of doubt, the lack of these goods is a necessary condition to raise matters related to social justice, but in these cases the problem should be
extended from the fair distribution of default goods in the event of a catastrophe to the fair distribution as far as the access to environment and the demand to protect it are concerned.

2. Ecological justice

More recent theories claim that “social justice focuses on distribution but is also concerned with individual recognition, participation and the functioning of the community” [1], which means that social justice equally applies to ecological problems. Hence we can extrapolate and speak about an “ecological justice”, as subset of social justice which is a distributive one. Liberal theories of the past century exclude environment from the sphere of the matter of social justice.

John Rawls [2], for instance, believes that our relation with the environment is one that exceeds the issue of justice as long as it does not exist in the state of nature and therefore cannot be comprised in social contract theory. In his theory of justice, the interaction with nature is not assumed as pertaining to the sphere of justice. Rawls argues that it is bad to destroy nature but “to be bad” is not the same with “to be unjust” as there is no victim of injustice in the man-nature relationship [3]. The liberal perspective does not accept the inclusion of the non-human nature in the assumptions on justice so we can speak about a “good” at the level of human nature and of another “good” outside it. Liberal theorists of social justice such as Rawls or Dworkin are interested in justice as impartiality, therefore they leave aside concerns on the various categories of good. In its liberal variant, ecological justice would be reduced to a mere agreement on good democratically decided on by a majority.

Schlosberg focuses on the concept of ideological justice, examining the way in which distributive justice may be extended to environmental issues. The author considers that we can approach this issue from three points of view: that of future generations, by extending the notion of human community to the ecological system and space (included) [4].

The concern for the future generations is the most controversial approach as it does not discuss the issue of justice in relation to the natural world, but focuses on justice as responsibility for future generations. The problematisation of the future generations renders possible the action of relating to the environment without direct considerations on it, only on the consequences that the life of humanity will have on an environment or another. Justice, in this sense, recalls another principle of equal opportunities between generations which means that we cannot pass to the future generations less than we received ourselves, we cannot deprive them of the possibility of defining their own good and we cannot put their life in danger. “This approach is a distributive one based on the distribution of ecological goods to the future generations, taking into consideration the fact that the present generation consumes, but is also careful to leave enough resources to the future generations” [5]. The observation that needs to be made is that these considerations are not completely contradictory to the liberal theories of justice if we take into account the fact that the departing point is John Locke’s contractualism. According to his vision, one of the legitimate limits of property is the condition of ownership from the common property only to the extent to
which it does not bring prejudice to the others’ access to it.

Even a liberal such as Brian Barry brought into focus the possible impact that damage to the environment could have on the future generations. It would be extremely necessary “to ensure a better life for the future generations in agreement with what they believe to be so” [6]. As a result, to act justly as far as the future generations are concerned is to leave them an environment that would not diminish their choices for a better life. However, this does not mean that Barry is concerned with specific types of possible choices of the future, but only with the fact that formal conditions to make these choices possible need ensuring.

**Extending the notion of human community on the ecological system.** The most significant representative of this viewpoint is Brian Baxter. Influenced by Barry’s conception on impartiality, Baxter claims that we can extend the idea of community justice to the environment, this extension simply being a procedural one. The subsumption to community is not based on “a certain concept of good but rather on a certain interest” [7]. To remain impartial, we have to detach the idea of community, of justice, of the idea of good.

**The issue of ecological space** in the distributive theories of social justice refers to the way in which distributive justice may include natural environment. In this situation, the environment becomes object of calculus for everyday life, by taking into consideration what is distributed and the costs of this distribution both for people and the environment. Remaining within the limits of liberalism, the supreme value is the freedom to live our life according to our own values, as we wish. At this level, along with the issue of fair distribution, there is also the matter of sustainability or, in other words, the ecological costs that our choices involve. Including the concept of ecological space in fair justice assumes for ecological justice to come as an extension to social justice.

### 3 Ecological footprint and political ecology

The concept of ecological space may be correlated to another concept, namely that of ecological footprint, a relatively new concept that started to be used in the last decades of the 20th century.

The ecological footprint focuses on the consumption of natural resources and is calculated by relating the human consumption of natural resources to the Earth’s capacity of regenerating it [8]. From this perspective, we can understand the reaction of political ecology to the capitalist system and implicitly, its placement at the left of the political axis. If, as far as economic politics is concerned, all ideologies, including Marxist socialism, are concerned with economic development in the sense of increasing production and productivity of the economic system, ecologism is the only ideology that states the necessity of limiting industrial growth, thus attacking the capitalist system precisely at its base (it is well known that the capitalist system is based on the principle of individual differences in society based on property, a principle that may be applied only by economic production in continuous development). Without any shred of doubt, the “spirit of capitalism” that determined the individual to possess (and consume) as much as possible leads to the progress of
society, but at the same time, involves a waste of raw material and labour. We should not ignore the fact that we are dealing with an impasse in the sense that production encourages acquisition and vice versa. Moreover, for the purpose of encouraging acquisition, product quality is weaker and weaker for the products to be replaced more and more quickly with others from the same class.

The engine of a consumer society is productivism [9] understood as a totality of the social-economic structures and mentalities that boost production without taking into account the real needs of the population and the product life cycle. The solution proposed by ecologists as alternative to “the society in which much is produced, little is consumed and a lot is thrown away”, i.e. consumer society, is the application of a new ethical concept. This would impose certain quantitative and qualitative standards to economic production. Therefore:

- goods that are not accessible for all and require great investment in raw matter and labour should not be manufactured;
- such goods should not be manufactured in quantities that cannot be run out;
- the economic system should be mainly concerned with the protection of the environment.

From such a perspective, technical progress refers to a production of quality by using as few resources as possible. Herein, it is important to mention that, as far as the distinction between growth and development is concerned, (economic) growth aims at a quantitative principle, while development has in view a qualitative principle [10]. That being said, we conclude that ecologism supports economic development, favouring a slowdown of economic growth but it does this not to bring damage to the capitalist system, but to protect the resources and the environment.

References: