Introduction: education, the environment and sustainability

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ABSTRACT

The 17th Biennial INPE Meeting was scheduled to take place from 28 to 31 July 2020 at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Of course, there is something ironic about convening a conference on the environment and sustainability that would require presenters to utilize unsustainable modes of transport in order to participate. As it turned out, because of the outbreak and rapid global spread of a new Corona virus, the conference was cancelled and replaced by an online event held on 7 and 8 November 2020, both premieres in the history of INPE. The essays collected in this Special Issue will hopefully contribute towards the unmasking and undoing of the various kinds of denialism that have held us in its grip and that continues to thwart attempts to establish a sane and morally sustainable set of relationships between us, human beings, and other animals and the animate and inanimate environment.

The world was not given to you by your parents, it was lent to you by your children.

(Kenyan proverb)

‘One of the greatest challenges – if not the greatest – facing humankind at the beginning of the 21st century is arguably the state of our planet and, coupled with this, our relationship with the natural environment. Most, if not all, other concerns – however significant – are necessarily secondary in this regard. The human impact on the environment has been, and continues to be, enormous. Human population growth and advances in technological ability and control continue producing previously non-existent environmental problems. What is at stake here is nothing less than the survival of the earth in its present state, as being inhabitable, and therefore also human survival itself. At the very least, it is a matter of the quality and conditions of our lives, present and future. If this is correct, it follows that one of the greatest priorities – perhaps the greatest – of academic research, scientific, philosophical, educational and other, may be how
to arrest and possibly reverse the present decline. There are difficulties, of course. The problem is not only climate change denialism, that is, doubts that the diagnoses and prognoses are correct. Substantial philosophical and pedagogical questions also concern the articulation and definition of the approaches we human beings should adopt in response to the environmental predicament/s. Further questions are raised about the metaphysical and ethical foundations of our concern for our planet, and about educational and pedagogical implications. Should educational policy and practice, for example, be informed by a concern for nature and the environment for our (human) purposes? Or should we teach and learn for the natural environment in and for itself?'

This introductory paragraph is taken from the Call for Papers for the 17th Biennial Meeting of the International Network of Philosophers of Education (INPE) that was scheduled to take place from 28 to 31 July 2020 at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City, with Renato Huarte Cuéllar as chair of the site committee. Of course, and this is something that was pointed out by a number of concerned colleagues, there is something ironic about convening a conference on the environment and sustainability that would require presenters to utilize unsustainable modes of transport in order to participate. As it turned out, because of the outbreak and rapid global spread of a new Corona virus, Covid-19, the conference was cancelled, a premiere in the history of INPE. All of a sudden, a new challenge was facing humankind at the beginning of the 21st century, as the number of infections and fatalities rose exponentially, countries went into lockdown mode, and economies all but ground to a halt. But is it really a new challenge, one that is unrelated to the climate crisis, rapid losses of biological diversity and our relationship with the natural environment? No. At the heart of the health crisis that has engulfed our planet and that has targeted human beings in particular, in the form of a deadly virus, is an obsession with economic growth and human expansion – in terms of sheer numbers, resulting in unsustainable population density, progressive encroachment on natural habitats, and exploitation and destruction of the biosphere.

75% of all infectious diseases are zoonotic, that is, they originate in non-human animals (Jones et al. 2008; Belay et al. 2017). The conditions of factory farming, intensive animal husbandry and rapid human encroachment on non-human habitats have proved ideal for the development, spread and increasing mutations of killer viruses, which are transmitted to humans via the ingestion of animal products. The so-called ‘Spanish Flu’ that lasted from January 1918 to December 1920 (so-called because the Spanish press was the only press at the time that presented uncensored accounts of this uncommonly deadly influenza pandemic) appears to have started with the infection of a US poultry farmer and spread following his recruitment for the US armed forces during the first world war. This respiratory virus was harboured in birds, mutated and later migrated to pigs, fatally afflicting humans before long. The SARS (severe acute respiratory
syndrome) virus and the Ebola virus, both appearing in the early 21st century, can similarly be traced back to the proximity and consumption of captive domestic and more exotic animals, like civets, raccoon dogs, fruitbats and flying foxes. The new Corona virus is no different. It has been located in bats and pangolins, who have proved ideal hosts – they are carriers but themselves insusceptible to the virus. While fruitbats and flying foxes have been among the ‘bush meat’ favoured in many parts of the African continent, bats and pangolins have been popular features of the so-called ‘wet markets’ in parts of Asia, traditional localities where living animals can be purchased and are often slaughtered upon or immediately prior to purchase. The outbreak of a new strain of Corona virus in Danish mink farms is a further case in point, albeit with little to no physical consequences for humans – owing to the rapid ‘destruction’ of millions of mink following the discovery.

As the spread of the virus started to assume dramatic proportions, I received a meme about a conversation between Homo sapiens and Mother Nature. Homo sapiens protests, ‘There’s no way we can shut everything down in order to lower emissions, slow climate change and protect the environment.’ Mother Nature responds, ‘Here’s a virus. Practice.’ Within a few weeks of the viral outbreak and spread, the smog over many parts of China and northern Italy, following curfews and industrial lockdowns, had cleared visibly – as satellite photos showed. Swans, dolphins and species of fish seldom seen returned to the canals of Venice. Coyotes were spotted in the streets of San Francisco. Wolves are being seen with increasing frequency in Germany, after having been on the brink of extinction. A wild herd of about 120 Kashmiri goats ventured from the Great Orme into Llandudno in Wales.

I am not citing these cases in order to spread some ill-founded optimism about the crisis (note the singular) we find ourselves in or about the post-Corona situation. I have no intention to trivialize the hardships we have faced and will continue to face for an indefinite time. Quite the contrary: it is a time for reflection and for lasting humility on our part. Helena Pedersen, one of the invited keynote speakers, has in an earlier essay posed a question that is of fundamental relevance in the present context: ‘What happens with education if it acknowledges that the world does not need humans, and is likely to thrive ignorant of human existence?’ (Pedersen and Pini 2017, 1053) This tallies with Steven Best’s contentions (Best 2014, 119 and 166, respectively) that, while earthworms, dung beetles, butterflies and bees are important to the integrity and diversity of nature, ‘human beings could be removed from earth ecosystems with positive effect’, and that Homo sapiens is ‘the one species the earth could well do without’. This theme is picked up by David Chang in his essay, which begins with the diagnosis of rapid human population growth as a chief contributing factor to the ecological crisis our planet is facing. Chang does not advocate coercive measures for population control but instead favours an approach to environmental education that encourages students to consider the assumptions and implications of having children and that thereby fosters a sense of social and ecological responsibility.
In her keynote address, which was also the Terry McLaughlin memorial lecture, Vanessa De Oliveira Andreotti points out that formal education has been complicit in the reproduction of historical and systemic violence, as well as unsustainability. The task of a substantially revised and re-imagined formal education is both to enable mastery of relevant knowledge and skills, that is personal empowerment, and to contribute towards ‘expansion of our capacity to process collective and personal traumas and to sense, relate and imagine “otherwise”’. The second part of Andreotti’s essay presents *Education 2048*, a thought experiment designed to enable uncomfortable but necessary conversations about the role of education in preparing us all for confronting the potential for and, indeed, the increasing possibility of social and ecological collapse during our lifetime. Sharon Todd’s empathic response constitutes an initial contribution to these vitally important conversations.

Helena Pedersen’s contribution to this Special Issue poses the question: What prevents education from becoming a transformative force in times of ‘omnicide’, that is, ‘the annihilation of everything’? She locates at least part of the response in ‘institutional anxiety’, which constitutes a (social-) psychological barrier to radical change. In particular, she discusses anxiety related to the moral standing of non-human animals as a threat to human exceptionalism in educational practice and research. (In his response, Kai Horsthemke discusses a recent manifestation of such anxiety at a university in South Africa.) Confronting these anxieties, Pedersen argues, could pave the way for new modes of being and acting within academia and provide interspecies ethics, justice and sustainability with an opportunity to flourish in omnicidal times.

The phenomenon of fear also appears in Margarita García-Notario’s essay. She argues that educating in and through fear is bound to be unhelpful in generating constructive and creative responses to the issue of climate change and the general state of our planet. Drawing on the deep ecological approach pioneered by Arne Næss, García-Notario proposes the principles of ‘deep questioning, deep experience and deep commitment’ as a suitable guide for sustainable educational and ecological practices. Gregory Bynum pays tribute to a contemporary of Næss, environmental activist and feminist psychoanalytical scholar Dorothy Dinnerstein, who proposed that the sharing of childcare responsibilities would have a significant impact on male rapacity and domination, effectively curbing androgenic environmental damage. Her theories, which were not widely endorsed at the time of their publication, receive a sympathetic response by Bynum. He defends them against Dinnerstein’s critics and contends that it is not only women and the natural environment that stand to benefit if Dinnerstein’s recommendations are taken seriously, but also men themselves.

In their contribution to the discussion of the moral/ethical dimensions and racial and sexual politics of ‘the hidden curriculum of what we eat, who we eat with, and the significance afforded this moment of the school day’, Samantha Deane and Annie Schultz are concerned with ‘the social and political
consequences of the naturalization of the care work of women and one important symbolic representation of this work: milk’. They problematise the extent to which both this care work and the functions of non-human females in the dairy-industrial complex are taken for granted on the assumption that they are ‘natural’. Deane and Schultz conclude by contending that we should desist from “milking” the care of women and [other] female bodies’ and begin considering ‘the ontological significance of the products children consume’. Milk does a body good, if it does, only at the expense of other bodies.

Mark Beatham’s interest in his contribution is with place-based education, that is, nurturing through (public) education an understanding of shared spaces and proper or right relationships with and within these. Proper relationships, he argues (drawing on the work of Wendell Berry), ‘preserve the means of co-creation between human culture and creation’: ‘Sustainability requires a proper relationship between culture and nature’. Although Beatham does not employ these terms, it is not difficult to see how this kind of education might not only have an emancipatory function but also encourage activism among learners and students, motivating them to ‘add to the commonwealth through the accumulation of knowledge, efforts, and commitment’.

Unsurprisingly, young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg and the Skolstrejk för klimatet/Fridays for Future movement she started in 2018 are mentioned in several essays (Pedersen, Garcia-Notario, Stone, Gilliam). The three papers by Lynda Stone, Cortland Gilliam and Daniel Gibboney were presented as a symposium during the INPE online conference in November 2020, the topic being ‘Together America and the World: Environment Issues, Participation, and Education’, each presentation raising a set of different albeit related issues. Common to all three is the question of participation, democratic and otherwise – by whom, for whom and in what form. Stone is centrally concerned with youth power, youth movements and youth activism in response to the climate crisis. Gilliam, too, discusses youth activism, but he highlights the fact that ‘non-White activists’ have been sidelined and assigned ‘back seats’ in a global youth climate movement that has been represented predominantly by ‘White and Western climate activists’. Gibboney points out that the climate crisis is actually a crisis of facts that has climate science believers pitted against climate change denialists, advocates of alternative facts and conspiracy theorists. His essay explores activism in the light of ‘possibilities of shared practices’ in times of ‘unshared realities’. Gibboney’s ‘spiritual exercises’, in this regard, complete the arc that began with Andreotti’s reference to a need for activating the imagination, for creating new sensibilities (see also Todd, in this issue).

Philosophy in all its forms and traditions has always been centrally preoccupied with truth. However, in recent years truth appears to have become unfashionable. Climate change and corona virus denialism and conspiracy theories have all contributed to the current state of affairs in which truth and facts are treated with disdain. For example, the ideas that truth is not objective or
universal and that there can be ‘alternative facts’ have taken hold not only of popular culture but also of politics, to the obvious detriment of the latter (Horsthemke 2017). The precedence given to assorted political and ideological (not to mention personal narcissistic) agendas, along with the rising popularity of pseudoscience, has led to a decline of truth both as a serious subject and as an intellectual tradition. Climate change denialism and corona virus denialism are objectionable not only because they peddle blatant untruths but also because they are cynical and cruel. They demean the many millions, human and non-human, who have forfeited their health and/or their lives as a result of the changing climate and the new pandemic. It is my sincere hope that the essays collected in this Special Issue will contribute towards the unmasking and undoing of the pernicious relativism (cultural, moral and epistemological) that has held us in its grip and that continues to thwart attempts to establish a sane and morally sustainable set of relationships between us, human beings, and other animals and the animate and inanimate environment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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