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Dangers Facing the Earth Charter

JAVIER REYES RUIZ

Abstract

The article explores social and educational processes that could undermine the Earth Charter's promise. It points out that the meaning of the Charter would be affected if it is used in a doctrinaire manner, if individuals or groups assume the role of its legitimate and expert emissaries, if it takes on a messianic tone in its central ideas, if it is spread solely through education workshops, disconnecting it from everyday life, or if it is presented as the prediction of an enlightened future. Finally, some reflections are included on the role of the Earth Charter in the construction of an environmental ethics for life.

Keywords: Earth Charter, environment education, environmental ethics

It often happens that good intentions lose their way and instead produce effects contrary to those desired. For example, sexual liberation ended up in pornography markets, combative pacifism ended up becoming profound passivity and the defense of nature is being transmuted into profitable chains of natural product stores.

Similarly, the Earth Charter runs the risk of having its original meaning and intentions undermined, especially if its use is not systematised and evaluated with some frequency. Hence it is advisable to review some possible dangers or risks that it runs.

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FIRST DANGER: THE EARTH CHARTER BECOMES A CATECHISM

A crucial element in the Earth Charter is its affirmation of differences, its defense of diversity, its emphasis on adjusting to contexts as opposed to repeating maxims by rote memory. The Earth Charter represents a plurality of worldviews, ideas and practices that went into its making. It is an array of colours and shades. If the Earth Charter were to become a catechism or a monolithic discourse, it would become a contradiction. An anarchy of interpretations, or even a parade of heresies, is preferable to the monotonous beat of repetitions of a uniform litany.

It is important to ensure that the Earth Charter remains a living document that can stimulate questions, self-reflection and renewed critique. It will better fulfill its function if people question the full relevance of its content, than if they mechanically repeat the paragraph on the global situation located in the preamble. In short, let us protect the Earth Charter from becoming a universal proclamation laden with dead letters. Let us defend the basic principle that it is desirable that the central proposals in a document of this kind be as alive as the humans who are willing to reinvent them.

SECOND DANGER: THE EARTH CHARTER SPAWNS A PRIESTHOOD

If we wish to maintain the Earth Charter's spirit, it must be understood that it needs no owners, priests, prophets, paladins, bodyguards or official spokespersons. Nor does it need exclusive clubs, mute disciples, clans of initiates, sects, or those who dominate microphones and speakers' platforms.

It is well to keep in mind that where gurus flourish, the horizontal dimension declines. In other words, with each 'enlightened one' we not only lose a citizen, but democracy comes to resemble a ritual where the sheep always vote for the same shepherd. Having said that we do not want the Earth Charter to end up as a catechism, we also ask that there be no catechists. Not only because they teach answers by memory and are cruel killers of imagination, but because they believe that any dissidence conceals a threat.

The Earth Charter instead needs educators, pedagogues and communicators to construct a shared intellectual and moral direction that will generate open cultural practices and institutional arrangements.

THIRD DANGER: THE EARTH CHARTER IS ACCEPTED AS MESSIANIC DISCOURSE

The Earth Charter is the result of countless exercises of reason, spirit, intuition and the feelings of perhaps millions of men and women throughout the world. In this tangle of efforts scattered in time and spread throughout space, there is a unifying thread of spirituality that seeks the development of the best human qualities.

The Earth Charter reflects the combined wisdom of many souls. But it is not divine or even infallible.

There is a danger of using the Earth Charter to enforce a mystical, fundamentalist spirituality loaded with ideological manipulation and bereft of political critique that appeals basically to the human heart, but is not accompanied by a sufficient knowledge of the social sciences and the natural sciences to unmask actors who might exploit people and the planet.

The spirituality incorporated into the Earth Charter, which is indispensable, must be prevented from becoming a smokescreen that dilutes the issue of social justice in the name of the crucial concern for returning to the planet its sacred dimension. This danger is accentuated when those heading a movement have no economic worries and therefore think that materialism is vulgar.

Spirituality is not a sacred word, it is a social product. Its ethereal referent does not exempt us from the struggle to give it meaning and to strip away the showcase spiritualities that, with or without subtlety, exploit others in the name of transcendence.

The Earth Charter is a magnificent opportunity to give spirituality the centrality that rational dogmatism caused it to lose. But the opportunity will be squandered if we limit it to rituals where incense blows more freely than discussion of ideas. It must be acknowledged that the Charter faces the danger of being confused with the 'naive-optimism club' or of being converted into a litany of clichés for a handbook of personal and planetary improvement.

FOURTH DANGER: THE EARTH CHARTER BECOMES A FESTIVAL OF WORKSHOPS

The Charter is a call, a calm invocation, to rootedness in the planet. This entails a long and complex process that cannot be exhausted in momentary efforts. Thus, workshops on the Earth Charter, as in any educational process, are privileged moments for the teaching-learning process, but if they become the central and almost sole thrust, they will surely cause the transforming significance of the Charter to be lost.

The critical knowledge that is channeled in committed actions entails a process, a complex unfolding; it cannot be limited to workshops. Everyday life, as it is said in critical pedagogy, is the element that gives meaning to education. Therefore, the Earth Charter cannot be confined to educational events; it needs the confluence of multiple paths to bring about the re-education to which we aspire.

An Earth Charter that is joyfully celebrated in events and workshops but stays silent in the everyday lives of the people will not be worth much. Taking it out of the cloister of scheduled events requires imagination.

FIFTH DANGER: THE EARTH CHARTER PRODUCES A 'COOL' IMAGE OF THE FUTURE

'Happiness is the best product in the world, and that is what we sell' says Tony Altobelli, a top Walt Disney Resorts executive. Happiness is a good business and so it can be sold. By contrast, we cannot turn the Earth Charter into a pretty story about the paradise where we will be happy if we respect all its principles. It is not in anyone's

interest that it be handled like a recipe book for reaching paradise, not only because we will not deceive many people, but because in an idyllic world, humankind might go extinct from utter apathy, asphyxiated by yawning.

The Earth Charter is an anti-myopia message. It is an alarm that shakes us out of the slumber that prevents us from railing against the slaughter of ecosystems, human servitude, excessive power, the ruin of civilization and matricide against nature.

We will always have a universe in which conflicts must be resolved, but we can move from resolutions involving missiles or economic strangulation to ones that employ the mechanisms of modern civility that can allow us to reach better agreements and better decisions.

What spectacular boredom we would face in a 'cool' future where the rich, to camouflage their wastefulness, eat certified organic foods and drive solar-powered Mercedes Benzes, while the poor, aware that reproducing themselves is in poor taste, voluntarily combine anemia with birth control.

We must prevent the Earth Charter from becoming the prediction of an anodyne future in which social critique is a kind of 'compassionate conservatism'. A cool future would save us from the inconvenience of the exhausting, long and complex struggle for the rights of other humans and take us to the elegant defense of the rights of whales. In a cool future, large merchandisers would have social-minded foundations to save the hippopotamus from extinction, while they contaminate or plunder or squeeze the life out of desperately poor workers.

To claim that with the application of the Earth Charter principles, the future will be green, smiling and laden with wonders is to give the Charter a vacuous, picturesque patina of a best-seller romance.

The Earth Charter's vision of the future is much more mundane and radical. It's future is a space of encounter, synthesis and design of strategies for political and cultural struggle by a fabric of citizen networks. It is a doorway for those ready to get moving towards a better but not perfect world, where the dance of order and chance is more favourable to us.

EARTH CHARTER AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

To elude these dangers, we need an interpretation of the Earth Charter in which the environmental ethic (or the ethic for life, as some call it) is thought of as a living entity that calls us to action and not only as an existential question; as a framework of inspiration for practice and not only an incisive exercise of introspection to help us to judge less and comprehend more.

Employing the Earth Charter as an educational tool requires that we accept that the environmental ethic cannot remain trapped in the 1,500 cubic centimetres of our brain, but rather it must journey towards actions that give new meaning to being in the world.

The simple exercise of self-criticism leads us to accept that we have made little progress. In the environmental movement, which is so imbued with the human, the environmental ethic today is more a desire than a solid body of proposals; it is more an intention than a well-established practice; it is more a topic that disturbs

than a working agenda. But its weaknesses do not deny it its function as a beacon for a sustainable future.

In the area of environmental ethics, the Earth Charter should be used to debate and confront the prevailing position, which claims that the economy (through the market) and politics (through the negotiation of differences) are the central paths for solving environmental problems. No one denies the importance of the market and political action for environmental protection, but there are corners of human behaviour that can be occupied only by ethics, for it depends on conscience, convictions and cultural patterns and not only on supplies, demands and market institutions.

The Earth Charter should contribute to keeping us, as members of the species, from becoming so self-absorbed that we lose our values and sell our critical capacity for an extra portion of consumption; especially when reality has shown that accumulating wealth does not constitute and never has constituted, a precondition for human development. In this sense, the Charter is absolutely necessary for placing solidarity and the common good, within the repertoire of human values, above self-interest and material progress.

In the area of ethics, the Earth Charter should also serve as a counterweight to preservationist perspectives, in which a high value is given to life, but only to that which unfolds in the wilderness; thus we particularly protect nature as a magnificent spectacle, forgetting that we also need nature, perhaps even more, in the middle of traffic and in the supermarket queue.

Some believe that dire economic poverty is resolved by endlessly multiplying charitable deeds. If that were the case, it would suffice to set up dozens of aid stations to save ecosystems. However, as we know quite well, the environment will not be saved by bursts of mercy toward the other species that, together with our own, weave the fabric of life, but rather by recognising and respecting the intrinsic and multiple values of nature.

While accepting dialogue among different interpretations, I think that if the Earth Charter is to become an element for transforming civilization, an environmental ethic must emerge both *vis-à-vis* the current social morality and the ideological justification of power; in other words, the question of power cannot be bracketed when rethinking ethics. Thus, debating the political institutions present in the Earth Charter is ineluctable.

Some thinkers propose that humankind has finally attained the ancient dream of becoming an indivisible whole; and that this total unity is not provided by the so-called networked society with its dizzying information superhighways, but rather by the fact that no one can escape the environmental disaster that reaches every nook and cranny of the planet. Rather than being overcome by despair, we turn to the Earth Charter, which extends to us an invitation to feel positively attached to seeking solutions and to build an environmental ethic that roots us in a firm and stubborn optimism and enables us to discern better panoramas for hope.