Guattari's Philosophy of Environment and its Implications for Environmental Education in (Post)Colonial Africa

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Abstract

In this essay I introduce Guattari's philosophy of environment and focus in particular on his ecosophy which comprises three interlocking dimensions of self, society and nature. Guattari argues that integrated world capitalism is concerned more than anything else with the production of human subjectivity. He suggests that through its technological arm, the media, integrated world capitalism is producing human subjectivities that are domesticated, that is, passive, dull and uninspiring. The symptoms of the homogenising and normalising effects of integrated world capitalism are evident in suffering occurring in the three ecologies: environment, social and mental. Creating new ways of living (alternative to those configured by integrated world capitalism) requires the (re)singularisation of both individuals and institutions – their uniqueness should be reclaimed. Guattari points out that new ways of living are not to be achieved through macro-political consensus but rather through micro-political dissensus – vectors of dissent open up possibilities for substantive change in serendipitous ways. Furthermore, transformative events in one of the ecologies can have similar effects in the other ecological domains. In my essay I explore some implications Guattari's expanded idea of ecological niche has for environmental education in (post)colonial Africa. In doing so I give particular attention to the notion of sustainable development.

Introduction

In (post)colonial Africa, all spheres of life are threatened by new forms of colonialism. I refer here to the homogenising and normalising effects of globalisation. In efforts to resist the 'bad' effects of globalisation some Africans have called for the restoration of traditional African cultural practices such as *ubuntu*.[1] In this essay I suggest that Africans need to (re)invent new ways of living in order to meet the challenges presented by the continent's many and complex problems, but that this cannot be achieved by invoking old formulae (including cultural values) that were appropriate when the world was a different place. I argue that globalisation should be viewed not as a completed project, but as a complex process with holding places and opportunities for outcomes that are different to its perceived homogenising and normalising effects. I also suggest that African cultural values such as *ubuntu* should not be abandoned, but instead be imagined differently. In my exploration I draw on Guattari's philosophy of environment because it provides a useful lens for understanding Africa's multidimensional problems and it also opens up ways of navigating the routes of escape from the negative effects of globalisation.

Specifically, my essay has two purposes. First, I shall introduce the work Felix Guattari,[2] one of the most challenging and complicated critical thinkers of the past few decades. I introduce his philosophy of environment generally but focus specifically on his idea of *three ecologies*. Second, I shall explore some implications that Guattari's work might have for environmental education in (post)colonial Africa.

Guattari's Philosophy of Environment

In his culminating work as single author, *The Three Ecologies* (1989, translated into English in 2001), Guattari argues that capitalism has expanded to a globalised form which he calls integrated world capitalism. For him, the symptoms of increasing domination of integrated world capitalism is evident in the sufferings of three interlocking elements/domains of self, society and nature – the suffering of the earth is evident in the suffering of self, society and nature. Guattari (2001:27) writes:

> The earth is undergoing a period of intense techno-scientific transformations. If no remedy is found, the ecological disequilibrium this has generated will ultimately threaten the continuation of life on the planet's surface. Alongside these upheavals, human modes of life, both individual and collective, are progressively deteriorating. Kingship networks tend to be reduced to the bear minimum; domestic life is being poisoned by gangrene of mass-media consumption; family and married life are frequently 'ossified' by a sort of standardisation of behaviour; neighbourhood relations are generally reduced to their meanest expression … It is the relationship between subjectivity and its exteriority – be it social, animal, vegetable or Cosmic – that is compromised in this way, in a sort of general movement of implosion and regressive infantilisation.

Guattari emphasises that integrated world capitalism is not only engaged in the destruction of the planet's biophysical base and the erosion of social relations, but also engaged 'in a far more insidious and invisible penetration of people's attitudes, sensibility and minds' (Pindar & Sutton, 2001:6). Guattari refers here to the homogenising effects of integrated world capitalism's ideological arm (the mass media) which is producing a human subjectivity which is domesticated, that is, passive, dull and boring. The mass media is integrated world capitalism's most powerful non-violent weapon for achieving social control across the globe. As Pindar & Sutton (2001:6) point out: '…everyone nowadays has a television set. Many people in the Third World will have televisions long before they have proper irrigation'. One effect of the mass media is the erosion of human subjectivity in all its uniqueness – a notion that Guattari calls 'singularisation' (Guattari, 2001:33). What is occurring is a process of desingularisation resulting in the normalisation of subjectivity. For Guattari, singularity is threatened in a similar way to species of plants and animals that are endangered. Desingularisation does not, however, mean that individuals are passively shaped by integrated world capitalism and its technological arm, the media. Put differently, desingularisation does not simply concern the passive shaping of 'people's attitudes, sensibility and minds' through socialisation, but rather that integrated world

capitalism and the dominance of the mass media limits the discourses available to them. As Davies and Banks (1992:3) write:

> Poststructuralist theory argues that the person is not socialised into the social world but interpellated into it. That is, they are not passively shaped by active others, rather they actively take up as their own the discourses through which they are shaped.

Guattari (2001:27) argues that political groupings and those in authority appear not to understand the full implications of the state of the planet since they remain content with offering technocratic solutions to problems such as industrial pollution. He argues that clarity on issues of suffering in the three ecological registers (the environment, social relations and human subjectivity) might only be gained through an ethico-political articulation, which he calls *ecosophy*. For Guattari, ecosophy shares with traditional ecology a concern for biological species and the biosphere, but also recognises that 'incorporeal species' are equally endangered and that an entire 'mental ecology' is in crisis.

Guattari's work is framed in a similar vein to much of the history of Western radicalism, that is, 'filled with accounts of impending crisis and imminent social breakdown' (David & Wilkinson, 2002:133), as a precursor to improved conditions. As David and Wilkinson (2002: 133) write: 'Visions of the apocalypse have almost always tended to prefigure our hopes for regeneration and renewal; the "dialectics of disaster" have consistently appeared as "the preface to hope"'. Guattari's 'dialectics of disaster' is evident in his discussion of the symptoms of suffering in the three ecological registers; symptoms such as biophysical degradation, unemployment, oppressive marginalisation, loneliness, boredom, anxiety and neurosis – what Doel (2002:218) has described as 'a well-worn litany of horrors'. Hope, for Guattari, is captured in notions of transversality and (re)singularisation, in new ways of living that are not configured by integrated world capitalism but rather in an ecological praxis that affirm the three ecologies. My interest in this article, however, is not to take issue with Guattari but rather to explore the generative possibilities of his work for environmental education in (post)colonial Africa. Before doing so, I shall discuss some of Guattari's ideas in more detail.

For Guattari the three ecological registers originate from a common ethico-aesthetic discipline and the forces which act upon them are similar, however, they are also distinct from the point of view of the practices that characterise them – the different styles that produce the three ecologies he calls *heterogenesis* (Guattari, 2001:69). Heterogenesis involves processes of continuous (re)singularisation, that is, a 'singuralisation of subjectivity as opposed to a transcendent, universalising and reductionist homogenisation' (Guattari, 2001:90). Furthermore, he points that large institutions such as that of the State operate by homogenising (macropolitical consensus) but could be simultaneously 'defeated by heterogeneous formations whose singularity cannot be represented (micropolitical dissensus)' (Guattari, 2001:90). In summary, Guattari, suggests that through thinking tranversely interactions between the three ecologies may be understood – that suffering in one particular domain is reflected transversely with suffering in the other domains. Moreover, that (re)conquest in one domain serves as a catalyst for conquests in the other domains. But, such conquests are not to be achieved through

consensus but rather through dissensus, through the exercise of creative autonomy, leading to 'a gradual reforging and renewal of humanity's confidence in itself starting at the most miniscule level' (Guattari, 2001:69).

Importantly, Guattari argues that we cannot create new ways of living by reversing technological advancement and go back to old formulas, which were pertinent when the planet was less densely populated and when social relations were much stronger than they are today. But, new ways of living are to be found in responding to events (associated with integrated world capitalism) as potential carriers of new possibilities. As Pindar and Sutton (2001:9) write:

> It isn't a question of exchanging one model or way of life for another, but of responding to the event as the potential bearer of new constellations of Universes of reference. The paradox is this: although these Universes are not pre-established reference points or models, with their discovery one realises they were always already there, but only a singular event could activate them.

Guattari further argues that integrated world capitalism pervades contemporary social life and is delocalised and deterritorialised to the extent that it is impossible to locate the source of its power. Efforts to create new ways of living might therefore be viewed as processes of reterritorialisation, that is, reclaiming the local and also the uniqueness of individuals and institutions such as schools, municipalities and so on. The resingularisation referred to here might result in individuals and institutions being paradoxically more united and increasingly different. Processes of resingularisation through an expanded view of ecological niche (Guattari's ecosophy) promise to produce understandings which could enrich and transform our sense of ourselves and our relationship to the planet.

The Three Ecologies and the (Post)Colonial

In the same sense that Guattari argues that integrated world capitalism is not chiefly concerned with the production of goods but rather with the production of subjectivity, colonialism might also be understood in this way. Masolo (1997:288) argues that the postcolonial aims at rectifying the power order produced by the one-sidedness of colonialism. He suggests that the postcolonial aims at (re)empowering and (re)subjectivising those disenfranchised under the colonial order but that the objectives of (re)empowerment and (re)subjectivisation are not clear in African philosophy as a postcolonial discourse. Unlike Masolo, I am less interested in clarifying notions such as (re)subjectivisation and along with Deleuze and Guattari (1991:108) see the overriding aim of philosophy as its capacity to contribute to a future that is different to the present. They write: 'Philosophy does not consist in knowing and is not inspired by truth. Rather, it is categories like Interesting, Remarkable or Important that determine success or failure' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991:82). I want to think (transversely) of Africa in terms of Guattari's three ecologies and view (re)empowering and (re)subjectivising in terms of his notion of (re)singularisation.

Africa's suffering is evident in Guattari's ecological domains of self, society and nature. The degradation of the natural environment is evident in staggering statistics provided in the Geo-2000 report (UNEP, 2000). For example:

- An estimated 500 million hectares of land have been affected by soil degradation since about 1950, including as much as 65% of agricultural land.
- Africa lost 39 million hectares of tropical forest during the 1980s, and another 10 million by 1995.

In the social domain we have witnessed the breakdown of kinship networks and associated cultural values such as *ubuntu*. In Africa there are high incidences of civil wars, genocide, dictatorships and autocratic rule that are connected to human suffering. Chinweizu (1987:3) points out that through cultural assimilation programmes of Arabs and Europeans, Africans have become severed from their ancestral traditions and alienated from their 'natural'[3] African identity. The alienation of Africans from their cultural traditions is evidenced by Goduka's (1999:27-28) words:

(A)lthough I am an indigenous Xhosa scholar, versed in our traditions, in many ways I am a beginner in tuning into and drawing on indigenous educational philosophies because I have been schooled in Eurocentric epistemologies. Thus living within, beside and in the face of European tradition makes opportunities for a fully indigenous, cultural, personal, social and spiritual life a daily struggle against the framework of Eurocentric dominance.

Environmental degradation and the erosion of human solidarities are related to the production of unprecedented levels of poverty in Africa, to the extent that it is predicted that Africa is the only continent that is expected to experience a rise in poverty levels this century (UNEP 1999). Of course, not all of Africa's suffering is the consequence of colonialism, however, much of its geopolitical, socio-economic and environmental development have been shaped by the colonisation of the region and its subsequent partition in 1885 among several European countries (UNEP 1999).

But, the self has also suffered as a consequence of colonisation. I refer here not only to material suffering, but mental suffering – what wa Thiong'o (1986) and Chinweizu (1987) refer to as the colonisation of the (African) mind and the need for its decolonisation. Chinweizu (1987:2) draws on Shakepeare's *The Tempest* and in particular his parable on colonialism, referring to Prospero (ruler of the island), who upon return to his own country handed power over of his colony to Ariel, 'his obedient native auxiliary, but not to Caliban who had fought against his rule'. Chinweizu (1987:9) suggests that decolonising the African mind might be viewed as a battle between the Ariel and Caliban tendencies within each African since no African who has lived in the last 100 years has escaped the taint of the colonial experience. This notion is, perhaps, evident in Goduka's words that I quoted earlier.

The effects of integrated world capitalism, and its associated new forms of colonialism are increasingly felt in Africa. The homogenising and normalising effects of the mass media and other forms of globalisation provide further challenges to the struggle for an 'African identity'. Guattari's three ecologies gives us a particular vantage point from which to view

Africa's suffering – that we can view suffering transversely, that is, across the three ecological registers. Africa's future, its hope, its development might lie in firstly understanding that the three ecologies are closely intertwined and that new ways of living might be triggered by an event in one domain, but felt across all three domains. Secondly, that Africa's hope does not lie in turning back the clock by invoking old formulas that were appropriate in pre-colonial times. For example, a parochial view of the cultural value/practice *ubuntu*, in the sense that it has been preserved and has remained untainted by other cultural influences, might be naïve and not useful. Rather, *ubuntu* should be (re)imagined and (re)constructed so that Africans can find inspiration from it that might result in new ways of living. We cannot reverse history, but rather should view scientific and technological advancement (that are appropriate of course) as potential bearers of 'new constellations of Universes of reference' (Pindar & Sutton, 2001:9). As Ramphele (quoted by Enslin & Horsthemke, 2004:24) writes:

> *Ubuntu* as a philosophical approach to social relationships must stand alongside other approaches and be judged on the value it can add to better human relations in our complex society. … The refusal to acknowledge the similarity between *ubuntu* and other humanistic philosophical approaches is part a reflection of the parochialism of South Africans and a refusal to learn from others. … We have to have the humility to acknowledge that we are not inventing unique problems in this country, nor are we likely to invent new solutions.

Thirdly, new ways of living may not be found in monolithism – and are not to be obtained through consensus by way of large institutions such as the African Union (AU). Rather, the basis for inventing new ways of living might rather be dissensus – that Africa's hope and future lie in the resingularisation of people and institutions. Irwin (2003:336) writes: 'Vectors of dissent open up the possibility of real change in surprising, often frightening ways'. If Africa is to (re)conceptualise a framework of society outside of integrated world capitalism then the resingularisation of the territories of African life is crucial. But, what might some of the implications of all of this be for environmental education in (post)colonial Africa?

Some Implications for Environmental Education in (Post)Colonial Africa

The United Nations Organisation (UNO) has declared the next ten years (beginning in 2005) as the decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Some African governments have already embraced the notion of sustainable development as a central idea in their policies. Sustainable development has also been the focus of many debates in/on environmental education over the past decade and therefore it might be fitting to focus on sustainable development in my exploration of some implications that Guattari's ecologies might have for environmental education in (post)colonial Africa.

Sustainable development, a term first used in German forestry, has become deterritorialised to the extent that it now is firmly placed on the agenda of supra-national organisations such as the UNO, and in Africa on the agenda of organisations such as the South African

Development Community (SADC). This is not surprising because sustainable development is a term that has great political appeal – it brings into harmony two highly attractive notions in that it promotes the conservation/preservation of non-human nature most valued, and at the same time allows opportunities for human aspirations to 'develop'. However, as Bonnett (2002:1) argues, sustainable development is a problematic term. It is heavily contested, subject to internal contradictions (the notions of conservation and development are conflicting) and raises epistemological difficulties (for detail see Rist 1997; Bonnett 1999). It is in the political attractiveness that the dangers of sustainable development lie. Its deterritorialisation has resulted in its globalisation, potentially having homogenising and normalising effect(s) on individual and social practices.

In the same way that integrated world capitalism is chiefly concerned with the production of human subjectivity so too might sustainable development be understood. If global(ised) discourses on sustainable development are uncritically taken up in spheres of African social life (including education), the consequence could be the domestication of human subjectivity – subjects that are passive, dull and uninspiring. I would argue that policy instruments of governments (including curriculum statements/documents) take on similar roles to that of the media (integrated world capitalism's technological arm). But how are global(ised) discourses on sustainable development to be resisted so as to create/imagine alternative ways of living? Firstly, as Guattari reminds us, returning to archaisms is not where the answer lies. In this regard, a parochial perspective on *ubuntu* is also not helpful. I refer here to the belief that *ubuntu* is an idea that is natural, that it has resisted all influences besides colonialism, rather than imagined and politically driven. Holding a narrow Africanist view of *ubuntu* has led Makgoba (1996) to contradictorily claim that *ubuntu*, which is by definition speciesist, fosters human's respect for the biophysical environment (for elaboration see Enslin & Horsthemke, 2004:24–25). *Ubuntu*, in my view should rather be invoked in ways that open up avenues for living rather than a nostalgic response to current crises, that is, as a return to old ways of being and doing. Importantly, Guattari reminds us that the creation of alternative ways of living/educating is also not to be achieved by exchanging one model for another, but rather to see the phenomenon (in this instance sustainable development) as a 'bearer of new constellations of Universes of reference'. Therefore if Africans are to transcend ways of living configured by dominant discourses on sustainable development then (re)singuralisation of sustainable development/ sustainability will be crucial and, further, (environmental) educators should invigorate the lines of escape – the answer does not lie in abandoning the term but in how it could become uniquely imagined and expressed by individuals and institutions.

But, let me return to Guattari's three ecologies: environment, social and mental. For Guattari the three ecologies are closely intertwined and so new ways of living (sustainably) require new imaginings of humans' relations(hips) with non-human nature, themselves and self. Here, I shall focus on the two latter-named ecologies, bearing in mind Guattari's contention that change in one of the ecologies triggers change in the other ecologies. I find some resonance between Guattari's mental ecology and some recently published work on 'sustainability as a frame of mind' (Bonnett 1999, 2002; Reid, Tearney & Dillon, 2002; Stables, 2002). Sustainability as a frame of mind would involve breaking old frames: frames configured by colonialism (including

its global version integrated world capitalism) and frames that return to ways of living of the past. New ways of living (sustainably) require new frames of mind that are associated with unique self-expression and experimentation – individual competence becomes the key as a social force of change. But individual competence does not imply isolated individualism, which would of course produce solipsism – mental ecology is not separate from social ecology. It is here that the notion of *ubuntu* may add value so as to avert isolated individualism. But, in forging solidarities (through invoking notions such as *ubuntu*) such solidarities should take on new forms, that is, not based on consensus or monolithism but perhaps based on dissensus where different groups hold disparate positions *vis-à-vis* one another but are united against forces such as (neo)colonialism, integrated world capitalism, globalisation and dominant discourses of sustainable development that are produced by these forces. As Irwin (2003:329) writes with reference to contemporary anti-global protests:

> Contemporary anti-globalisation protest is a remarkable 'rhizome' of radical groups, upstanding citizens, charities, long standing emancipatory organisations, environmental groups, right wing organisations, anarchists, communists and so forth, who have all found a common thread which weaves together their disgust at the solidified locus of financial, discursive and policy flows which have coagulated in supra-national organisations such as the WTO, World Bank, IMF, and various events such as the recent United Nations Earth Summit at Johannesburg.

Educating for sustainability as a frame of mind, or education for (re)singularising sustainability does not necessarily mean that all school structures such as subjects/learning areas should be abandoned but rather that these should serve as channels for new ways of thinking, being and acting. As Stables (2002:7) writes: '[We] might take the view that it remains important to learn languages and sciences and history – but that these should be learnt as much as possible as adventures towards encounters with the unknown, and that students might have some other adventures, too, whether in or out of school, so that, even in education, the experience can exceed the expectations, whether or not the frames are changed….Let the educational quest always be for the unknowable'. In our quest for the unknowable, our hope lies and our escape from the ways in which our lives (human subjectivity) could become desingularised.

Conclusion

The 'environmental crisis' is not just humanity's relationship with nature that has gone wrong but also a crisis of human-human relations and a crisis of self. Guattari argues that the contemporary environmental crisis might be understood as an effect of integrated world capitalism and its technological arm the mass media. Crucial to understanding both the homogenising effects of integrated world capitalism and the charting of alternative pathways to its influence is an appreciation of the delicately intertwined nature of the three ecologies: environment, social and mental. For Guattari, new ways of living are not be found in returning to values of the past, nor in replacing existing models with new ones, but rather in seeing

current events as bearers of alternative constellations. Modern(ist) education, like the media, has reproduced subjectivities configured by integrated world capitalism, but crucially could become a key site for creative change.

Guattari's discriminating lenses offers a more nuanced reading of environmental education in (post)colonial Africa. Africa's suffering as a consequence of colonialism (read transversely to integrated world capitalism) is evidenced by the three ecological registers: environmental degradation, erosion of kinship networks and wounded psyches. Africa's escape from (neo)colonialism is not to be found in the invocation of archaisms nor in consensus politics through supra-national organisations such as the AU, UNO, etc. New ways of living are to be found in the 'discovery' of alternative paths provided by the very events/institutions that have propensities towards homogenisation and normalisation. Even though sustainable development is a problematic term, it should not be abandoned but could be invoked as the frames of mind in pursuit of the unknowable and perhaps the unimaginable.

Notes on the Contributor

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Endnotes

1   *Ubuntu* is an African word comprising one of the core elements of a human being. The African word for human being is *umuntu* which is constituted by the following: *umzimba* (body, form, flesh); *umoya* (breath, air, life); *umphefumela* (shadow, spirit, soul); *amandla* (vitality, strength, energy); *inhliziyo* (heart, centre of emotions); *umqondo* (head, brain, intellect); *ulwimi* (language, speaking) and *ubuntu* (humanness) (Le Roux, 2000:43). The humanness referred to here finds expression in a communal context rather than the individualism prevalent in many Western societies (Venter, 2004:151). Battle (1996:99) presents the concept *ubuntu* as a concept that originates from the Xhosa expression: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye Bantu*. Not an easily translatable Xhosa concept, generally, this proverbial expression means that each individual's humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others and, in turn, individuality is truly expressed.

2   Felix Guattari, a (post-)Lacanian psychoanalyst and political activist, is perhaps better known for his collaboration (over many years) on several works with Gilles Deleuze. His partnership with Deleuze began during the 1968 student protests in France, a period when Guattari and Deleuze also enjoyed a close friendship with Michel Foucault. Guattari and Deleuze's early acquaintance during this period of intense political activism produced their first seminal work, *Anti-Oedipus* (1972, English translation 1984). They further collaborated on its sequel, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980, English translation 1987). Their partnership culminated in the 1991 (English translation 1994) publication *What is Philosophy*, published a year before Guattari died. However, the amasingly productive partnership between the two has tended to obscure Guattari's own work to the extent that their partnership has been described by

the awkward adjective 'Deleuzo-Guattarian' (Macey, 2001:171). The privileging of Deleuze's work is also evident in a growing body of knowledge/interest on/in rhizomatics/rhizomantics in relation to education (see, for example, the special issue of *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 2004).

3   I use scare quotation marks here because identity is imagined/constructed rather than natural.

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