

‘Hate-fuelled nationalism is a partner of corporate neoliberalism’

Interview with Vandana Shiva - Ecofeminist Activist

Pablo Castaño / Adrià Rodríguez

Vandana Shiva (Dehradun, 1952) is one of our time's most recognised ecofeminist activists and intellectuals. A doctor in quantum physics, she was one of the founders of the World Social Forum, a pioneer in opening up the debate on agroecology and seed control, and the author of more than 15 books. Since 1987, she has been the head of the agroecological farm and seed bank Navdanya in northern India and helps to organise peasant struggles all over the world.

CTXT meets Shiva in the old industrial area of Fabra i Coats in Barcelona, where she has come to participate in the Fira Litoral de Barcelona, a meeting of critical publishers. There, the Indian activist and intellectual engages in a conversation with Yayo Herrero in front of an audience of around 700 people.



La física y activista ecofeminista Vandana Shiva durante la entrevista. / Adrià Rodríguez

You share a diagnosis of the ecological crisis with Yayo Herrero. How would you describe it?

The first element in understanding the ecological crisis is that it is being caused by unlimited extraction. This happens because corporate and colonial rights have been granted and are rewarded with absolute power.

Presenting extractive activity as progress hides exploitation, hides the violation of the self-organisation of systems,

how trees are connected to rivers, how the soil is connected to agriculture, and how plants' biodiversity is connected to insects. All these relationships are fundamental.

Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana spoke of autopoiesis and proposed a total paradigm shift by making us see that living systems are self-organised. Extractivism destroys the internal organisation of living organisms and their relationships with everything else that is alive. This is how all destruction becomes an externality. You destroy, but you hide the destruction.

Part of this comes from Cartesian thinking and Francis Bacon's mechanical thinking. Mechanical thinking takes things apart and gives life to each part separately. People educated in this mechanical thinking find it difficult to see relationships. Relationships were destroyed in an economy of death.

How would you define the ecofeminist perspective in agreement with Yayo Herrero and other thinkers such as Maria Mies?

Ecofeminism is saying that the Earth is alive, that the Earth sustains and maintains life. And it is saying that women are not a passive second sex. They are not an object to be possessed or controlled. Women sustain society. Their care, their invisible work, is the real economy because they take care of the reproduction and regeneration of society. But they are also the carers of the Earth. Because women have been given the actual work [of care], which doesn't count as work, they have to work with nature. For example, in India, women are the main water providers. They know when a well is drying up when a river is drying up. Because they work with nature, they are the first to respond to the ecological crisis.

One of the debates about the relationship between technology and the green transition is that of renewable energies. The IPCC and other organisations say that one of the actions necessary to tackle climate change is to promote renewable energies, but these require large amounts of minerals and land. How can we promote renewable energies without creating another new wave of extractivism

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and colonialism?

My first criticism of the reductionism of renewable energies is that we forget that there are many types of energy in the world. Every living system is an energy generator. Schrödinger, the quantum physicist, wrote that the difference between machines and living systems is that machines require external energy and generate entropy, which is energy wasted in the form of emissions. In contrast, living systems do not require external energy. A seed becomes a tree using its own energy and the sun's energy, which is negative entropy. The whole question of positive and negative entropy has been hidden, but this is at the heart of the energy and climate debate.

To look only at energy consumption and say that we will continue to consume the same through renewable energies is not to address the debate on energy generation and to hide the demand for resources and land. That is reductionist in every sense. It is problematic how the climate issue has been reduced to energy consumption, to the search for renewable energies and to a question of temperature. To think that climatic phenomena come from the atmosphere alone without seeing what is being done to the earth is to separate what is connected. We cannot solve an ecological problem, which is a problem of how life is being dismantled, by maintaining the industrial,

engineering and mechanical mentality. As Einstein said, you cannot solve a problem with the same mindset that created it.

Another focus of your work, which is also linked to the issue of technology, is pesticides. In recent months, farmers in Europe have protested many times. One reason for the protest was the European regulation restricting the use of pesticides in agriculture. In response, the European Commission reduced that regulation's stringency level. How can agricultural and family economies and the environment be protected?

The protests began over an economic issue: the free trade agreement with Mercosur. Free trade destroys all economies while allowing corporations to prosper. It does not pit Europe against the Global South; it is the working people of Europe and the Global South who suffer.

The globalised agro-industrial system is a recipe for increasing production costs and collapsing agricultural

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incomes; it is an unfavourable economy. This is why farmers are in crisis. All over the world, wherever free trade and further industrialisation are promoted, farmers are responding.

The protests are because farmers understand that there is an attempt to get rid of them, that they have become a dispensable entity: we are tending towards farming without farmers. Industry seized these protests as an opportunity because it distributes phytochemical products through the big farmers' unions. They got some of them to talk about the removal of pesticide regulations, but that is the voice of the corporations, the poison cartel. It is not the voice of small independent farmers.

The issue of pesticides has a lot to do with seed control, a struggle in which you have been involved since 1987. How has the issue evolved over the last 30 years? Is it still as relevant?

Life will always be relevant. The renewal of living systems by their own means will always be the basis of freedom in nature and society. Why did I get involved in the issue of seeds? In 1987, I was invited to a meeting where the new biotechnologies were being discussed. At that time, there were no GMOs in the world; the first genetically modified organism was commercialised in 1992.

The industry had mapped out its path and said its main objective was to generate seed patents. Now, a patent is a monopoly you get because you invented something new. So, the first thing that had to be done was to change the nature of the seed in people's minds. The seed had to stop being something that made itself and become a product invented by Monsanto.

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A commodity?

More than a commodity: a creation. A commodity recognises that the farmer has a role and that the land has a role. When we talk about intellectual property over seeds, Monsanto is God. They have assumed the role of the creator and have turned something that renews and multiplies itself into something they have made. But a seed is not a machine.

That's why I started creating community seed banks like Navdanya. Secondly, I decided to start working with the Indian government and parliament to draft laws respecting the integrity of life on Earth. We wrote laws that say that plants, animals and seeds are not entities created by humans and, therefore, cannot be patented. These laws are still in force in India. The third thing I decided to do was to take the seed companies to court for stealing them. It was what I call 'Columbus's second arrival'. They simply steal and say, 'it's my intellectual property'. And we told them, 'no, you stole it and therefore it is biopiracy'.

Another key issue in the ecological crisis is water. The Mediterranean region, where we are, is currently suffering from drought, and more water scarcity is predicted in the future. This is a cross-cutting issue that encompasses social, ecological and political dimensions. How can we look at the water problem from all these different points of view?

We don't just need to unite the multiple dimensions of water but the multiple dimensions of an interconnected planet. The climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis are one and the same. When we forget about biodiversity and

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destroy it, the climate is destabilised because biodiversity manages the climate. In the Chipko movement, the women realised that if you destroy the forest, you get drought and flooding. So, managing water means managing the regeneration of biodiversity, of forests, of plants,

of the land, of pastures. All these are water management systems, just as the climate issue is. Climate havoc concerns destabilised hydrological systems, the real killers in the Global South. Every disaster in India in which people have died is a water disaster. When a cyclone hits, people die. People die when a glacial lake melts, and there is a flood.

It is necessary to link all the dimensions of water. When the government builds a dam for the rich farmers in the valley, the rest will lose their access to water. As all resources are interconnected, they must be managed as common goods and for the good of the whole community. They cannot be divided up for extractive use by the most powerful. Right now, the privatisation of water and the water futures market are issues of great relevance that people resist. The water in Delhi would be privatised, and we managed to avoid it.

The ultra-nationalist Narendra Modi of the BJP party will probably be re-elected as prime minister of India, while the far right has prospects of growth in Europe. What these parties have in common is that they combine nationalism and neoliberalism. How can we explain their rise in the context of the ecological crisis?

*In 1991, I wrote the Manifesto for an Earth Democracy. In 1999, we blocked the WTO summit in Seattle. During this period, neoliberalism developed, along with the deregulation of trade and the economy and the death of democracy. This new culture of death and destruction also began. Samuel Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilisations* is key to this moment. It comes to say that I can only know who I am when I know who I hate. Hatred was created as the currency of identity. All spiritual traditions have said something different: knowing who you are*

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has to do with how you relate to the earth and your community. You exist in the community; as a community, you are part of nature, and you produce together with nature. We have moved from that to a negative identity, a culture of destruction, violence and death. What

exists today is the culture of pesticides, of poison: 'Know who you must exterminate'. That agenda of knowing who your enemy is has become the national agenda.

But a nation has to do with how the streams flow, how healthy the forests are, how healthy the citizens are, and how organised they are to take care of the commons. These are the issues that define a community. However, today, cultures, economies, and democracies have been emptied of community and have become the property of corporations. This is how cultural nationalism has become a partner of corporate neoliberalism.

At one point, you spoke of the need to create a G-7000 billion. What kind of democratic institutions do we need to defend an Earth democracy?

True democracy is possible together with other beings that inhabit planet Earth. Growing food organically is a practice of Earth democracy; it has to do with the freedom of all life forms and their interconnections. Saving seeds, for example, is not just about saving humans; it is also about saving pollinators. We must reclaim that.

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- ❖ **About the authors:** **Pablo Castaño** is a freelance journalist and political scientist. He has a PhD in Political Science from the Autonomous University of Barcelona and has written for CTXT, Público, Regards and The Independent. **Adrià Rodríguez** is a researcher and project technician at the Urban Research Institute of Barcelona. He has a degree in Fine Arts (UB), a Master's degree in Creative Documentary (UAB) and in Degrowth, Political Ecology and Environmental Justice (UAB).
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Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemper.org/>
e-mail: informa@jussemper.org