



## Opinion

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# The Symbolic Dimension of Agroecology



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## Opinion

The term Agroecology has at least three meanings widely used in literature: it means either a science that studies the agroecosystems; a social and political movement and, finally, a way of doing agriculture. In this way agroecology also means a production system based on several philosophical principles of respect for life which are expressed in practices such as the avoidance of toxic substances and genetically modified organisms and the promotion of the management of agrobiodiversity, among other aspects.

As a science, agroecology focuses on the study of the ecosystem and the cultural characteristics of agroecosystems, although the literature still does not clearly define exactly this object of study. Many investigations revolve around a specific type of crop, which might be considered as an agroecosystem itself. In others cases it is taken as reference for agrarian property systems, mainly the farm. The latter refers to the set of agricultural-type biophysical elements managed individually or collectively by an owner or by an association of farmers with property rights. In order to discuss these concepts, the author proposed to differentiate individual fields of cultivation, pastures and forest sites that exist within a given farm as “minor agroecosystems” and reserve the term “major agroecosystems” to the farm that encompasses such minor agroecosystems. The more or less homogeneous groups of farms or major agroecosystems in a particular landscape would constitute a “matrix of agroecosystems” and would be the link between agroecology and landscape ecology.

Agroecology then focuses on the study of the wide range of symbolic (science, law, myths, philosophies, ideologies) and organization (i.e., social, economic, political) relations that steer the different technological alternatives created by human beings to produce food, fibers and other materials in their different agroecosystems. These agro ecosystems cover the range from an indigenous Amazonian chagra to a sophisticated farm using precision agriculture and genetically modified plants. This entire spectrum can be studied from the perspective of agroecology.

As a social and political movement, the term agroecology encompasses the positions of criticism of the agrarian development dominant model. From this perspective, it severely criticizes the unequal distribution of land (which occurs mainly in the poorest countries, the so-called planetary South), the asymmetries of power between national states and transnational companies and their monopolist business of seeds and inputs and the recent phenomenon of land grabbing. Agroecology also opposes modern technological forms of agricultural production that end up polluting soils and water, reducing biodiversity and affecting the health of millions of people around the planet. Political agroecology defends food sovereignty, security and autonomy, denounces the violation of the farmers’ rights to exchange their seeds and seeks new ways to produce healthy food for all population under equal conditions.

In line with the above and particularly from the second half of the last century, the farmers of the world who do not accept the conventional model of modern agriculture have been coming back to ancestral technologies and recovering old forms of agricultural production that were tested in the course of more than ten thousand years of history. These farmers have taken the ancestral practices and have been fused them together with the contributions of the modern agrarian sciences. Several currents of agroecology have emerged as a result, such as ecological agriculture, organic farming systems, biodynamics, natural agriculture, permaculture, and other production systems that are similar, in spite of their different denominations and purposes, because they have become in different forms of alternative agriculture in the face of the dominant conventional model.

In this way, “agroecology” can express each of the above mentioned meanings and currently it is very difficult to make distinctions, given the strength of the significance that the term hides due to its polysemous and universal nature.

However, there is another major use of the term agroecology. This dimensions is not explicitly named, but underlies the

previous three: the symbolic dimension, a term that seems strange to agricultural professionals (agronomists, veterinarians, foresters and field biologists), but which is widely accepted among professionals of the social and human sciences.

Culture, in its broadest aspect, refers to the set of theoretical structures emanating from human thought (symbols), which have been linked to their forms of socioeconomic, political and military organization and are expressed in their technological platforms. Symbols are all those constructions of thought built by humanity to relate to nature. They include myths, scientific theories, laws, customs, values, ethics, morals, aesthetics and ideologies, among other aspects. Symbols, organization and instruments are the three pillars of the culture through which human beings have profoundly transformed ecosystems. In addition, no other human transformation has been more profound and constant than agriculture. Moreover, there is nothing that has greater influence in agriculture, than the symbols on which it has been built.

The first and perhaps most important symbolic meaning of agriculture is its value as a means to preserve life, through food. This conception, understood and practiced by agroecology, reveals the profoundly sacred nature of the art of producing food, because it includes all human and non-human beings. And by all we indeed mean everyone: the old priest and the old pensioner of the modern city; someone who went to war or who remained as a worker in the manufacturing factories; the student and the unemployed; the returning mariner or the company guardian who does not move from his post. Food is a fundamental human right and this is a fact for those who practice agroecology in its different expressions.

Moreover, agroecology helps reconnecting agriculture to one of its lost symbols: solidarity. The generosity of the land, in the hand of the ecological farmer, provides food to those who need it. Hence the emergence and growth of agroecological markets that are currently multiplying in the cities or on the same farms to take away the power from the transnational companies.

Respect, as a hidden symbol of the agricultural trade, is another contribution of agroecology. The life of other beings that intervene in the field of cultivation (weed plants, microorganisms, arthropods, mammals, birds) is respected, because each of them plays a role in the global balance of the agroecosystem. The premise of not killing extends not only to the inhabitants of agroecosystems (insects, fungi or bacteria that are no longer considered enemies) but also to all human and non-human beings that come into daily contact with agriculture. If in the world a single poisoned person dies with a product used in an agricultural system, then this system is not valid in the light of ethics because it does not entail respect.

The way to produce food reveals the importance that each farmer gives to this sacred act. And it is precisely these agroecological farmers, located at the base of the food pyramid, who take the first step to grant a sense of ethics to agriculture, to include in it from the beginning the values of solidarity, respect, generosity and love that can be lost afterwards in the mercantile processes, in the oligopolistic supermarket and in the creeping politics.

Nevertheless, the production and distribution of food is also a reason to celebrate and enjoy. These symbols of happiness have been recognized by agroecology when it is placed with farmers to celebrate with them the days of planting, the days of hard work and the days of harvests. And these dates and moments inspire songs and poems due to their intrinsic beauty. Subsequently, agroecology is poetry (another symbol), because it helps writing in letters what other men write in sweat and sacrifice.

Finally, the agroecology scientists know that one of the most powerful symbols of modernity (positive science) has been criticized and that at the same time a new paradigm with popular knowledge is being built, where dialogue is held with the peasant and indigenous communities. The agroecology invites scientists from all disciplines to create different ways to produce, conserve and trade organic products. Now the questions do not revolve around the products or the plagues, but the way in which the agroecosystem itself should be organized to direct its total biomass production to a certain degree and as a result, thanks to its own biodiversity, the agroecosystem can regulate such populations or cure such diseases. The questions are now transferred from the part to the whole. And the scientific apparatus wins out because its questions are diversified and its methodologies become more complex, more creative. Organic farming invites us to think, rather than to copy.

Food is, then, the basis of human life and in its production, the knowledge and techniques employed and the ethics implicit in the proposed model occupies a prominent place. Its repercussions expand to the very essence of social organization because if a society welcomes this type of agriculture in depth, it will have to modify its education, political institutions, systems of access to land, market circuits, worker-employer relations, in a word, its same feeding practices.

Then yes. Agroecology is dance, poetry, respect, solidarity, understanding, new and integral knowledge, ethics and values. However, this fourth dimension of ethics and values, which is at the base of the other three dimensions, remains somewhat unknown and undervalued by almost all segments of society.



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