

Sustainability and environmental racism: Intersections in the Brazilian reality

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ABSTRACT

The notion of sustainability began to manifest itself politically as a response to a growing global environmental crisis a long time ago and had its origins in humanity's awareness of the risks posed by global environmental hazards, especially those resulting from nuclear detonations and radioactive fallout in the 1950s. And central to these concepts was the idea of sustainable development, a term that encapsulates a set of paradigms aimed at utilizing resources to meet human needs while considering the imperative of environmental preservation. However, despite the optimistic outlook, the reality of sustainable development has been undermined by several challenges, including environmental racism. The emergence of environmental racism, a phenomenon in which environmental policies and practices disproportionately affect individuals or communities based on race, intersects with the pursuit of sustainability. Thus, this work, with the objective of contributing to the resolution of these issues, acting as a complement to the authors' master's and doctoral studies, proposes a non-exhaustive answer to the following question: what are the intersections between environmental racism and sustainability in Brazil? To answer this question, the concepts of sustainability, with a focus on sustainable development, and environmental racism were analyzed in order to propose what are the connections between them. As this research unfolds, it aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue and efforts to create a more sustainable and equitable future. That said, the present research did not aim to exhaust the subject. The methodology used in this article was inductive, through the collection of bibliographic bases on the subject.

Keywords: Sustainability, Environmental racism, Sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

Among the annals of global sustainability and visionary leadership, one name stands out as a beacon of vision and influence: Gro Harlem Brundtland. Serving as the esteemed former Prime Minister of Norway, Brundtland's legacy extends far beyond her political tenure. At the helm of a crucial initiative, she coordinated the creation of a groundbreaking document entitled "Our Common Future," a monumental work that would come to be revered as the "Brundtland Report." As the report found its way into the world in the second half of the 1980s, little could be predicted about the resonant importance, profound impact, and lasting legacy it would propagate not only in subsequent decades but also in those yet to come.

That said, even before the Brundtland Report, the notion of sustainability began to manifest itself politically, as a response to a growing global environmental crisis. This awareness, rooted in the mid-twentieth century, had its origins in humanity's awareness of the risks posed by global environmental hazards, especially those resulting from nuclear detonations and radioactive fallout in the 1950s. And central to these concepts was sustainable development, a notion first articulated by the avant-garde Brundtland Report. The term encapsulates a set of paradigms aimed at utilizing resources to meet human needs while



considering the imperative of environmental preservation. The central message of the report proposed a future where development was sustainable, meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

However, despite the optimistic view, the reality of sustainable development has been marked by several challenges, including environmental racism. The emergence of environmental racism, a phenomenon in which environmental policies and practices disproportionately affect individuals or communities on the basis of race, intersects with the pursuit of sustainability. This complex relationship between environmental justice and sustainable development is particularly evident in the Brazilian context, where historically marginalized populations continue to bear the burden of environmental degradation, inadequate infrastructure, and economic inequality. Despite the constitutional commitment to inclusive rights, the practical application of these principles has lagged behind, perpetuating systematic racial and socioeconomic disparities.

Disparity in access to basic services, such as water, sanitation, and education, also perpetuates environmental racism. In urban areas such as São Paulo, where a substantial portion of the population is black, marginalized communities often reside in peripheral areas characterized by inadequate infrastructure. Such areas are more susceptible to the impacts of natural disasters, and the resulting psychological trauma is compounded by limited accessibility to mental health services.

This complex interplay between sustainable development and environmental racism highlights the urgent need for policies that promote equitable access to resources, mitigate systematic discrimination, and uplift marginalized communities. The path to rectifying these injustices involves not only changes in policies, but also a profound shift in social attitudes, recognizing the intrinsic worth and dignity of all citizens.

In the Brazilian context, environmental racism is not limited to the present. It has deep historical roots, stemming from colonial processes, racial subjugation and exclusion. Indigenous, quilombola, and riverine communities have been victims of distorted perceptions, often seen as obstacles to development rather than contributors to a diverse and inclusive society.

Addressing environmental racism within the context of sustainable development requires comprehensive reforms, careful consideration of economic policies, and the active participation of marginalized communities in biopolitical decision-making. The quest for equitable living conditions requires a reassessment of the consequences of socio-economic reforms on historically marginalized groups and the adoption of an intergenerational perspective that protects the rights and dignity of present and future citizens.

Thus, this work, with the objective of contributing to the resolution of these issues, acting as a complement to the authors' master's and doctoral studies, proposes a non-exhaustive answer to the following



question: what are the intersections between environmental racism and sustainability in Brazil? To answer this question, the concepts of sustainability, with a focus on sustainable development, and environmental racism were analyzed in order to propose what are the connections between them. As this research unfolds, it aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue and efforts to right historical wrongs, alleviate environmental injustice, and create a more sustainable and equitable future. While progress may be gradual, the commitment to change remains unwavering, driven by the conviction that every citizen deserves the opportunity to thrive in an environment characterized by justice, dignity, and equity.

SUSTAINABILITY

In the annals of global sustainability and visionary leadership, one name stands out as a beacon of foresight and influence: Gro Harlem Brundtland. Serving as the respected former Prime Minister of Norway, Brundtland's legacy extends far beyond her political tenure, as she was the coordinator of the document titled "Our Common Future," also known as the "Brundtland Report," for which she inspired the name.

In the second half of the 1980s, when the aforementioned report was published, it may not have been possible to glimpse its importance, impact, and power of dissemination and conceptual perpetuation in the following decades - and, as it seems, in the decades to come.

This was because, as pointed out by Mondino, "The Brundtland report represents a fundamental act for the introduction of the concept of sustainability into legislative frameworks." The report's spark became a bonfire of global proportions, introducing the need to consider sustainability as a "fundamental paradigm for action".

According to Sneddon, Howard, and Norgaard,

The Brundtland Report serves as an important historical milestone for several reasons. First, Brundtland's definition of sustainable development – invoking the needs of future generations balanced with the unmet needs of the world's current population – is the most widely accepted starting point by scholars and practitioners concerned with environmental and development dilemmas. Second, Brundtland signals the emergence of the "environment" as a critically important aspect of international governance. Therefore, as rudimentary and incomplete as it may seem, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) indicates recognition by national governments (both North and South) and practitioners of "development" at all scales that ecological, economic, and equity issues are deeply interconnected. Finally, we argue that "Our Common Future" is a critical time frame. He initiated an explosion of work on development and sustainability through which we charted the course of sustainability thinking and practice. In addition, a number of interdisciplinary areas have emerged in parallel that – as we will argue later – provide a basis for a renewed intellectual, ethical, and political commitment to sustainability. (Code 39)

However, long before the Brundtland Report, the idea of sustainability had already been politically manifested in the definition of the term development, in response to the societal perception of a global environmental crisis. This was an accomplishment that had been in the works for a long time, with the most



recent origins dating back to the 1950s, when humanity first became aware of the existence of global environmental risks.

Between 1945 and 1962, there were 423 atomic detonations and radioactive fallout spread thousands of miles from the test sites, which sparked a heated debate in the scientific community. Since then, driven by the process of globalization, the world, governments, international organizations and the global community, despite capitalist pressures and individualism, have adopted a different stance towards the environment. And this same process of globalization accelerated not only the understanding of environmental damage, but also the pace of consumption of material goods and the development of countries, which required the creation of new concepts to guide life and science.

One of these concepts is sustainable development, the initial premise of which was also elaborated by the avant-garde Brundtland Report. The term, which "[...] encompasses a set of paradigms for the use of resources that aim to meet human needs [...]", takes into account that "[...] Everything that surrounds us needs special care so that it continues to exist. Therefore, economic and socio-political sustainability only exists if environmental sustainability is maintained."

As written in the Report:

Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept of sustainable development implies limits—not absolute limits, but limitations imposed by the current state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. But technology and social organization can be managed and improved to pave the way for a new era of economic growth. The Commission believes that widespread poverty is no longer inevitable. Poverty is not only an evil in itself, but sustainable development requires meeting everyone's basic needs and giving everyone the opportunity to realize their aspirations for a better life. A world in which poverty is endemic will always be prone to ecological and other catastrophes." (Code 39)

In addition, according to Hajian and Kashani, the increase in poverty, "the depletion of the ozone layer and the cause of global warming, the depletion of natural resources and the risk to some species of animals and plants, and the pollution of water and air" is what triggered the attempt at a global response. However, what began as a strategy against ecological disaster has evolved and expanded, and nowadays has turned into a much more complex economic and social necessity. "The evaluation of financial techniques in many countries has demonstrated that rapid economic growth has precipitated critical issues from the point of view of sustainable development, including social, economic and environmental sustainability."

That said, the need for sustainable development, which seems to have begun as a result of poverty, still encounters social issues, especially those related to race and class, as a major obstacle.

Thus, as before, the need to name phenomena emerges once again and, in the context of sustainable development, what was once considered a mere reflection, a side effect, of the development of cities and states, is now known as environmental racism, as will be reported below.



ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

In the 1990s, Bullard had already written that "The current environmental protection apparatus is broken and needs to be fixed. The current apparatus manages, regulates, and distributes risks," a reality that does not seem to have changed.

Environmental injustices, although they seem like recent topics in the literature, are an old subject. In fact, they are as old as the topic of race. However, in this second case, much has changed, as "the nature of racism has become appreciably more subtle and structural," which, considering the slow pace of the judicial apparatus around the world, has led to the "claim of environmental racism not fitting into the existing judicial construct of racism." This, however, does not make environmental racism any less "real" than other forms of racism.

An early concept of environmental racism, elaborated by Chavis, consists of "racial discrimination in environmental policymaking and the enforcement of regulations and laws," as well as the exclusion of certain groups composed of people of color from leadership within the environmental movement, and "the deliberate targeting of communities of color to toxic waste facilities, the official authorization of the presence of poisons and pollutants that threaten the lives of communities of color."

For Bullard, this refers to:

"[...] to any environmental policy, practice, or guideline that differentially affects or harms (whether intentional or unintentional) individuals, groups, or communities on the basis of race or color. Environmental racism is just one form of environmental injustice and is reinforced by governmental, legal, economic, political, and military institutions. Environmental racism combines with public policy and industrial practices to provide benefits to white people, while shifting costs to people of color. (Code 39)

The urbanization of cities is one of the main causes of environmental racism, with no randomness in the "attribution" of part of society to suffer the effects of environmental degradation in a more direct way. In fact, the so-called "Tigres", black people enslaved in the Brazilian colonial period, were the basic sanitation service of the city. Their task was to empty "containers with human excrement and also to provide water for consumption and daily use to the residents of Casa Grande, mansions and public offices", but they themselves had no (or almost none) access to such services.

Nowadays, the distribution of the population in urban spaces, according to Baptista and Santos, still follows a model of inequality typical of urbanization, "where the populations living in the peripheries and favelas, more vulnerable due to their lower income, education, color, gender and race, are the most affected and vulnerable to various risks and environmental degradation."

"[...] especially among communities and traditional peoples, such as quilombolas and indigenous peoples. Causes related to economic development, such as agribusiness and the construction of dams, have promoted environmental, cultural, and social degradation, often involving entire communities. In urban areas, the situation is no different. The defense of the right to property has significantly



marked the history of the formation of Brazilian and Latin American cities. Although the social function of property was recognized, market freedom always prevailed over state control, allowing the best housing areas to remain reserved for the components of a certain layer of society that could acquire the urbanized land. (Code 39)

Outcomes at the individual level can be affected by systemic racism; However, systematic racism can affect outcomes on a larger scale, such as neighborhood conditions. Therefore, it is possible to extract evidence that there is a directly proportional relationship between structural social racism and environmental racism, which conditions the black population to have less access to health, education, decent housing and a healthy environment to live with the same dignity as the white population.

Thus, the convergence between environmental racism and sustainable development can create difficulties and paradoxes. While sustainable development promotes environmental protection and resource management, the reality seems to be very different from the theory, which raises the motivating question of this research: what is the intersection between sustainability and environmental racism in Brazil?

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM IN THE BRAZILIAN REALITY

In Brazil, as in several other countries around the world, issues related to sustainable development do not always work in favor of the entire population. A part of society is relegated to an existence without access to sustainability and a healthy environment, exposed to a greater risk of involvement in natural disasters and, to a large extent, race influences this division between those who have access to a dignified life and those who do not.

With a history of slavery, the Brazilian territory went through a colonial process of subjugation and segregation of the newly freed black population, forced to live on the margins of society and without fully enjoying the rights of national citizens. After that, the dictatorial period and the process of redemocratization also demanded the action of racialized social movements.

Maurício and Borges, bearing this in mind, demonstrate that the Brazilian state has used its economic interests as one of the engines for racial subjugation, promoting segregation by redefining urban spaces, "projecting an unequal and racially discriminatory city model."

"[...] The coincidence of racial discrimination with the imposition of unfavorable socioeconomic conditions for the black population has led to the worsening of spatial segregation, forming true zones of environmental sacrifice, which compromise access to the rights to housing, public health, basic sanitation, infrastructure, employment, transportation, security, health, leisure and education." (Code 39)

Although the 1988 Constitution provided for inclusive rights, aiming precisely to mitigate, even if partially, the nation's past inequalities, the practical application of the guaranteed rights has not yet gone



beyond mere existence at the theoretical level. "In addition to the limitations related to income, a significant portion of the black and indigenous population was subjected to environmental marginalization, occupying hills, garbage dumps, allotments devoid of basic sanitation [...]". At the same time, the indigenous population was and still is expelled from their ancestral territories.

Currently, in the city of São Paulo, for example, almost 40% of the population is black. This part of the population, for the most part, occupies the outskirts of the city, places where the lack of water and basic sanitation is more frequent. However, this reality is not the result of mere coincidence. On the contrary, as Baptista and Santos state:

"These results, linked to issues of income, mobility, education, health and violence (average age of deaths and homicides), make evident the population profile of each neighborhood, making it impossible to dissociate the perspective of territorial occupation and urban space from the socioeconomic conditions of the population (MARICATO, 2000). [...] According to Agyeman (2003), deaths can be caused by police violence, urban violence caused by drug trafficking, or diseases that affect these populations due to the lack of diagnosis and preventive health treatment, as well as access to basic sanitation, which we also call preventable deaths. However, few studies show these correlations, while the numbers of sociodemographic indices, access to or lack of urban infrastructure, and the high or precarious environmental conditions of each of these urban spaces studied are undeniable." (Code 39)

Currently, the black population represents a significant portion of Brazil, but environmental racism is not limited to them. On the contrary, indigenous peoples, quilombolas, riverside communities, among others, are also victims of a distorted perception. Seen as exotic and underdeveloped, these communities represent an obstacle to development and the interests of the state, which sometimes results in their disappearance. On the subject, according to Santos, "If the savage is, par excellence, the place of inferiority; Nature is, par excellence, the place of exteriority [...]. But since what is external does not belong, and since it does not belong, is not recognized as equal, the place of externality is also the place of inferiority.

And the harms resulting from environmental racism are not limited to material and physical harm. The psychological impacts of natural disasters, for example, are more intense in marginalized groups, who also largely find it difficult to treat these psychological traumas due to a lack of access to state-provided psychological care services.

Given this panorama, for Muniz, the need to implement "[...] policies to change the reality that involves the Brazilian population is evident, in order to overcome [...] the inertia of the Public Power", after all, it is up to the State to realize the rights that guarantee an ecologically balanced environment, a right provided for, inclusively, in the Federal Constitution.

With this in mind, Abreu believes that the Brazilian reality can be changed:

"The tragic facet of biopolitics with environmental racism, disrespect for vulnerable groups and the formation of environmental excluders can be rescaled in a positive way. It is possible that the excluded groups, seen only as a mass of votes (number of votes) and not as citizens who deserve



respect and whose fundamental rights must be guaranteed, will leave their position of excluded and resume their citizenship furtively forgotten by the state machine. (Code 39)

The precarious situation of thirsty Brazilians - a flagrant example of environmental injustice - which was an electoral platform for many politicians - and still is, can be mitigated with the effective participation of citizens in biopolitical decisions, with the collection of promises made in the elections and with the struggle for the defense of the fundamental rights of these sertanejos who have no political and economic strength. who don't have a voice, who don't have visibility, but who have dignity. These Brazilians are worthy citizens and this condition of environmental exclusion is not fair to them. The sub-citizenship of these environmental outcasts cannot be accepted as natural. Thus, it would be up to the State to assess the direct and indirect consequences of social reforms - even more so when they are economic in nature - on historically marginalized groups. These consequences should also consider intergenerational and intragenerational plans to ensure a dignified existence in the present and in the future."

Of course, a change in the state's stance of this magnitude does not happen overnight. In fact, it is the result of years of studies and gradual improvements, social movements and public policies aimed at protecting the environmental rights of citizens to which they are entitled but do not have access. This research sought to contribute to this process, which has been going on for decades and certainly still has a long way to go.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Gro Harlem Brundtland name is a landmark of vision and influence in the fields of global sustainability and visionary leadership. Her influence as coordinator of the "Brundtland Report" transcends her time in office, inspiring an idea of sustainability that has endured over time.

The report, released in the 1980s, established the need for sustainable development and emphasized how closely related environmental, economic and equitable factors should be. The fundamental idea of sustainable development, as proposed by Brundtland, has evolved to be a compass for academics, practitioners, and decision-makers navigating the complex interplay between human advancement and ecological preservation.

The seeds of sustainability were planted ahead of the Brundtland Report in response to threats to the environment on a global scale. The detonation of atomic bombs and the realization of the resulting global ecological damage raised awareness of these concerns in the 1950s, and a shift in public perceptions was fostered by the pace of globalization in the following decades, which led to a reassessment of economic expansion, material consumption, and environmental preservation.



As a response to natural disasters, sustainability has become a complex social and environmental necessity that addresses challenges such as poverty, resource depletion, and global warming. A pivotal point in the rhetoric of sustainability – environmental racism – has emerged. The idea emphasizes the systematic disadvantages faced by marginalized groups due to racial discrimination in environmental policymaking, as well as the deliberate targeting of communities of color to suffer the direct repercussions of environmental degradation.

In Brazil, spatial segregation and the accumulation of environmental threats in vulnerable areas are the result of the historical legacies of slavery and later of discriminatory policies, and by unfairly exposing vulnerable populations to environmental risks and restricting their access to essential services, this type of injustice aggravates already existing inequalities. The situation in Brazil is a clear example of how environmental racism and sustainability are intertwined.

Urban planning, social institutions, and economic policies all carry heavy historical legacies of slavery and racial prejudice. With this in mind, the realization of environmental rights for marginalized populations requires coordinated efforts on the part of the state, encompassing social reforms, inclusive policies, and equitable decision-making. While change is gradual and requires ongoing dedication, progress toward bridging the gap between sustainability and environmental justice is imperative.

The present work did not seek to exhaust the theme, but to contribute to the debate around it. As humanity strives to achieve harmonious coexistence with the environment and among diverse populations, the lessons of Brundtland's legacy, along with the urgency of combating environmental racism, provide guiding principles for shaping a more just, equitable, and sustainable future. The journey ahead requires a collective commitment to dismantle systemic inequalities, correct historical injustices, and foster a renewed ethic of responsibility for both people and the planet.



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– which was once an electoral platform for many politicians – and still is – can be mitigated with the effective participation of citizens in biopolitical decisions, with the collection of promises made in the elections and with the struggle for the defense of the fundamental rights of these sertanejos who have no political and economic strength, who don't have a voice, who don't have visibility, but who have dignity. These Brazilians are worthy citizens, and this condition of environmental outsiders is not fair to them. The sub-citizenship of these environmental outcasts cannot be accepted as natural." (ABREU, Ivy de Souza. Biopolitics and Environmental Racism in Brazil: The Exclusion of the Environmental Excluded. *Legal Opinion*, v. 12, n. 24, p. 87-99, 2013. Available at: [Link](#). Accessed August 12, 2023. s.p.).

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