

## Abstract

This chapter follows the tribulations of a socio-ecological project at the periphery of one of the world's megalopolises, São Paulo. It investigates the circumstances under which the agroecologists involved in such projects create meaningful worlds through the cultivation of ecological awareness. I show how sustainability comes to figure as a central value in the agroecological movement, which is widespread throughout Latin America.

## Keywords

Sustainability and value

Sustainable development goals (SDGs)

Sustainable living

Socio-ecological projects

Agroecology

Ecological awareness

Indigenous intelligence

Personal development

São Paulo, Brazil

Social exclusion

Social housing

MTST (movement of workers without a roof)

## 1. Introduction

Now that the oxymoron (sustainable development) is decisively being let to blur into fuzziness (sustainability), anthropologists will have to pay attention, more than ever, to what has been elided (development). The economy that can continue forever is not developing in the same way or at the same rate or level as the economy that is asked to grow limitlessly; its nature has altered. Thinking anthropologically about human environmental relationships will thus remain incomplete, unless we provide an explanation of how people conceptualise nature and act in and in relation to it under current conditions of economic development and globalisation. Issues of knowledge and reasoning, as well as moral commitment and decision-making, have clearly emerged as unavoidable theoretical cornerstones for this work. It has also become clear that such an endeavour cannot be carried out from within the discipline of anthropology alone. With what other academic disciplines should anthropology carry out the project of documenting human environmental relationships from a nature,

society, and development perspective? This question raises the issue of knowledge co-creation, familiar enough to those involved in 'action research.' What kinds of ethnographic collaboration will be recognised as ethically acceptable by those embarked on transition journeys towards 'sustainability'? Although neither of these two questions are novel, they take on new meanings (and have different implications) now that the very purpose of research seems to have shifted quite significantly. Not only are we to examine commitments to values that are deeply implicated in our common future, but we are also expected to work collectively at bridging different values and interests as we seek workable solutions to intractable and complex problems, not least because our research must demonstrate its 'impact.'

'Sustainability' has intensified the traffic of concepts, technical terms and metaphors between activism and science. Development keywords do not necessarily come from academia, but may end there, whether they have journeyed through policy cycles or not (Martinez-Alier et al. 2014). Whatever else it will do, the anthropology of sustainability will thus have to describe bureaucratic contexts, decode discourses, map ambiguities and contradictions, and assess claims. Jeffrey Sachs (2015), for instance, announces in his new book that: "sustainable development (SD) is a central concept of our age. It is both a way of understanding the world and a method for solving global problems." Those among us who have followed the tribulations of SD over the last thirty years take note of the subtle changes in conceptualisation, meaning and intent, as well as the general evolution of aspirations, structures, and process that Sachs' words imply. What makes 'development' (whether economic, social, human, or sustainable) anthropologically so interesting is the fact that descriptions of are always also (and unashamedly so) prescriptions for. This allows us anthropologists to trace over time and map over space the constant traffic of concepts, technical terms and metaphors within and between expert networks, academic circles and mobilised actors. There is however something new in the discourse of sustainability underpinning the 'sustainable development goals.'<sup>2</sup> The call is no longer meant for governments and corporations alone; it mobilises every citizen. Each of us must stop behaving unsustainably; each of us must be the change we wish to see in the world.

Given that there are many collective ways of experiencing the world, the dynamic interface between natural environments and human societies is necessarily mediated by values, evaluations and judgments. Anthropological research is predicated on the dilemma of portraying the 'native point of view' without having necessarily to share it. This separation, however, becomes difficult to maintain when examining commitments to values that are deeply implicated in our common future. Difficult, but not impossible, as I shall try to demonstrate in this chapter. Anthropology can usefully contribute to the committed study of sustainable development if it renews its attention to the values, norms and principles marshalled by people as they act to make the world a better place. To research sustainability as a value, I start where an anthropological enquiry always starts, with an ethnography. I focus on a socio-ecological project in a popular neighbourhood of São Paulo, and follow a number of actors bent on living their lives sustainably. I discuss their determination to create positive change through professional actions and personal commitments, the difficulties they face, and some of the controversies arising from the decisions, choices, and course of actions they promote. These actors self-identify as agroecologists, and I show how sustainability comes to figure as a central value in

this movement, which is widespread throughout Latin America. I conclude with a few general remarks aimed at guiding further research on and analysis of what I call, for lack of a better term, sustainability ~~mobilization~~[mobilisation](#).

## 2. A Project to Combat Social Exclusion Eecologically

Projeto Arcadia<sup>3</sup> is an educational centre attended daily (after or before school) by 700 children age 5–15. Children take their meals at the centre, and can choose activities from a wide range of performing arts, computing courses, and sports. The centre was created in the early 1990s by a group of artists and wealthy citizens in response to the plight of street children—so graphically depicted in films such as *Pixote* (1981). Projeto Arcadia is located in one of the newer and poorer neighbourhoods surrounding São Paulo on a site that was acquired in the early 1980s by a well-known architect with a view to develop it. Government regulations aimed at curtailing urban sprawl in the conservation areas that protect the city's water supplies were passed shortly after the acquisition. Faced with a stalled housing development, the architect accepted to make the thirty-hectare site available free of charge for the development of his friends' philanthropic project.

As an association dedicated to fighting social exclusion through a holistic vision of personal development, Projeto Arcadia is not dissimilar to other well-known Paulista alternative education programmes. The amount of land it controls is unique, though, and so is the abundance of aquifers and fragments of Mata Atlantica (native rainforest) it contains (see Fig. 11.1). In the thirty years or so Projeto Arcadia has been on the architect's land, it has never used more than 10% of it, leaving the rest to informal (and often illegal) neighbourhood uses, such as the pursuit of recreational activities, cattle grazing, or plant growing for medicinal and religious purposes. There have also been regular attempts to invade this land over the years. Each time, this privately held property has benefited from the intervention of government authorities. Shacks built overnight in haste have been systematically destroyed, and their occupants swiftly removed.

Fig. 11.1 Remnants of Mata Atlantica in Arcadia, by a creek

When I first visited the centre, about ten years ago, the calendar year was punctuated with popular events, especially the carnival parade in February. In addition, talent shows were organised periodically to bring the children attending Projeto Arcadia together with those attending privileged schools in richer neighbourhoods. The goals have broadly remained the same over the years, even if changes in personnel, board members, trustees, sources of funding, and other factors have meant that education is increasingly being considered as a means to finding employment, rather than as a source of personal fulfilment. Offering a holistic education (regarded as the birth right of all children, regardless of their social or economic background) remains the primary goal of Projeto Arcadia's staff and volunteers. In recent years, however, a more 'business-like' view of cultural activities, with an emphasis on 'priority skills' has progressively replaced the ethos of beauty appreciation and the valorisation of artistic performance. Many literacy and numeracy

classes today are offered by volunteers sourced through the social corporate responsibility programmes of large companies. Rugby and other sponsored sports events have gradually replaced the hubbub of *capoeira* classes, theatre performances, circus skills, and carnival rehearsals. Whereas attempts at bringing an ecological outlook to the site gained prominence ten years ago, the issue of social housing has come back to the fore today.

To better understand the arguments of those involved at Projeto Arcadia who wish to combat social exclusion ecologically and those who tend to think that nature conservation is a matter for the rich, I present below the ethnographic portraits of two friends, Dill and Andrea, whose dream it has been to make the centre more 'ecological.' I then discuss a recent land invasion. The demands to build a social housing complex on the thirty-hectare site will leave little or no place for the agroecological activities initiated by Dill, Andrea and their supporters. I end with a visit I made with Dill to an ecopark some years ago to illustrate further the tensions between different versions of sustainability and ecology through which São Paulo's urban fabric is being reconfigured today.

When I first met her, Andrea (an actress) was working full-time for Projeto Arcadia, while her friend Dill (a multi-media artist) only came to the centre occasionally. Dill's interest in ecology was at the time more developed than Andrea's. Dill, who liked running workshops and sharing her artistic skills, nourished the dream of opening an alternative environmental education centre in the western part of São Paulo state, which is still largely rural. She had herself taken tens of short training courses on a wide range of practical topics broadly relating to agroecology.<sup>4</sup> The knowledge and experience she had acquired by joining the agroecology movement percolated through her daily life and her artwork in many different ways. Practical and spiritual ecology had become a part and parcel of her personal identity and lifestyle. Agroecology to her was an *art de vivre*, which she liked sharing widely with those around her, from friends and neighbours to the children she taught.

Andrea's interest in ecology was partly triggered by the managing director of Projeto Arcadia, who decided one day to organise an agroecology course. The land had become a kind of commons criss-crossed with public paths, and the director was looking for new ways of using the 90% or more of the site's surface that were not supporting educational activities directly. Several models of what to do with the land had been talked about over the years, including various forest conservation projects, as in one less frequented corner the forest had even grown back. Conversations with the director, members of the pedagogical team, and trustees confirmed that alongside ecological awareness, a desire to explore a range of alternatives for the full use of the property (and by so doing lower its running costs while increasing its revenues) played a role in the decision to organise the course. Should the land be used for an eco-housing project that would provide accommodation for core staff and generate rent revenues? Should there be a kitchen garden to provide some of the food used in preparing the daily meals (at least 1200) served at Projeto Arcadia? Should the property be reforested as a plantation to produce valuable commercial timber in thirty years' time? Or should the regeneration of the Mata Atlantica be further encouraged and the site transformed in a botanical garden or an ecopark opened to the public?

When Andrea invited Dill to participate in the course, she was happy to go along, even if she knew most of what was to be taught. What appealed to her was the promise of new contacts (with their cohort of possibilities, encounters, and chance opportunities) that a course always presents. Dill thus made use of the course very much as she had done in the past with other courses she had taken. It became an additional source of practical ideas to increase the presence and benefits of plants and animals in her immediate environment. She also looked at the course as a means to renew her artistic sensibilities. Some months after the completion of the course, she invited me to see the art projects that she had been inspired to design. In addition to beautiful objects made with clay and fabric, there were the plans of an interactive workshop built around the theme of rainwater storage. Dill had created this pedagogical exercise especially for a deprived primary school where educationalists from [USP](#) (the University of São Paulo [USP](#)) had initiated a community garden as part of their experiments in non-formal education. Having learnt rudimentary measurement techniques (quantities, volumes and ratios), as well as simple agroecological techniques, the school children researched climate reports and calculated average rainfall rates in their part of the city. With Dill's guidance, they started to think about roofs in terms of the total amount of rainwater that can be intercepted and stored. They focused their attention on the roof of a church adjacent to the school, as well as on various school buildings with large roofs. Paper models at various scales were created, as well as clay and wood models of rain catchment devices. When I last saw Dill during that year, she was hoping to create an art installation that would illustrate various agroecological techniques to irrigate the school garden.

Andrea's involvement with agroecology was more sudden, passionate, and short-lived than Dill's. Unlike her friend, Andrea had grown and lived all her life in apartment blocks, with no garden. The agroecology course was designed to get a wide range of users to think about the site from different perspectives, all aimed at grasping the complementary needs and potentials of the many kinds of people, plants, and animals living in and around it. For the first time in the eight years, she had worked at Projeto Arcadia, Andrea actually walked all over the site, both alone and with various groups of learners, each tasked with specific activities, such as looking for insects, finding wildlife, examining streams or tree species, and more. I got the impression that the course gave coherence to what Andrea had picked up about agroecology from conversations with Dill and other friends. This may be the reason why it had such a deep impact on her. Through conversations, I came to realise that she was now thinking in terms of the site as a whole, while before she would refer mainly to what was taught in the classrooms that bordered the site's entrance. The course made another type of impression on Andrea; it taught her (the hard way as we shall see below) that wildlife had made itself at home on large stretches of the land. 'The wildlife has figured out that humans only use very specific parts of the site,' she told me one day, 'and well-trodden paths,' she added. One day, one of the agroecology instructors took Andrea's team downhill to a place where the site's complex topography could be apprehended readily, not very far behind the caretaker's house. By so doing, he had inadvertently disturbed a ground nest of feral [Africanized Africanised](#) honeybees.<sup>5</sup> The swarm viciously attacked the intruders, as well as the caretaker's dogs, who had followed the party. Andrea and three other learners had to be taken to the hospital; two young dogs, stung to death, died during the night. A local beekeeper came in the morning to remove the nest, which he

accommodated next to his beehives. When she came back to Projeto Arcadia a couple of days later, Andrea involved herself even more intensely with the course, asking many questions, reading avidly, and developing strong bonds with the instructors.

The course over, Andrea created a play with the children to whom she was teaching drama, as if moved to express through her trade—~~theatre~~—the stronger bond she had developed with the land. The play, which involved plants, healing, and a number of agroecological themes, was performed and toured for several months, after which Andrea campaigned for the creation of a community garden at Projeto Arcadia. Having convinced at least some of the trustees and members of the management team of the propriety of her proposal, she obtained the right to spend 50% of her time on the development of this new line of activity. During the two years that followed, and with the full backing of the managing director and the active participation of a group of children and some parents, Andrea committed herself entirely to the budding community garden. She took courses in horticulture, seed savings, composting, and rainwater harvesting, while building contacts with a number of conservation NGOs, with which she partnered to write funding applications. Thanks to donations and a small grant, tools, seeds and equipment (as well storage and drying facilities) soon filled the two classrooms earmarked for the garden project. Work parties were organised to build a rainwater tank and a nursery. One weekend, volunteers from a large Brazilian corporation joined project workers and parents to plant hundreds of fruit trees on the slope where Andrea had been stung by ~~Africanized~~ Africanised bees. With additional funding, a small lake was dug at the foot of the hill, below the orchard. Produce from the kitchen garden started to make their way into the daily meals served daily at Projeto Arcadia (Fig. 11.2).

Fig. 11.2 Meeting at Projeto Arcadia

Andrea's passion and success grew, but so did the opposition to the agroecology project. She had supporters (the children, staff, mothers, neighbours, and board members involved in the gardening work), but not everyone was on her side. Tensions grew when it became clear that the agroecology project was not just an additional line of activity, but an entirely new way of looking at Projeto Arcadia's objectives, goals, and overall purpose, as well as, and more critically, the future of the site as a whole. Conversations I have had with a range of protagonists highlight the divide between those who understood and embraced the concept of including nature conservation within the city's poor neighbourhoods, and those who saw this concept as antithetical to progress and social justice. The poor need affordable housing and education, I was told. Projeto Arcadia is a *projeto social* (a 'social project') people often added, implying that the land should be used to shelter people, not to conserve habitats or to grow food. As months passed, the dispute grew more personal; it now opposed Andrea directly to the architect who had once granted the land, and who was now slowly coming back on the scene. The pro-agroecology managing director left for another job in the north of Brazil, and the architect was elected chair the Board of Trustees. Gradually, and through a process of organisational restructuration, he became increasingly involved in the day-to-day running of Projeto Arcadia. Clashes with Andrea multiplied, until she finally resigned. Resigning had been a very painful decision, she told me a few years later. Her emotional and professional investment in Projeto Arcadia's community garden had

been such that she found it difficult to work elsewhere. For months, she tried to involve herself in various social and/or conservation projects around São Paulo, but she could no longer muster the same level of commitment. Depressed and unemployed, she decided to resume her career as an actress instead. The last time I met Andrea, she was happily married with a baby. She works today for a leading national organisation that offers a wide range of cultural and educational activities based on strong ideals of social progress. She no longer has time for agroecology. Dill does not see Andrea very often these days. She too has had a series of disappointments with her agroecological projects. The lay and clerical personnel in charge of the church and the primary school where she had hoped to create the art installation were not impressed with the children's models of rainwater catchment techniques. As for the idea of using the church roof to collect rainwater, it was, to them, simply preposterous; spending money on it was out of the question. Dill has since gone back to making art objects for individual clients. Their orders have a spiritual or a personal dimension that leave little place for her agroecological dreams and inspirations. Her life also has changed. Now a grandmother, she often travels long distances across São Paulo to help her son or her daughter with childcare. She has therefore less time to look after street cats or rescued dogs; even the worms in her wormery have suffered from erratic feeds. She has also decided to give up her garden allotment, which went to a close friend with more time on her hands. One day, she hopes, when her grandchildren are older, she will go with them to a piece of land she timeshares in the countryside. 'The state of São Paulo is extensive; many parts are still rural,' she tells me. 'Crossing the giant metropolis to reach the countryside takes so long, though, especially at the weekend.' Moreover, Dill loves the city, and cannot envisage moving to the countryside permanently; she'd feel too isolated. Agroecology has increasingly become for her a set of aspirations and spiritual values that nourish her inner life and orientate her aesthetic appreciation of both urban and rural landscapes. Circumstances, opportunities, and situations she feels she has little control over constrain Dill's agroecological applications and techniques. Given her current priorities (to make a living as an artist and to care for her family), she has had to put on hold practical and material realisations. After Andrea's departure, the community garden lost much of its impulse. The two classrooms reverted to literacy and numeracy activities, and the remaining tools and equipment were shifted to the greenhouse. During my latest visit (Summer 2015), I saw no plant or seedling in the greenhouse, which had become a kind of storage space. The downsized garden area had been fenced off. Weeds had taken over, except for a bed or two that kitchen staff still cultivated. More dramatically, the orchard and the fragments of Mata Atlantica had entirely disappeared under a sea of undulating iron. Projeto Arcadia had been invaded two summers earlier by 1200 families 'without roofs.'<sup>6</sup>

This land invasion caused much commotion and disarray among staff, management, children, parents, neighbours and supporters of the project alike. People I spoke with described to me how well organised and politically determined the invaders were. They had arrived one night by car, setting the camp in less than a day, connecting the shacks hastily built to the electrical grid and to water supplies, drilling holes for toilets, and opening roads. Two years on, I could observe many solar panels on the roofs, as well as hyperbolic TV antennas. There have been five other land invasions in the locality since, all in conservation areas 'protected' through government legislation. Legally speaking, the invasion of Projeto Arcadia is of a different order,

given that the charity privately owns the land. However, in the minds of many,<sup>7</sup> Projeto Arcadia legitimately owns only the part used for educational activities; the rest of the property is considered to have been left idle and empty, including the orchard and the fragments of Mata Atlantica.<sup>8</sup> The board of trustees could have used the force of the law to expel the invaders (as it did many times previously), but given Projeto Arcadia's social aims and the size of the invasion (and the leaders' determination), the decision was taken to offer political support to the families demanding 'decent social homes for the poor.' Under the architect's leadership, therefore, the trustees have fostered peaceful dialogue between the invaders and the government, and facilitated a series of mediation, hoping for the speedy delivery of the 'Minha Casa Minha Vida' (My House, My Life) project. The plan agreed so far is to divide the property in various parts. Projeto Arcadia would only retain the land it already occupies for its educational and cultural activities, and sell back to the government the land needed to create a social housing park, a commercial centre, and a primary school complex. The status of the remaining area (and whether it will be used for nature conservation) is still under discussion.

### 3. Agroecology Projects as Worlds

How one goes about combatting social exclusion in a megalopolis like São Paulo? For Dill and Andrea, agroecology was part of the solution—at least for a while, until the obstacles they faced multiplied, thwarting their efforts and those of the children, parents, and co-workers with whom they had started developing a community concretely rooted in its natural environment. As their story illustrates, the paths agroecological projects tread are full of difficulties and uncertainties; not many evolve into resilient worlds.

In continuation, I focus on three particular land practices (provisionally called cultivating, sheltering, and rewilding) to shed light on Andrea's and Dill's ecological vision of world making and on the obstacles they have faced. I discuss these land practices in relation to three related stories: (1) a visit with Dill to an ecopark located at a walking distance from her home in the Pinheiros district of São Paulo; (2) the recommendations made for the social housing project to be developed on the Projeto Arcadia site by one of the instructors of the agroecological course mentioned earlier; and (3) an agroecological encampment at the Cúpula dos Povos during the Rio+20 summit.<sup>9</sup>

### 4. Cultivating the Land

All agroecologists see cultivation as the most basic (in the sense of the most fundamental) relationship humans may develop with the places they choose to occupy. Cultivating the land means working together to produce the nutrients that feed a community, as well as the surpluses that widen a community's exchanges, activities and partnerships. In the context of Projeto Arcadia, cultivating also meant reviving people's knowledge of the land with its complex webs of ecological interactions, while ensuring both the spread of this knowledge throughout the entire neighbourhood, and its transmission to the children attending the centre. To cultivate thus also meant strengthening already existing peasant and folk land uses, for instance, pasturing cows and growing medicinal herbs and magical plants.

The ecopark Dill brought me to visit and to photograph one afternoon ‘is not about cultivation,’ she remarked as we passed the gate. ‘It is beautiful, but it has no soul,’ she added (Fig. 11.3).

Look at the neat rows of salads, carrots and other vegetables. They are to be relished visually, not to be turned into food. I have asked employees about these vegetables. No one knows. It does not matter whether they are eaten or not; they are part of the design. They are grown for their colours, their patterns, and their appearance. Can you feel how deserted this place is? I get intimidated when I come here. Let’s go to the art centre now. You can create your “trash art” with brand new products (i. e. not recycled). What about that?

Fig. 11.3 Neat beds in the Ecopark in Pinheiros

Dill laughed at the absurdity of turning agroecology into an aesthetics for urbanites. Having walked straight to the ecopark from her house made me realise the extent to which the latter had become a cohesive world. Even if small, rented, and surrounded by high-rises that threatened to march on and close in, Dill’s house beat at the rhythm of her cultivating skills. Her minuscule garden was full of edible plants, as well as soil making and rainwater collection devices. Humans, cats, dogs, ants, plants, banana stalks, objects, seeds, seedlings, songs, worms, spirits and more all seemed to form part of a giant organism that opened and closed to the outside world in tune with the house’s inner life. The art project she was working on at the time, entitled ‘Life’s Fabric,’ captured the house’s pulse perfectly.

Cultivation reskills, boosts resilience and self-reliance, and enhances the confidence of individuals and communities. Cultivation can happen at any scale, large or small, depending on the size of the community that cultivates. With the site now squatted by a social movement pressuring the government to build more social housing, new cultivation ideas are emerging. As the site is so densely settled at present, it is no longer practical to develop extensive food-growing areas within Projeto Arcadia. The vast orchard having been destroyed and the extensive community garden largely abandoned, there are talks of cropping on building roofs. One adviser to the project has suggested that ‘Minha Casa Minha Vida’ blocks of flat could be equipped with micro-scale structures that would support individual or collective gardening. A multitude of small businesses supported by financial incentives could be created for growing fresh food to be sold in the commercial centre, which could become a hub for new ideas and practices. This would help create new, diversified income streams in an area where unemployment is high. Roberto (one of the agroecological instructors) has even talked of partnering the new social housing complex with a not too distant agroecological farm. This would reconnect people with food supplies in many ways, as well as ensure the supply of fresh products that are essential for people’s health. Various ‘community supported agriculture’ schemes could be developed, including arrangements allowing for social housing recipients and their children to escape from the city and spend some time on the farm in the countryside. Cultivation, in short, blurs the entrenched divides between rural and urban areas, and opens up new ways of thinking about the land and using it through living on it.

## 5. Sheltering with Nature

Dill invested more of her energy, time and agroecological creativity in her home than Andrea did. I have not discussed this with them, and do not know for sure whether this fact represents a difference in temperament, or circumstances.

An agroecological approach to sheltering reveals a primary concern with ecological functions. A roof, for instance, is seen first and foremost as an opportunity to collect rainwater to be used as a source of water for drinking and washing as much as to irrigate a garden. A window functions to let sunlight in, but also to modulate heat penetration and retention. Communal living arrangements are preferred over single habitation. Dill has always shared her house with housemates, even before she divorced and before her children left the nest. To recreate an ecologically functional and meaningful world, agroecologists also try to live where they work or to develop their projects where they live. One of the difficulties Andrea faced in Projeto Arcadia when she was developing the community garden is that her flat was two hours away from it, a fact partly reflecting the deep inequalities that structure São Paulo's urban fabric.<sup>10</sup> It is in the neighbourhoods around Projeto Arcadia though that Andrea found many of the architectural ideas that she hoped to introduce in the community garden. As already mentioned, agroecology is rooted in popular wisdom, peasant resourcefulness, and folk ecological knowledge.

Neighbourhoods such as the ones that surround Projeto Arcadia are neither rural nor urban; self-made buildings cluster among fields, orchards, or fragments of Mata Atlantica. The developing infrastructure seems to offer the promise that the government has now decided to treat these neighbourhoods as an acceptable extension of the city. If the concrete houses look built for permanence, their inhabitants continue to live transient lives, moving in and out according to work opportunities and the state of their relationships. Although less transient and impermanent than the agroecological camp at Rio+20,<sup>11</sup> the camp set up by the families who invaded Projeto Arcadia in the summer of 2013 shares more traits with it than with the social housing complex by which it will be replaced one day.<sup>12</sup> The planned housing park of cheap, minimal, and unimaginative concrete blocks could not be further away from agroecological sheltering principles. Yet, activists have tried to lobby the architect and the construction firm to improve the design. To them, design challenges for housing, school buildings and commercial buildings are structurally similar. In all cases, the idea is to harmonise the lives of humans with plant life, solar cycles, and water cycles. Housing can be designed ecologically to accommodate human and non-human lives in ways that support both, while enhancing the quality of life of both. These activists have tried to convince the architect to attend to priority alterations that would accommodate, among others, rainwater catchment systems, grey water recycling and ecological waste management. There was also talk of creating biological niches and offer bio-remediation through multiple uses of plants. During my last visit, as the activists were getting nowhere with their recommendations, they tried to convince the construction company of at least ear-marking one building as a prototype to demonstrate the validity of agroecological principles for the social housing sector. Simple and cheap proposals for retrofitting were also made, as a means to influence the companies involved in delivering low-cost housing for the public sector.

I wish I could have listened to more conversations between invaders, local authorities, local dwellers, architects, building companies and activists. Projeto

Arcadia had reached a critical point of its existence, where land use and purpose are being fundamentally redefined in the midst of a national political crisis. Although much more ethnographic research is needed to fully grasp the meanings, values, and moral framings at work in the unfolding of this popular urban development, enough has been presented, I hope, to illustrate that sheltering with nature faces challenges and difficulties of a higher ~~—~~ — one may wish to add structural, order. The realities that are being disturbed by agroecological activists (homelessness, encampment, transience, mobility, sedentariness, housing markets, planning regulations, or speculation) clearly show that what is in the making in marginal zones of social exclusions such as the site occupied by Projeto Arcadia is a new vision of human habitation on earth.

## 6. Inviting Wilderness Back

As readers will remember, Andrea's commitment to transforming Projeto Arcadia into an agroecological project grew in the aftermath of a traumatic encounter with stinging ~~Africanized~~ Africanised bees.<sup>13</sup> Like her, many of the staff, parents and children who took the course were astonished to find wildlife in the remnants of rain forest scattered in the lower part of the site, especially along the creek that runs at the bottom. To the conservation NGOs and the government authorities with which Andrea tried to partner, these rain forest patches were as many visible signs of the disappearing ecosystem, which the state and the prefecture of São Paulo are legally bound to protect. Ironically, the laws restricting housing development had allowed Projeto Arcadia to be created in the first place.<sup>14</sup> Ironically as well, such protection efforts were framed in terms of an urgent priority, the conservation of the last unspoilt (and miraculously surviving) areas of Mata Atlantica. Being located in the upper reaches of the watershed on which São Paulo's drinkable water depends, the conservation of such areas was also justified according to links established scientifically between forest cover and water supplies. Andrea and the agroecologists who were helping her did not contest this language of pristine rainforest conservation, but instead insisted on the need to supplement ecological restoration efforts with agroforestry activities, stressing, in other words, the positive complementarity between cultivation and forest protection. In so doing, they insisted on the compatibility between human access and the maintenance of biological diversity.

Having first come to Projeto Arcadia straight from the Amazon region, I was struck by the commonalities of arguments being used in favour of biodiversity enrichment and community conservation initiatives. The species that make the Mata Atlantica differ from those present in the Amazon rainforest, but the ecological structures share much in common, and I could readily see that the forest fragments Projeto Arcadia were healthy and thriving, devoid from alien species, viral invasions or deadly pathogens. As in so many parts of the world, these fragmented ecosystems seemed to recover best when left alone. It was of course surprising that no one had disturbed these patches gone feral. I heard stories of murdered corpses being dumped in their depths. It could be that such haunting presence deterred people from entering. The whys and hows of people's apparent disinterest in Projeto Arcadia's forest remnants can be established only through further research. In the Amazon region, where the demographic collapse that took place in the ~~16th~~ sixteenth and ~~17th~~ seventeenth centuries significantly complexified a long and slow history of forest

anthropogenisation, what westerners take for pristine wilderness is more often than not the result of abandonment.<sup>15</sup> In this part of the Mata Atlantica, it suddenly occurred to me, faunal and floral species have found refuge in forest fragments out of neglect rather than abandonment. Of course, it is possible that with the 2013 land invasion some of these fragments will have disappeared forever, but it is also possible that some of them, perhaps because of their impractical location, have continued to survive undisturbed.

So what processes of land recovery and disturbance have unfolded here? One may take a historical-ecological view of these forest fragments as the material bearers and physical retainers of human activity, and, in so doing, think about these fragments as the products of the irreversible passage of time. By reflecting upon the multiplicity of times they embody, one comes to see that the future of these forest patches does not depend primarily on an emerging consciousness about humanity's fundamental dependence on non-humans (see Tsing's chapter). Rather, their future is irremediably linked to the ways in which they are being conceptualised and fought over. The agroecologists who planted an orchard at the interface between the forest patches and the community garden aimed at promoting a new form of intervention. By implementing a number of agroforestry techniques, they sought to weave seamlessly the cultivated and the non-cultivated, while allowing parts of nature to exist beyond direct human control, with a view that no matter how small a piece of land, some parts must be 'left alone.' By treating the forest as a place in need of recovery, they thus encouraged a different form of neglect, while blurring all distinctions between intervention and non-intervention.

These forest patches have remained a headache for the architect and the designers of the social housing complex. While they would like to use the 'without roof' invasion as an excuse to increase the overall surface dedicated to human occupation, the conservation laws that prevented the urban development are still in force, and still need to be abided by. Several conversations with the architect have made me realise that the tension between urban development and forest conservation is caused by unexamined ideas linking the poor, the rich, housing, and space for the forest. Neither the architect nor anyone else working on the social housing complex seems to be able to approach forest conservation as non-intervention, or even better, *neglect*.

The parts that are not built over are thought of as requiring even more control and surveillance—hence costly resources, than the built ones. Whether a botanical garden, a green commons, an ecopark, or an educational reforestation project, the conservation area will need to be created, maintained, and guarded against encroachments. The government imposes conservation laws, I was told, but does not allocate credits to implement them. This is the bone of contention. Who owns, and who is responsible for 'green areas'? No one knows for certain. 'No public authority or private actor is willing to assume the cost or the responsibility of protecting the natural environment. 'This is why we have a headache on our hands' I was told. Pushing the discussion further, though, I quickly realised that the main difficulty lay in defining the location and the boundaries of the conservation area; the problem was not simply one of financing it. For many of the well-to-do decision makers involved, the poor were either undeserving of a conservation area, or unfit for it. Philanthropy concerned the facilitation of state-provided social housing. 'These people need

homes, not green spaces' I was told, before being informed of all the risks of vandalism and the costs of security and maintenance.

I did not have the opportunity to discuss these issues with the families sending their children to Projeto Arcadia, or with the families that invaded the site, for that matter. It is quite probable that they share the view that the poor need housing, not green spaces, especially given their demand for 1500 housing units, and the fact that the local authorities are prepared to grant them no more than 350. It is quite possible that they would see the forest patches as unnecessary luxury. After all, one of the most striking differences in São Paulo between a poor and a well-to-do neighbourhood is the number of trees that line the latter, and the total absence of greenery in the former.

There seems to be a shared view of nature as a burden or a liability, as something socially and economically unproductive, a luxury that only the rich can afford or appreciate. In such a perspective, the ecopark in Dill's neighbourhood is not in any way out of place. Its manicured grounds and its museum-like collections of plants perfectly illustrate for the city dweller what ecological functions have been, and, perhaps one day, were. Projeto Arcadia's agroecological vision, on the other hand, held the promise of an entirely different interaction between people and their natural surroundings, one inspired by the extractive reserve model found in parts of the Brazilian Amazon (e.g. Ruiz Murrieta and Pinzón Rueda 1995).<sup>16</sup> Whereas in the ecopark, trees and other plants were neatly aligned as in any colonial plantation (the resulting grid effect being an intrinsic feature of the aesthetic effect sought after), the Projeto Arcadia's short-lived agroforestry experiments offered the promise of a world inhabited according to close observation of ecological processes, a world where people eventually become indigenous to a place (Rival 2009). There is no space here to explore the reasons why agroecology is so closely related to social forestry and conservation programmes in Brazil. Agroecology's subversion of the idea that nature is best conserved as a collection of unproductive places made to be toured by visitors in search of leisure is in any case part of the explanation. If it is the presence or not of nature that materialises the separation of poor and rich neighbourhoods in São Paulo, it is the recognition or not of the value of human labour that differentiates extractive reserves and other conservation areas in the Amazon region (Rival 2012).

## 7. Conclusion

By following the tribulations of a socio-ecological project at the periphery of one of the world's megalopolis, São Paulo, I was able to investigate the circumstances under which actors involved in such projects mesh together the 'environmental' and the 'social' with the aspiration of creating meaningful worlds. In this chapter, I have explored ethnographically some of the ways in which people transform dynamic interactions with ecological opportunities and historical constraints into choices and values. As I have endeavoured to show, if such interactions are without a doubt embedded within sensory and investigatory experiences, they are also framed by enduring discourses on nature, society and development, which often thwart individual and collective attempts to break away from dominant forms of world inhabitation.

The nature/culture dualism has thrown contemporary anthropological theory in a crisis state (Rival 2014). While the material world in which we live is heading for an ecological crisis of global proportion, our leading conceptual frameworks deal with imagined worlds that have no reference to the land we walk on (see Gregory 2005).<sup>17</sup> The way out of this problem is not simply to reassert the merits of a materialist approach against radical virtualism, but, rather, to reconnect the imagined worlds of our subjects (including fellow anthropologists) to the material conditions that give rise to them. As the ethnography presented here illustrates, modes of adaptation are grounded in imagined worlds, which emerge through close observation of ecological processes and inevitably lead to processes of indigenisation. Such knowledge systems do not disappear ~~overnight~~<sup>overnight</sup>, nor do they remain unchanged; rather, they evolve historically, through frictions and clashes with the homogenising forces of capitalist trade. Moreover, the processes of indigenisation brought about by globalisation and commodification transform traditional environmental knowledge in unpredictable ways.

After fifteen years of existence as an 'art against social exclusion' project, Projeto Arcadia was re-planned to grant new values to its land base. Staff, parents and children learnt to see that the forest was growing back amidst the trash on parts of the site. Looked at by some as a whole, the site appeared to offer new socio-ecological possibilities. Gardens were cultivated, trees planted, and a lake dug. The agroecological practices I have briefly evoked in this chapter illustrate the ways in which life and matter come to form an integral part of human social worlds that no longer set nature apart from technology. Agroecologists give shape to lived landscapes by inserting a multitude of ecological relations within social dynamics, thus redrawing the boundaries between living kinds and artefacts. Not everyone, however, chose to look at Projeto Arcadia through an agroecological lens. Instead of seeing the site as a whole-world-in-the-making, some members focused on the growing real-estate value of the property, and, when Brazil's social housing politics heated up, divisions grew more entrenched. Whereas some still defended that 'more ecology in the economy is what we need to create a sustainable world,' others firmly defended the view that Brazil's poor need 'more social progress,' not 'more ecology.'

The ethnographic portraits I have presented in this chapter reveal the extent to which agroecology draws on forms of indigenous intelligence that offer people practical ways of assembling worlds at different scales, and through which new ways of relating ecological and social possibilities may be learnt. I have stressed that world making through agroecology relates primarily to an ability of seeing and articulating 'the whole,' that is, a whole from which one's natural surroundings are not excluded. Sustainability is ~~mobilized~~<sup>mobilised</sup> in this context as a core value to articulate the whole and to change the world for the better. This preliminary analysis can do no more than outline the contours of the value system underpinning the political nature of sustainability ~~mobilization~~<sup>mobilisation</sup>. It has, nevertheless, shed some light on the dynamics of political friction. More specifically, we are now in a better position to understand why whole-world-making projects may trigger political disputes involving tensions over forms of 'disrelations' between humans and non-humans. Politics, therefore, needs to be rethought in terms wider than simple disagreements about modes of relationality or modes of emplacement.

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<sup>1</sup> “As an intellectual pursuit,” he continues, “sustainable development (SD) tries to make sense of the interactions of three complex systems: the world economy, the global society, and earth’s physical environment,” before adding that: “SD is also a normative outlook on the world, meaning that it recommends a set of goals to which the world should aspire.” “The sustainable development goals (SDGs) will guide the world’s economic diplomacy in the coming generation.” (Sachs 2015: \*\*).

<sup>2</sup> The United Nations General Assembly decided in September 2014 that the report produced by the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (after two years of deliberation) would form the basis for integrating the SDGs in the post-2015 development agenda. The SDG list can be found at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/> accessed on 29/12/2015.

<sup>3</sup> All the names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

<sup>4</sup> Agroecology is at once a science, a set of practices, and a movement (Wezel et al. 2009; Altieri and Toledo 2011). Agroecological studies began in the late 1920s as the study of how crops interact with their ecosystems, before expanding in scope in the 1980s in response to the limitations of the Green Revolution. While the fusion of these three dimensions of agroecology is especially prevalent in Latin America, agroecology as a grassroots movement is very active in the south of Brazil.

<sup>5</sup> *Apis mellifera scutellata* Lepeletier. Africanized bees, which are common in Brazil, are more dangerous to humans than normal bees (see <http://entnemdept.ufl.edu/creatures/misc/bees/ahb.htm>).

<sup>6</sup> See <http://juntos.org.br/2013/12/juntos-na-luta-com-a-ocupacao-Arcadia/>, accessed on 12 July 2015. The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (MTST, in English, Movement of Workers Without a Roof) has been very active throughout the country, but especially in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro under the presidency of Dilma Rousseff, who created a vast social housing programme called ‘Minha Casa Minha Vida’ (my house, my life). See the MTST website at [www.mtst.org](http://www.mtst.org) and Rousseff’s housing programme at <http://www.brasil.gov.br/governo/2015/08/voz-do-brasil-dilma-rousseff-entrega-residencias-do-minha-casa-minha-vida-no-ceara>

<sup>7</sup> Locals do not consider themselves to be different from invaders, given that this neighbourhood of the southern periphery of São Paulo was created through the same process of land invasion in the 1970s and the 1980s.

<sup>8</sup> People in interviews referred to ‘um terreno baldio’ (an empty, idle land). More research is needed on popular and administrative representations of land use and land conservation.

<sup>9</sup> Cúpula dos Povos refers to the parallel event entitled ‘Peoples Summit for Social and Environmental Justice in Defence of the Commons’ which took place during the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012. See <http://rio20.net/en/>, accessed on 2 October 2015.

<sup>10</sup> The ‘non-agroecological’ nature of the ecopark I visited with Dill has a lot to do with the fact that it is a park; people do not live in it, or depend on this land for food or shelter. It is a place earmarked for urban strolling and visual appreciation. Moreover, it is located in a neighbourhood undergoing drastic renovation, where modest family houses with gardens are being replaced with expensive multi-storey office blocs. The ecopark is now the only bit of ‘nature’ present in a very dense urban patch.

<sup>11</sup> It took me a while to notice the agroecologists’ presence on a patch of grass behind the Bank of Brazil Foundation’s exhibition booth. What caught my eye at first is a recycled art sculpture in the shape of a tree that was being assembled day by day. Like this tree, grown bit by bit, the encampment was taking shape slowly. The installation would have grown more visible, had the agroecologists been allowed to stay overnight; but their display was diurnal. Each day upon arrival, they would open the bundles of blankets and sheets they had left on the ground. Children were playing as they helped unpack the bundles. There were sacks of seeds and produce from their farms, which were sold at low cost. The materials needed for the art installation were heaped in a corner. Simple tools and devices were set up for passers-by to try out. On a large blanket in the middle, a group sat cooking and eating while conversing. Later on in the day, two young men came to the edge of the sidewalk, barefoot, their hands full of *Physalis peruviana* seeds, urging passers-by to get some. The weed’s nutritional and medicinal properties were vaunted. More, there was no need to plant *Physalis peruviana*; it was enough to throw the seeds gently in the air above a patch of soil. I bought a bottle of perfume from a young man, and a video telling the story of the farm on which he lived; he had made both.

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<sup>12</sup> The bank in charge of the loan system has agreed to endorse the project, and a construction company has already signed the contract. The construction should thus have started in January 2016, but all these measures had been taken before the worsening of Brazil's political crisis during the summer of 2015. Of the 1500 flats to be built on the site of Projeto Arcadia, less than 300 will be allocated to the invaders, who will not be allowed to decide and choose whom among them will be allocated a flat in the complex. Moreover, the land will have to be fully vacated for the building work to commence.

<sup>13</sup> (see above, page\*).

<sup>14</sup> (see above, page\*).

<sup>15</sup> Long seen as emblematic examples of pristine wilderness, Amazonia's forests are understood today as resilient and evolving legacies of both nature and culture. See Balée (2013) and Rival (2016).

<sup>16</sup> In extractive reserves, biological diversity depends on the productive protection afforded by a certain type of anthropogenisation through agroforestry. Like in the areas cultivated by native Amazonians (see chapter by Manuela Carneiro da Cunha), biological diversity varies in correlation with cultural diversity.

<sup>17</sup> For Gregory (2005), these processes are accessible only by theoretically informed fieldwork. Anthropologists must thus continue to historicise their central concepts from the perspective of the contemporary global disjuncture in which we all live (Gregory 2005).