
LANDSCAPE ETHICS

A MORAL COMMITMENT TO RESPONSIBLE REGIONAL MANAGEMENT¹

Albert Cortina

Abstract: Starting with the hypothesis that during this first decade of the 21st century a certain territorial culture has spread that implies greater awareness of landscape on the part of the authorities, the economic and social agents who exercise a degree of leadership in territorial matters and the general public, this article sets out to analyse the possibility that a new ethics of landscape is beginning to take shape.

The notion of landscape as proposed by the European Convention in Florence in 2000 looks at the idea of the social construction of landscape. In this new paradigm, landscape is conceived as a social product, the cultural projection of a society in a given space from a material, spiritual and symbolic standpoint.

Landscape is understood to be inherently dynamic and changing. When the elements that give a particular landscape its historical and cultural continuity are suddenly removed and its sense of place is lost, we are seeing not evolution in the landscape but its destruction. And the very idea of intervention in these landscapes gives rise to the need for principles and moral values that will provide guidelines that allow landscapes, whether unique or commonplace, to evolve without being destroyed. As I see it, therefore, there is an obvious need for an ethics applicable to regional and landscape planning and management.

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The new ethics of landscape must be based on the ethics of responsibility, taking into account the dignity of nature, the rights of future generations to enjoy quality landscapes and the rights and duties of today's citizens whose interventions transform landscapes and with them their collective identity, their quality of life, their physical and social welfare and, in short, their happiness.

Keywords: *landscape ethics, landscape management, new territorial culture, landscape awareness, environmental ethics, ecological ethics, European Landscape Convention, landscape intervention, evolution and transformation of the landscape, ethics of responsibility, sustainability, regional agreement and mediation.*

THE SOCIAL CONCEPT OF LANDSCAPE

The European Landscape Convention

The 10th anniversary of the signing of the European Landscape Convention promoted by the Council of Europe was commemorated in Florence in October 2010. This Convention, which came into force on 1 March 2004, is an international treaty that looks at landscape as an essential element of individual and social wellbeing, a fundamental factor in people's quality of life which contributes to human happiness and to the consolidation of a local, national and European identity. From this perspective, landscape partakes of the general interest and the common good on a cultural, ecological, social and spiritual basis, and is a favourable resource for economic activities and for the management of a given region's natural and cultural heritage. Progress in production techniques in agriculture, forestry, industry and economic activities in general, coupled with practices in matters of regional and urban planning, transport, infrastructures, renewable energies, tourism and leisure, and, in general, changes as a result of globalisation, have very often caused the destruction, degradation and trivialisation of landscapes and the subsequent loss of regions' landscape capital.

According to the Convention mentioned above, government authorities,

in conjunction with social and economic partners, and with large-scale participation by the public, must help preserve landscape quality. To this end, it establishes the juridical guidelines for adopting national, regional and local policies on landscape and landscape management.

The document is the most important breakthrough in landscape protection to have taken place in Europe to date. The importance of the Convention in fact lies in the boost this international treaty has given to the introduction of national and regional legislation where its criteria for management, protection and planning have been widely adopted.

The initial considerations of the Council of Europe in this Convention illustrate Europe's new stance on landscape, based on all-round treatment of all the elements forming part of it, in place of the approach taken to landscape up till now. The Convention binds and integrates the *landscape* with part of the common heritage that the Council wants to guarantee and promote, in particular, through the adaptation of economic and social agreements. In short, the idea is to make progress towards "sustainable development based on a harmonious balance between the needs of society, the economy and the environment".

It therefore starts from a series of premises which are the grounds for the assertion that the landscape is in need of protection, planning and management, insofar as it is of value for the general interest in terms of culture, the environment, regional and urban planning, history and society, aesthetics and, following from all this, ethics. In this respect, landscape is a fundamental part of Europe's cultural and natural heritage and contributes to developing local and natural cultures, enhancing humans' wellbeing and helping to consolidate their collective identity.

The development and implementation of the European Landscape Convention from 2000 until today can be said to be in full gear in much of Europe, in Spain and in particular also in Catalonia, whose Parliament was one of the pioneers in endorsing its principles and giving legal consideration to landscape through Law 8/2005 and the regulations enforcing it.

Landscape as a collective and cultural transformation of nature

In these ten years, therefore, we have seen the conventional notion of landscape revamped to bring the concept into the current social debate. Landscape has gone from being conceived simply as the static image of the land or a beautiful sight for contemplation to being an indicator of

the state of health of society's relations with the environment. Various factors have contributed to this change, the main ones being: a) rapid transformations in traditional landscapes, b) the global ecological crisis and c) the appreciation of landscape as an economic and social resource.

Transformations in the landscape due to regional urban growth and the development of technology capable of transforming nature are not new, but in recent decades they have reached a speed hitherto unknown. The result of these transformations in some cases takes the form of destruction of the landscape and in others gives rise to standardised, impersonal landscapes and what is known as *trivialisation of the landscape*. The consequence of this trivialisation is that some landscapes become scarce, take on the value of rare assets and are more highly appreciated by society, which demands their protection as social heritage. The global ecological crisis is also reflected in the landscape. First, societies perceive the loss of quality in landscapes as an unmistakable sign of the imbalances currently besieging the environment, inasmuch as the decline in landscape diversity is an expression of the fall in biodiversity and the global ecological imbalance. In addition, the loss of the Earth's landscape diversity is seen as irreparable damage which must be remedied as soon as possible.

From the new perspective of the European Landscape Convention, the values of landscape are perfectly objectifiable and include more than just the natural ones; as a reflection of a social and regional identity, landscape is imbued with social, cultural, historical, spiritual, aesthetic and other values.

In this sense, then, landscape is not just a subjective, individual matter, but above all a shared project, a collective heritage, with values that can be objectified and managed, even if we experience it and enjoy it individually. Precisely for this reason, landscape can and must be taken into account in regional planning and management. It is in this context of social construction and the management of regional transformation that landscape takes on its ethical dimension.

As Professor Joan Nogué says:

landscape is conceived as a physical representation and at the same time as our cultural representation of it. It is the geographical countenance of an area with all its natural and anthropic elements as well as the feelings and emotions aroused by their contemplation. In short, the landscape is conceived as a social product, as a society's cultural projection in a given space from a material, spiritual and symbolic perspective. (Nogué, 2007, p. 10).

DIGNITY OF NATURE AND EVOLUTION OF THE LANDSCAPE

Environmental ethics

At this moment in time, we can more clearly see the creation of a social awareness about the repercussions of human intervention on global events affecting life on our planet. With regard to the need to reconsider the limits to this intervention, there is tacit agreement which is nevertheless difficult to put into practice. There are different, sometimes contradictory, positions within the same framework of concern.

Human beings are aware of how degradation of our surroundings also degrades us. This realisation calls for reflection on the limits that force us to take greater care of nature, not to degrade it unnecessarily and to take a longer, closer look at our surroundings. Discovering the precariousness of both human beings themselves and nature also opens our eyes to the senselessness of certain habits that were common in the past, as well as, for example, today's urge for total control over nature, which only distinguishes between use and abuse very rarely.

Nevertheless, many of the thinkers, scientists and activists who take part in today's debate on these topics believe that insistence on the limits to our technological intervention in nature will only really have an effect if at the same time nature is attributed its inherent worth. According to this point of view, however much human beings are aware (if this were possible without acknowledging the moral importance of nature) of the absurdity of progress based on indiscriminate domination of nature, the damaging consequences of a purely instrumental approach and the privileged position of human beings in the world, only by attributing to nature an inherent objective could a real change be brought about in our relationship with it.

In this respect, the environmental ethics project which has been underway for years in the English-speaking world is a very important break with the past and introduces a new paradigm into reflection and moral arguments about the environment, to the point where some experts see it as a new ethics.

Not content with being just one more on the list of applied ethics, environmental or ecological ethics in its broadest sense vindicates the essentially ecological nature of any moral grounding. Whatever the case, familiar ethics is what now introduces ecological thinking about individual and collective moderation and caution in the framework of a new relationship with nature and our surroundings.

As regards the novelty of environmental ethics with respect to the past, certain changes are called for in the development of this type of ethics, which are basically tied to the need for self-correction in some practical tendencies and in numerous anthropocentric habits in our current thinking and the need for a far-reaching shift towards ecology as the context for understanding relations between humans as natural and social creatures in their human and natural surroundings.

One feature of environmental ethics is therefore its language centring on the moral values inherent to nature. Seen in this light, and abandoning the instrumentalist twist as ethics for the use of the environment, environmental ethics emerges as a specific approach to the introduction of non-human nature as a new vision of the ethical paradigm. By extending moral consideration and value outside the human sphere, it comes forward as an alternative to traditional ethics. The latter is conceived as a human ethics for human beings based on a centralist conception which, according to this line of thought, is incapable of dealing adequately with environmental problems. Therefore, unlike other fields of applied ethics that try to extend ethical concepts, categories and values to new areas, including business, engineering, genetics or ecological issues themselves, the defenders of environmental ethics ask for a direct field of application transcending the human social field as such (Velayos, 1996).

If introducing nature into the ethics debate in the late 20th and early 21st century and subsequently extending moral relevance across time to reach future generations was in itself an innovation, an ethics whose initial intention is none other than to extend moral horizons to non-human nature as an end in itself is something even newer.

Even so, within the diversity of possible usages, the concept of environmental ethics is gradually taking shape in the English-speaking world in the sense of an ethics that includes the inherent moral valuation of non-human entities which quite possibly are not endowed with even the smallest degree of conscience. This condition is at the same time labelled both innovative and anti-traditional, as Western ethics usually only gives moral consideration to human beings and/or God and is now, at most, timidly beginning to make room for non-human animals in its spectrum of consideration.

As Professor Carmen Velayos argues (1996), environmental ethics is a new project with regard to human ethics, or ethics centring on the moral objective solely of our own species. Most characteristically, one of its implications is the breakdown of the symmetry between moral agent

and moral patient, which would prevent the existence of obligations towards beings that were not also moral agents and reciprocal parties to the contract as a moral underpinning.

In this respect, Taylor (1986) tries to distinguish between the material conditions of *human ethics* and those governing *environmental ethics* and says that a valid system of human ethics is an apparatus of moral rules that involve the principle of respect for all people as centres of autonomous choice. On the other hand, what characterises *environmental ethics* is the inclusion of non-human nature in this scope of respect.

As we begin the 21st century, then, we are witnessing an important consensus in Western ethics as regards the ethical dimension of our relations with our natural surroundings. Consequently, the majority acknowledges that our action on the environment needs to be regulated or limited to duties, or else new practices are called for. Nevertheless, it seems that the materialisation of this basic initial consensus still finds difficulty today, because once the ethical charge of many of our acts has been practically assumed from the standpoint of moral philosophy and advocated in culture, it becomes necessary to justify the true extent of the horizon of morality and explain whether the demands of an ethics applied to our relations with the environment must necessarily be extended to the direct field of application of nature, to the extent that nature itself is conceived as an object of moral consideration.

The extension of rights to the whole of humanity is one of the modern triumphs which cannot yet be renounced. Today, ethics in its different paradigms has no difficulty acknowledging that over and above contingent conditions, all human beings possess moral worth. The anthropocentric paradigm defends human beings as the only creatures with moral objectives, while the rest warrant a derived acknowledgement, that is, one that depends on human needs or interests.

Nevertheless, under environmental ethics, the ecosystem is also eligible to benefit from our moral responsibility. Those who believe in its inherent worth argue that an ecosystem possesses its own good (its stability), which persists over time and is independent of the living, or non-living, elements that interact in it and through which cycles of matter and energy flows are established.

The global ecosystem, in some cases the direct moral consideration of the biosphere as a whole, involves acknowledging the Earth as a living organism. This is how James Lovelock sees it in his well-known *Gaia hypothesis* (1988), which today has become a scientific theory. In this

sense, biocentrism or ecocentrism can be understood as a position that defends the global systemic value of the nature's workings; it encompasses individuals, species, communities and ecosystems.

Territorial culture and landscape awareness

Without abandoning the systemic view of our relationship with nature, the reflection we yield from our new notion of landscape goes beyond the postulates of the environmental paradigm. Landscape, according to this conception, is "an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors" (Article 1 of the European Landscape Convention).

Within this framework, our society uneasily notes that landscapes have undergone a marked process of change in recent decades. In theory, this should come as no surprise: if landscape is the physical reality born of the dialogue between human activity and our surroundings, as perceived by the community, any dynamic community (which ours particularly are) will inevitably transform the landscape it lives in. We must therefore agree that any landscape is a moment in a process rather than a static reality (Nel·lo, 2003). The notion of change, therefore, is consubstantial to the very concept of landscape.

Nevertheless, at an individual and collective level these rapid transformations in the landscape generate concern. There are grounds for this concern as the quality of the surroundings is an essential element for the quality of life of people and societies. It is therefore not surprising that developments in the landscape today are the object of controversy and conflict, to the point where the landscape itself has in many cases become the cause of them.

The idea that some form of collective intervention is necessary in order to guide and, where necessary, correct landscape transformation processes is therefore gaining ground.

Oriol Nel·lo goes even further in his reflections on the dilemma between nature conservation and the notion of landscape management and says that

today, the frequently commendable conservationist paradigm has been amply surpassed as any dynamic society inevitably transforms the landscape, and the attempt to keep a humanised landscape immutable, as though it were a museum piece, is a delusion (Busquets & Cortina, 2009, p.36).

This realisation has given rise to new perspectives that suggest that what is needed now is to ensure that as landscapes go through their inevitable process of change the values that characterise each of them should be preserved and enhanced rather than eroded. Public landscape policies should therefore shift from trying to preserve the image of certain landscapes unchanged to trying to manage change over the region as a whole, with the object of preserving its landscape values, amongst others.

The new paradigm therefore establishes the pre-eminence of process over fixture, of values over image, of the whole over the parts and of holistic landscape planning and management over museum-like nature conservation.

In this context, we can take territorial culture as being

the minimum training necessary to accept and not question that rational and location-sensitive regional planning is necessary for the common good; that sensible, sustainable management of natural resources is advisable for the benefit of the community and that a form of government and regional management based on dialogue and social consensus is desirable to reduce the inevitable regional unrest arising out of certain decisions. (Nogué, 2010, p. 147).

The landscape therefore acts as a catalyst, an elemental centre of the growing regional and environmental unrest that can be sensed in our society. It is therefore to be expected that ethical considerations should be raised about the type of transformation taking place in a given landscape.

This profound ethical dimension of landscape and of interventions on the natural surroundings (as well as on urban, peri-urban, agricultural, coastal and other landscapes) is precisely what needs to be protected by a new territorial culture which, in collusion with the general public, can steer the transformations taking place in a given landscape. It is not a case of anything goes. Interventions in the landscape must be justified by the ethical nature of the transformation (Cortina, 2010).

But can a landscape be transformed without destroying it? This is one of the most urgent challenges facing contemporary societies, one calling for a response from society as a whole and not just from the government or scientific and academic institutions. This question brings us up against an issue which clearly has a social, cultural and, of course, ethical dimension.

As Professor Joan Nogué points out:

if we understand landscape as a natural scenario shaped by culture, as a society's cultural projection on a given space, we have to admit that the landscape is inherently dynamic and changing. When the elements giving a particular landscape its historical continuity are suddenly removed and the sense of place is lost, what we have is not an evolution in the landscape but its destruction (Nogué, 2010, p. 122).

The ability to act on the landscape without destroying it, without breaking its essential character, without removing the elements that give it its historical continuity, is one of the big issues still pending resolution. It is not always easy to alter, modify, intervene or manage without destroying. As Nogué says:

when you destroy a landscape you destroy the identity of the place, especially when you are unable to substitute another, however artificial it may be; it is as reprehensible as destroying the planet's biodiversity. The distinction between evolution and destruction of the landscape is not one of degree but goes much deeper, because above all else it is a moral question. Today the dilemma between evolution as opposed to destruction of the landscape is fundamental and enters fully into the terrain of ethics. (Nogué, 2010, p. 125).

For that reason, in Nogué's opinion:

we need to permeate ourselves in an awareness of landscape similar to our environmental awareness, which will allow us to enjoy mere contemplation of the landscapes around us, not because of any special action arising out of an ambitious strategic plan, but simply because it has been demonstrated over and over again that attractive, clean, pleasing and aesthetically harmonious surroundings make a noticeable improvement to people's life quality. We have the framework documents; we have the diagnoses. All we need is greater social and cultural awareness. (Nogué, 2010, p. 146).

NEW LANDSCAPE ETHICS

Ethics of responsibility and landscape ethics

If at this point in the discourse we ask ourselves about the differentiated existence of *landscape ethics* (Cortina, 2010), that is, what its nature

is and what demands it places on us, we must be clear, first of all, what issues it deals with and, secondly, the problems that arise when finding a basis for it. Landscape ethics is not and cannot in any way be a classical sort of ethics; nor should it be confused with what is known as ecological or environmental ethics, even though it takes certain features from them. This is so first because of the subject it deals with, that is, because of the nature of the ethics it establishes. As Zimmer says (2008) with regard to the debate between landscape ethics and landscape aesthetics, the interesting thing about landscape and, to put it another way, its philosophical interest, is that it is a mixed phenomenon: classical distinctions, like the one made between nature and culture, do not work, because the landscape is a good example of interrelation due to the inevitable unity between nature and culture. This means that landscapes are manifestations of a particular relationship between the individual and the whole of nature and consequently, this relationship with the whole of nature and the whole of the territory is what landscape ethics must deal with.

As we saw earlier, human being's new role in today's world calls for a fundamentally new ethics. Not only does it call for personal responsibility in the limited sphere of individual action; it also, in proportion with today's technical and scientific power, calls for universal responsibility for the being as a whole. The new landscape ethics must therefore not only reflect individual decision-making but must also be an ethics for collective praxis, as the new dimension of human praxis can only be dominated in the form of the social decisions taken. The singularity of this landscape ethics tied to the concept of responsibility with respect to other ethical relations is that it is based on non-reciprocal, unilateral acknowledgement, which demands that we recognise the rights of nature and of future generations, rights from which no obligations to us can be derived in return.

In this respect, the basic principles of the ethics of responsibility proposed by Jonas (1995) are perfectly suited to the emerging idea of landscape ethics, as they consist in using regional intervention and management to avoid any action whose unforeseeable and therefore probably uncontrollable consequences could be harmful in the future. The ethics of responsibility is a cosmo-centric type of ethics, as the new dimension of the praxis affects not only human relations today but also nature as a whole, the landscape understood as the face and the character of the territory and the future generations who will live there.

If we understand that ethics comes from *ethos* and that this ancient

Greek word means character, when we refer to landscape ethics we are expanding on the idea that the landscape is the character of the territory and that this defining feature must be grounded on ethical values applicable to the social construction of landscapes (regardless of whether they are of special interest for their uniqueness or excellence or simply part of the group of ordinary landscapes, that is, those forming part of most people's everyday lives) and on moral principles governing responsible intervention in and management of the landscape by the authorities, social and economic agents and citizens, with the purpose of guaranteeing and improving quality of life and people's individual and collective wellbeing (in short, their happiness), as well as the quality of the transformed territories themselves and of landscapes as they constantly evolve (Cortina, 2010).

Ethics applied to responsible regional and landscape management

As I pointed out earlier, landscape is more and more frequently an important dimension in territorial and environmental conflicts. On the other hand, they all eventually boil down to a conflict of ethics. In fact, the problems do not lie in the actual transformation of the landscape itself but in the nature and the scale of that transformation: this is the real debate. The distinction (ultimately an ethical one) between the evolution of a landscape and its destruction is not one of degree; it goes much deeper.

It may be precisely because of this ethical dimension of the subject that the European Landscape Convention has had such an impact. The Convention, which was discussed in the first section of this article, explicitly acknowledges that "the landscape is an important part of the quality of life for people everywhere: in urban areas and in the countryside" (Preamble of the European Landscape Convention).

The landscape, according to the Convention, is a key element of individual and social wellbeing. In other words, it looks at the affective and sentimental dimension of the setting in which social groups act and sees this dimension as fundamental for the acquisition of real *quality of life*.

In the same way that we share certain social values, we also collectively share certain landscape values, something that is not incompatible with individualised, personal enjoyment of that same landscape.

In Nogué's opinion (2010, p. 127), the landscape can engender individual emotions at the same time that it is the repository for scientifically

recognised and socially agreed upon values. This enriches the subject of landscape and leads us to say that acceptance of this more individual and subjective dimension of landscape is not incompatible with the collective (i.e., public) management of its values once they have been identified, described and democratically agreed upon.

The idea of the social construction of landscape on the basis of the wishes of the affected communities is increasingly gaining ground.

This new paradigm, as I see it, is leading to the birth of a set of emerging principles and values that are present in the stakeholders working to implement a new territorial culture. This cultural framework takes on a certain degree of solidity as it gradually permeates policies, legislation and instruments in planning, management, training and teaching. At the same time, the principles and values of this new territorial culture are gradually transforming the processes through which citizens participate, as decisions are adopted on the basis of territorial agreement and agents consider new alternatives for resolving conflicts through the use of mediation techniques. From my point of view, the application of these principles and values in regional and town planning and in landscape intervention and management implies, that progress is being made towards the consolidation of what we could define as a new landscape ethics.

Nature and culture are closely interwoven in the landscape, but also present is the ethical dimension of the harmonious use of nature and the aspects of aesthetic experience and a new cultural configuration of the territory.

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