



---

# From Environmental Imperialism To Cultural Imperialism

**Dr. Zakia Arar** Higher School of Teachers (ENS)- Ouargla (Algeria) Educational Media Laboratory EN3001022001 Email: [arar.zakia@ens-ouargla.dz](mailto:arar.zakia@ens-ouargla.dz)

Received: 13/05/2024; Accepted: 03/09/2024; Published: 08/10/2024

---

## Abstract

This study seeks to present and discuss ecology in a post-colonial cognitive context, as the research presents the concept of environmental imperialism as an expression of the exploitation of the environment by colonial powers and making it a tool to impose their hegemony over Third World countries. It explains how developed countries exploited environmental resources in colonies and transferred polluting industries and toxic waste to them, which led to the deterioration of their environment and the spread of diseases among their populations. The research also discusses the impact of environmental hegemony on thought and culture, and thus produced perceptions that serve the control of the West and perpetuate the dependence of developing countries, which confirms that the impact of environmental imperialism is not limited to nature as much as it extends to thought as well. This calls for the necessity of awareness of its dimensions to confront its effects

**Keywords:** Ecology; Environmental Imperialism; Environmental Philosophy; Cultural Hegemony; Postcolonialism.

## Introduction

The postmodern era—and its resultant movements resisting the unbridled expansion of Western thought—has defined the nature of the relationship between the self and the other. This relationship has transcended direct confrontation in its content, adopting indirect hegemony as a means to complete its trajectory. This research paper focuses on investigating one domain of indirect confrontation: ecology, which employs the environment as a new mechanism for controlling and exploiting populations. Environmental imperialism emerges as one of the most prominent manifestations of this hegemony, wherein developed nations exploit the natural resources of Third World countries and impose economic and environmental systems that increase and entrench their intellectual dependency. On this basis, this research examines the cultural roots of environmental imperialism and its impacts through reviewing select cases that embody this situation. Therefore, the primary research question in this context is: To what extent does environmental imperialism contribute to the consolidation of cultural imperialism?

## **Study Objective**

The primary aim is to uncover the cultural references and foundations of environmental imperialism.

### **First: The Genealogy of Ecological Discourse**

It is well established that discourse is a term associated with contemporary criticism and is one of the products of the postmodern era, which seeks to unveil the colonial aspect of modernity and subsequently deconstruct Western intellectual perceptions of the self and other. Critical thought in the postmodern era, along with its resultant movements resisting the collective expansion of Western thought—such as postcolonial discourse and deconstruction—aims to reveal the methods of Western hegemony's continuity in the post-colonial phase. This colonialism was one of the most important projects that embodied Western modernity. The methods of continuity have diversified with the multiplication of means, tools, and domains. On this basis, the term 'discourse' emerged to reflect the relationship between knowledge and power.

Since the relationship between self and other within the sphere of modernity and postmodernity is governed by the principle of power, control, and the will to dominate, this hegemony maintains its entity through "tightening control over the capabilities of developing nations in a way that renders them mere followers. This has been reflected in the humanitarian situation of citizens in both developed and developing countries, where citizens of developed nations live dignified lives, in contrast to the prevailing conditions in developing world countries, where statistics indicate increasing poverty rates, disease spread, and underdevelopment within developing nations" (Mohamed Ibrahim Ghanem 2018, p. 12).

Consequently, the environment has been employed as a tool to impose and maintain hegemony. On this foundation, this branch of knowledge flourished under the name of ecology, a relatively new science that traces its beginnings to the late nineteenth century. Ecology is defined as "the science that studies the interrelationships between living organisms and their environment [...] and the Earth as a whole represents the comprehensive ecological domain in which systems and sub-domains nest" (Michael Zimmerman 2006, p. 9). From this, it becomes clear that the focus of ecology is relationships.

It is recognized that the nature of the relationship we are studying is based on the principle of irrational exploitation, which is the imbalance that led to the flourishing of this branch of knowledge. Researchers in this field almost unanimously agree that "the origin of this imbalance can be traced back to humans, whose impacts and pressures on the ecological sphere have reached the point of transforming them into an enormous geological force—according to Edward Wilson's expression—leading many to believe that humans are the environmental problem" (Michael Zimmerman, p. 10).

The writings addressing these issues have formed the content of environmental philosophy. Despite its contribution to deepening the understanding of environmental issues, the fundamental function it serves in all its fields—as defined by Michael Zimmerman (2006) and represented in environmental ethics, radical ecology, and human-centered reformism—lies in "the theoretical grounding of this crisis by tracing it back to the philosophical moment that characterized the Renaissance in the seventeenth century, specifically through Cartesian rationality that sparked the Industrial Revolution in Europe. This is based on human centrality or the theory of two substances—the thinking self and extended matter—from which several dualities emerged: the self-versus the world, reason versus nature, and subject versus object. These dualities positioned humans at the forefront while relegating nature to a lower rank, thus considering humans as the undisputed center and master of the universe, superior in the hierarchy of cosmic entities" (Ahmed Al-Farrak, 2020, p. 7).

This perspective, which makes the self a master, represents the core of Western modernity, noting that the 'self' here refers to the Western concept. Thus, superiority and dominion are limited to Westerners alone, meaning that "Western humans alone possess absolute freedom to act upon, dominate, and subjugate nature to serve their purposes, as long as it is merely a massive machine prepared to satisfy their desires. It suffices to break it down into parts to possess knowledge of it, and consequently control, manipulate, and direct it as desired" (Ahmed Al-Farrak, p. 87).

Therefore, the primary goal of this conflict is to impose control over nature and exploit its resources. Since most resources are concentrated in the Third World, imposing control and hegemony over Third World countries alone ensures the exploitation of existing resources. Thus, the essence of colonialism is environmental colonialism, driven by greed for its bounties and wealth. Sartre previously pointed this out, saying, "...you know well that we are exploiters, you know well that we took gold and silver from the new continents and brought them to our old metropolises, and the results were good..." (Jean-Paul Sartre, 2007).

In the same context, Edward Said clarified the reality of the East for the West, which barely exceeds being a home of wealth and resources. When colonial powers encountered resistance and desperate defense of lands—that is, the environment—properties, and wealth, they resorted to weapons, force, and environmental destruction through the irrational exploitation of resources. These violations against the environment created crises and environmental disasters whose consequences and effects continue to this day. The West exploited these crises from another angle to impose its control indirectly, reinforcing the idea of dependency. The prevailing situation in Third World countries—the colonies—and the diseases and epidemics left by environmental disasters made the idea of development in all its forms (economic, cultural, industrial...) "a glossy means in the hands of developed countries to beautify economic development and make it a tool for the group controlling the international economic system to tighten control over the

capabilities and resources of developing countries under the banner of achieving effective environmental protection" (Mohamed Ibrahim Ghanem, 2018, p. 12).

What exacerbated environmental disasters, in a way that both ensures and reflects the entrenchment of dependency, is "the advanced nations' pursuit to concentrate polluting industries in developing countries.... The economic needs of the latter and their pursuit of development allows for the concentration of these industries without concern for the negative environmental impacts of these projects, which can be considered a prioritization of economic considerations imposed by globalization over environmental considerations" (Mohamed Ibrahim Ghanem, p. 18).

This situation contributed to the birth of what has been termed the neo-colonial condition, reflecting the nature of the complex and prevalent consciousness in this era. This revealed a deep ideology controlling the relationship between self and other and each's view of itself, reflecting their respective visions of their environment. Thus, it can be said that "environmental problems arise in connection with cultural attitudes and social practices, some of which are so deeply embedded that they remain invisible to most people" (Michael Zimmerman, p. 16).

These attitudes have determined the nature of the relationship between self and other—a relationship governed, as previously mentioned, by the principle of power and the will to dominate. This relationship was reflected in the Third World environment, which was used as a tool of subjugation and a means of continuing hegemony and imperialism. Through this, the West deified itself, leading to "human violation of nature, exploiting nature and harnessing its forces to satisfy desires without moral restraint, without a standard that transcends both nature and desires and subjects them to its values and measures. This resulted in the pollution of natural resources and the unaccounted plundering of earth's wealth, which in turn led to the upset of nature's balance in many fields" (Ahmed Al-Farrak, pp. 111-112).

Therefore, human progress and its development across all levels can be seen as the result of natural world destruction. Perhaps this ideological dimension of environmental philosophy is what led thinkers and critics to term this branch of knowledge as deep ecology. They believe that human centrism is one of the most important roots of the environmental crisis. This field of deep ecology includes what is called social ecology, whose proponents emphasize that "the primary root of the environmental crisis is social hierarchy, as authoritarian social structures allow some people to dominate others, as well as destroy, plunder, and harm non-human beings without justification" (Environmental Philosophy, p. 22).

What emerges from this analysis allows us to distinguish between two discourses: a founding discourse of ecology deriving its intellectual origins from Western philosophy and Orientalist discourse, and a resistant discourse revealing the realities of modernist thought and its effects on the colonized environment.

The true and original cause of the environmental crisis "extends beyond what traditional environmental thought has repeatedly stated, striking deep into the moral and cultural conception of the natural environment, and the behavioral interactions that resulted from that conception" (Abdul Majid Al-Nadjar, 2019). While most views attribute the real causes to the Industrial Revolution and the tremendous technological development the world has witnessed and its resulting distortion of nature, the reality of this crisis, though resulting from current civilization in its industrial dimension particularly, is that "this civilization itself was founded on a philosophical and religious conception of the environment that could only end in the current crisis, whether looking at the distant roots of that conception or its endpoints in modern philosophy" (Abdul Majid Al-Nadjar, 2019).

Therefore, genuine research must focus on deconstructing the cultural and ethical positions founding the philosophy that has formed and continues to form cognitive and intellectual references in dealing with the environment, thereby determining the nature of behavior within it. On this basis, it can be said that research in ecology through its connection to intellectual and ideological context reveals a purely imperial dimension—that is, it is research in the history of colonialism.

## **Second: Manifestations of Ecological Imperialism**

As a synthesis of what preceded, contemporary imperialism can be said to be closely linked to the environment, with environmental imperialism becoming "a description of the forms of material change that occurred in colonized societies' environments through colonial occupation. According to this context, imperialism didn't just alter the cultural, political, and social structures of colonized societies, but also humiliated and destroyed their environments and traditional forms of coexistence" (Djouida Ghanem, 2019).

The review of some manifestations through which this connection is felt is sufficient to clarify the contents of this branch of knowledge, its basic features, and its beginnings. A broad and deep reading reveals several violations against colonial environments that destroy the climatic and environmental values of these regions. In agriculture, for example, we find that Europe "saved its agricultural production from an insect called Phylloxera that appeared in Europe by transferring agricultural projects to colonized countries to eliminate this pest, thus imposing a new agricultural system in the colonized countries" (Djouida Ghanem, 2019).

We also find, within the framework of projects aimed at distorting the image of the Other while proving Western superiority through the use of ecology, what happened in Egypt. When the Ministry of Industry imported Zionist cotton strains, these strains destroyed the Egyptian cotton crop, leading to Egypt's exit from international cotton export competition—a major deal in the post-colonial context (Djouida Ghanem, 2019).

In the same context, the nuclear waste issue emerges as one of the most prominent, important, and dangerous issues that effectively embody the use of the environment as a weapon ensuring the continuity of imposed hegemony. It also embodies the deep politics

of Western ideology and its view of self and other. Africa and colonies generally are considered the designated place for disposing of dangerous waste produced by Western factories. As one researcher puts it, Africa is environmentally violated and suffers from a real breach of African environmental sovereignty. Statistics indicate that "27% of diseases in Africa are related to environmental hazards—respiratory infections, malaria, and others... which constitutes about 60% of the health-damaging environmental pollution effects" (Bouhania Goui, 2019).

This situation reflects a blatant embodiment of the concept of environmental racism and a clear violation contradicting all individuals' right to a healthy and safe environment, which ensures what is called environmental justice (Bouhania Goui, 2019).

In this context, many researchers confirm that the movement of waste transfer from developed countries coincided with the beginning of the seventh decade of the twentieth century. For example, in 1987, "a ship transported about 4,000 tons of ash from Philadelphia to Haiti, claiming it was fertilizer while it was toxic ash from American city incinerators" (Bouhania Goui, 2019). Another example is the actions of Italian, French, and German companies dumping toxic waste shipments in Nigeria. The Italian company leading the operation on behalf of other companies went so far as to forge papers concealing the truth about these wastes, which amounted to about 3,000 tons packed in thin tin cans containing carcinogenic and radioactive materials (Bouhania Goui, 2019).

### **Third: The Effects of Ecological Imperialism**

The negative environmental impacts of such practices on nations in general, and the resulting environmental problems that extend beyond various forms of pollution (water, air, soil), compel this research paper to look beyond merely investigating environmental pollution effects. Rather, it aims to highlight what we term "intellectual pollution," which is considered one of the most dangerous forms of contamination. It is well established that the environmental pollution effects on colonial territories were intentional, as "the spread of diseases among colonial populations decimated a large portion of indigenous inhabitants, thereby facilitating European military and technological invasion" (Djouida Ghanem: 2019). This development, coupled with the opportunity for elites to migrate to the world's metropolises—to the center, to the source of civilization, thought, and culture—was notably influenced by the psychological impact of negative impressions about the colonized environment and positive perceptions of the colonizer's environment, an effect that Franz Fanon had previously detailed extensively.

In light of attempts aimed at altering the consciousness of the colonized to ensure Western hegemony's continuity and others' dependency, we find that elite thinking in colonized worlds has reinforced Western dependency. Edward Said elucidated this in his book "Orientalism," noting that the Orient paints itself with an Orientalist brush. This situation emerged from elites' pursuit of a dignified life in a healthy environment free from pollution that has caused and continues to cause numerous diseases in colonies and threatens human life, with the West becoming, in this context, akin to a prison for the

intellectual elite globally. This situation has become a fundamental axis of post-colonial critical discourse, occupying the thoughts of many intellectuals and critics within a resistant epistemological context that served as a response to movements aiming to perpetuate cultural hegemony. Various terms describe this situation—some call it neo-colonialism, others describe it as colonial intellectual penetration. Despite terminology differences, the content remains unified: intellectual pollution. Therefore, the fundamental issue is one of consciousness about reality and its components, or rather, about the political mapping of global thought. Regardless of supporting or opposing viewpoints, awareness of world ideology ensures understanding of self and other positions, knowledge that guarantees its holder the construction of a liberating, forward-looking vision.

## **Conclusion**

This research demonstrates that environmental imperialism is not merely a transient phenomenon but an extension of old colonial policies in new garb. The exploitation of developing countries' environmental resources reinforces dependency and exacerbates their economic, social, and environmental deterioration, indirectly perpetuating cultural dependency ideology and ensuring multifaceted hegemony. This pattern of dominance—resource exploitation—has led to environmental destruction in Third World countries and worsening humanitarian crises. Therefore, it is necessary to reassess the relationship between developed and developing nations and establish strategies ensuring environmental justice and protecting peoples' rights to a healthy environment and sustainable development. These challenges require concerted efforts and profound reforms through activating civil society's role and working to deepen awareness of reality's ideology, discovering the position of self and other in the global intellectual landscape.

## **Bibliography**

### **1. Books**

- Ahmed Al-Farrak et al. (2020). Environmental Education and the Questions of Development and Ethics: Towards a New Environmental Consciousness. Fatima Al-Fihria Center for Research and Studies.
- Zimmerman, Michael (2006). Environmental Philosophy. Translated by Mueen Shafiq Rumia. Knowledge World Series, Kuwait.

### **2. Articles**

- Bouhania, Goui (2019). The Absence of International Ethical Dimension in Managing Environmental Issues in the African Continent. Research paper presented at the International Conference organized by the Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics, titled Global Ethical Approach to Social and Environmental Justice Issues. Doha.

- Ghanem, Djouida (2019). The Imperial Perspective of Environmental Sciences: From the Absence of Ethical Questions to the Emergence of Environmental Historical Irony. Research paper presented at the International Conference organized by the Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics, titled Global Ethical Approach to Social and Environmental Justice Issues. Doha.

- Al-Nadjar, Abdul Majeed (2019). A Cultural Ethical Approach to Environmental Engagement. Research paper presented at the International Conference organized by the Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics, titled Global Ethical Approach to Social and Environmental Justice Issues. Doha.

- Ghanem, Mohamed Ibrahim Qutb (2018). Environmental Globalization. April 2018.

- Ghanem, Mohamed Ibrahim (2018). Poverty Rates and the Spread of Diseases and Underdevelopment within Developing Countries. p.12.