

Environmental Education in times of catastrophes: the education response to the shipwreck of the *Prestige*

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Abstract

In November 2002, the Prestige, an obsolete oil tanker, sank and spilled her cargo offshore Galicia (in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula). This accident originated a social experiment, unwanted but valuable to understand how the catastrophic experience of the “manufactured risks” is socially represented. The present article analyzes the response of the regional education system to the catastrophe from two viewpoints: a) of its comprehension in the context of the critical and proactive social response to the official intent of representing a “non-catastrophe”, and b) of the role of Environmental Education (EE) as a pedagogical praxis whose political dimension is revealed as indispensable. The thesis we shall defend is that the political nature of EE, many times just implicit and others explicitly denied, is recognized here as the fundamental axis in the response of the education system and of other education agents. In this sense, the catastrophe has not been just ecological but also, and foremost, social and political by questioning the economic globalization – its profound cause – and by putting in evidence the vulnerability of the administrations, incapable of preventing or mitigating its impact on the environment and on the human communities. In this scenario, EE contributes to the reflection about the origin of the catastrophe as an unforeseen consequence of the “advanced modernity”, in conformity with the analysis by Ulrich Beck of the “risk society”, and of the politizing potential of the successive catastrophes – the tip of the iceberg – in which the new social ethos is manifested and constructed.

Keywords

Environmental Education – Risk Society – Environmental catastrophe
– Political education.

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On November 19th 2002, after drifting for a week from North to South, moving along the whole Atlantic coast of Galicia (part of Spain, Northwestern region of the Iberian Peninsula), the *Prestige* found her destiny more than 3000 meters below the surface. As a reminder, she left us more than 50,000 tons of heavy fuel oil that washed the coast in successive waves, from the Portuguese border to the French and Spanish shores of the Bay of Biscay. The Galician coast was, by far, the most affected, receiving an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 tons of oil. This is the starting point of this text, and also its point of arrival. It is, without a doubt, a maritime catastrophe comparable to others that feature in the annals of modern environmentalism, such as that of the *Torre Canyon* (1967) or the more recent *Exxon Valdez* (1989). But it has also been a tragically enriching “experiment” offering keys to understand the perception, social representation and reaction of “advanced” societies to the catastrophic expression of the “manufactured risks” – to use the phrase coined by Giddens (2000) – typical of the contemporary world and that, in general, appear as fuzzy, invisible, hermetic threats to the whole of society.

In the civic reaction of a large part of the Galician society, many social actors and agents have played a central role in identifying and making visible the threat – like the child in the famous H. C. Andersen story *The Emperor’s New Clothes* – and in the proactive response to it: some of the communication media (here included the intensive use of the Internet), a large part of the local scientific community, the ecologists and environmentalists, the professional and company interest groups more closely related to the sea, people from the arts and culture etc. From this assemblage of mediators, the interest here is in exploring the role of Environmental Education and that of environmental educators, particularly those that have worked inside and from within the education system, in the collective task of

constructing a rational and democratic response to the catastrophe. We intend, furthermore, for this approximation to highlight some of the identity problems that seem to affect Environmental Education, problems apparently overcome by what presents itself as a new frontier: the Education for Sustainable Development.

The political identity of Environmental Education

In the first texts published in Spain about the identity of an Environmental Education (EE) then still being gestated (Strohm, 1977, Cañal, García and Porlán, 1981) it can be seen that the political approach was essential in the formulation of the pedagogical strategies whose conception was needed to face up to the “environmental issue”. That was the dimension, the content or the conception most visible, sometimes in competition, sometimes seeking complementarity with the other important reference in those pioneering essays of theoretical grounding: the recourse to Ecology as a science of synthesis transcending the scientific-natural field to participate in the social representation of the imbalances in the relations with the surroundings, and which could contribute with “rational” keys to their solution. The state of the issue was not much different in Europe and, in fact, in the world. For instance, Allan Schmieder (1977: 25) in a monograph edited by UNESCO in 1977 significantly entitled *Trends in Environmental Education* stated that “the philosophical belief that we have to pursue nothing less than a fundamental reform in the way in which our society faces the problems and makes decisions is inherent to any Environmental Education”. The careful reader shall not overlook the fact that, while it can be analyzed from a philosophical perspective, this is essentially a political task and belief.

The political nature of EE has been diluted to the point of being explicitly

questioned by those who defend an ideologically neutral education, objective and free from values, which would limit itself to translate the “best available knowledge” about how nature works – a kind of Didactics of Ecology – into a mercenary and reductionist interpretation of EE, which we have had little doubt in qualifying as “neoliberal” (Meira, 2001). The expression of this conception is an educative practice explicitly apolitical in environmental issues, which must grant the individual the “freedom” to act accordingly, in the trust that his/her behavior will be reasonably pro-environment if he/she has the most appropriate information.

Nowadays, the discourse of EE focuses on the notion of sustainable development. In the official genesis of this concept, clearly political, we find the Rio de Janeiro 1992 Conference, the Earth Summit on Environment and Development that took place in the Brazilian city, where the main world leaders gathered to negotiate a strategy to face simultaneously the imbalances in development and the environmental crisis. Their deliberations were consolidated in several documents, the most important from an education viewpoint being the Rio Declaration, conceived to supersede the supposedly obsolete Declaration of Stockholm, and the Agenda 21, a more action-oriented, strategic document. In parallel with the main event the World Forum of NGOs and Social Movements also gathered. Although less publicized for obvious reasons, around thirty alternative programmatic documents were approved at this forum, among which the *Treaty on EE for sustainable societies and for global responsibility*, whose Fourth Principle states forthrightly that “Environmental Education is not neutral, but ideological. It is a political act based on values for social transformation”. A clear position that contrasts with the ideological asepsis that characterizes the official documents of the Earth Summit.

Although it may seem strange and paradoxical, the most important in the Rio

Declaration or in chapter 36 of Agenda 21 is not what they say about a certain way of understanding EE, but what they do not say: chapter 36, dedicated to education as an instrument to build sustainable development, does not deal, in fact, with EE, but with it refers to as “education for sustainable development”. The only two direct mentions to EE in the text are made to cite the Tbilisi 1977 Declaration, which is noted as a remote antecedent. Indeed, it would be worth reading carefully this Declaration and the documents that supported it, to capture the weight of the political dimension in the origins of EE, vividly present in that foundational stage and actually even within the United Nations.

Going back to the Rio Earth Summit, it should be remarked that another significant document, the Rio Declaration, does not even include the word ‘education’ in its text, which refers to communication and information but not to education. This subtle effort of an official deconstruction of a trajectory, that of EE, which in 1992 accumulated twenty years of experience, may be seen in a number of different ways, but from a contemporary viewpoint it can only be understood as resulting from a confrontation, more tacit than explicit, between different conceptions of what EE must be like, a confrontation set against an ideological background and in which the definition of the type and depth of the changes that the praxis of EE must aspire to is at play. A confrontation to which, sadly, many environmental educators, perhaps the majority of them, remain oblivious and also naïve.

In these last years many expressions have been used to talk about EE: it has been qualified or described as “education in values”, “education for coexistence”, “ecopedagogy”, “education for citizenship”, “civic education”, “global education” etc. We could ask ourselves if behind this search for adjectives that emphasize its identity, we are not simply shunning before the field of action of political education. That is to say, that the central issue

is how to facilitate that citizens become conscious and active agents in society – which now is also the global society – so that they will know their rights and learn to act accordingly, giving them the abilities and cognitive, emotional, and social instruments to participate actively in public life and in decision-making in all levels. We talk generically of a political education, even though the objects upon which we project and express it may be gender equality, intragenerational equity, the respect for cultural diversity or enjoying a quality environment now and in the future.

In the decade since the Rio Summit, the shift from the United Nations system for EE to the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has given rise to a few controversies about the theoretical and strategic meaning of such change. Since the Earth Summit many of us educators have spent more than a decade like greyhounds in the tracks chasing the hare of Sustainable Development. This is no gratuitous rhetorical figure. As we all know, the greyhounds never catch up with the hare, which by the way is not even a real hare, despite looking like one. The greyhounds think they know what they are running for – to capture the hare – but in fact they do it to facilitate a gambling business, which, it is said, is far from negligible. The main players never question this purpose, needless to say that the greyhounds lack the faculty to do it, although the latter are the ones that carry the can when they do not win (something that is bound to happen sooner or later). Neither do they have the possibility of choosing a different game, or a different “playing field”, given the fact that they are not free to run or not. Their world is the racetracks, and they cannot even know if their world is just one among many possible worlds.

I do not know if many players in EE see themselves in this metaphor or at least see elements in it that describe their role or the role that seems to be given to EE in the so-called advanced societies. I can see too many similarities.

To begin with, we have not chosen the playing field created around Sustainable Development. Let truth be said, we have accepted, with no little enthusiasm, to play in it. Even though after what happened – or rather, not happened – at the 2002 Johannesburg Summit, and after only punctual successes or apparently localized victories – as the *Prestige* – maybe it is time to realize that little can be expected from the hare of Sustainable Development. In fact, it can be easily seen that the final recipe from the well-known Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), which made the concept official, was more of the same: a sustainable economic growth that would allow financial resources to be released in the North and in the South to face simultaneously the environmental crisis and that of development. The key therefore is that everything hinges on – and hence Sustainable Development is accepted and applauded by the World Bank, the IMF, neoliberal governments, multinationals etc – deepening the deregulation of markets, and on what, often cynically, is referred to as the “true democracy”.

The task of EE – or if we prefer, of ESD – looms in this scenario as extraordinarily difficult, at least in the more developed countries: how does one convince the Western population that their lifestyle and the economic model that supports it produce unwanted effects that, paradoxically, threaten the levels of welfare achieved? How can the same fraction of the population, a little over 20% of the world total, accept the changes necessary to overturn the environmental risks and those derived from the unfair distribution of the planet’s resources? Except for naïve or neoliberal educators (and they exist), a great deal of the reason for the existence of EE in the contemporary world hangs on these questions.

The first task, to raise the awareness of the relevance of environmental problems, is partially completed. Public opinion polls show to what extent Western populations “identify”

and “are aware” of the importance of a whole series of environmental problems already incorporated into the common culture of any citizen (climate change, deforestation, ozone layer etc) or reveal themselves to be concerned about the “future” of the environment, but even more concerned with other, more daily threats such as the strike, health, or social security (Jodelet y Scipion, 1996). The levels of knowledge and conscience are, in general, quite low, and do not translate into substantial changes in lifestyles or in behaviors related to collective decision making (the vote, participation in environmental groups, the active demand for change in environmental policies etc). The “environmental culture” of the vast majority of the population is still very superficial, despite the fact that the scientific information available and made public on the ecological discontent grows exponentially.

Two psychosocial processes help to explain the difficulty in developing a “deep environmental culture”. In the first place, the most serious environmental threats have a counterfactual nature. We know a climate change exists, for example, because science has told it, mainly through the media. We accept there is an important problem almost as if it was a question of faith, but we fail to identify how it could affect us in the long run, or how the coming generations could be affected, and neither do we accept our share of the “responsibility” for its genesis. We lack the sensorial capacity to detect that the Earth’s climate is changing, and we even get confused when we attribute to this change the occurrence of certain atypical atmospheric phenomena, which are part of the meteorological normality, mistaking weather for climate.

Secondly, the social and technological complexity inherent to the processes of manipulation and transformation of nature in the advanced societies prevents us from being conscious of how our individual and collective – that is, of the social aggregate we belong to

– behaviors are related to the degradation of the biosphere. The environmental or social genealogy of the products and services we consume and of the residues we produce remains largely hidden. We may be aware of the existence of environmental problems, but not of their etiology or of our role, individual or collective, in their causes. Moreover, when we get a glimpse of such complexity it becomes difficult to think that an individual action in favor of the environment might really alter the established order. Globalization has increased the opacity and complexity of problems, contributing to the feeling of impotence of the more conscious citizens. Thus, we are capable of showing genuine indignation for episodes of contamination such as the *Prestige’s* or other tanker ships, but we hardly recognize that our energy model, or equivalently the lifestyle of any Western citizen, is based on the availability of crude oil transported in large scale through the oceans. It is easy to take on the role of the victim, but extremely difficult to assume – even if indirect – responsibility. Ulrich Beck puts it forcefully: “The race between perceptible wealth and imperceptible risks cannot be won by the latter (1998a: 51).

There is a third additional difficulty. In practically every document that marked the development of EE in a little over three decades of history (Belgrade, Tbilisi, Moscow, Rio de Janeiro, Thessalonica etc) there is an insistence on the fact that the social change required to meet the environmental crisis also requires a change a deep change of values. This can be another way of concealing the political substance of EE behind an apparently ethical controversy. When passing from the generic proposal of a change of values to identifying which values must be changed and by what other values, the nature of the proposed change becomes evident. Nothing is clearly identified in those documents: one talks of respect for life, of protecting Nature and, from 1992 onwards, of sustainability as the new guiding value. But when working with a

minimum of coherence in any educative-environmental action, it is easy to clash against the functional values present in advanced societies and in the context of market economy: against parsimony in the use of natural resources, the overt consumption imposes itself as of the keys in the functioning of the economic machinery; against the need to redistribute environmental benefits and burdens, the selfish dynamics of the market imposes itself; against the praise for participation and transparency in public affairs, the passivity of citizens and the opacity of the administrations and economic agents impose themselves etc.

In fact, the practice of EE, when it transcends the more superficial approaches (naturalists, conservationists...), enters quite easily in conflict with reality, that is to say, with the market, and with the culture and political framework that gives it institutional support. That is why we have characterized EE as an eminently civic and political education (Caride y Meira, 2002) to which, for example, the democratic govern of society is equally or even more relevant than the ecological understanding of the environmental crisis.

In an effort to give meaning and content to the discourse of Education for Sustainable Development, two terms are employed profusely in Anglo-Saxon pedagogy attempting to define two basic principles that should be kept in mind within this approach: “empowerment” – translated into Spanish, particularly in Latin America, as the grotesque “empoderamiento” –, which really talks about “taking over the power” or about the “ability to exert power over that which affects us”, and “ownership” – which means “incorporation”, in the sense of incorporating reality in symbolic and material terms –, (Tilbury, 2001). Both are concepts whose genealogy is political, and both prescribe an educative action whose strategic sense and objectives have a political character. Their incorporation into the theoretical-methodological arsenal of EE in the

1990s is due to some Anglo-Saxon authors committed to the Critical Pedagogy paradigm (Fien, Robotton, Sterling etc). It is not clear if they are newfangled ideas, either in the theoretical field or in that of pedagogical praxis. It certainly is a bit of an extravagance of history that these two terms have found special favor in Latin-American EE, precisely in the cradle of Popular Education which, bolstered by the works of people such as Paulo Freire, advocated in the 1960s and 1970s – foundational years for EE – Education as a platform and instrument for citizenly conscientization (“incorporation”?) and political mobilization (“empowerment”?), viewing the emancipated subject as an agent that assumes and understands his/her reality and can act freely to transform it.

The object of EE, as we understand it, is very far from such perspective. The most straightforward would be to defend that its main purpose, the one that gives it meaning as a praxical discipline, is to transform the environment. I do not believe it to be the case. We can also understand that it seeks to transform knowledges, values and behaviors relative to the environment. These are also purposes of EE, but not exactly those that give it all its meaning and identity. Going one step further, Lucie Sauv e (1999, 2004), even though presenting a particularly critical discourse against the “neoliberal” bias embedded in the ESD project, understands that the purpose of EE is to transform the relations with the environment. I do not share this interpretation either.

The object and objective of EE are, respectively and from my point of view, the social relations and the transformation of social relations. Its direct object comprises the social relations; the knowledge of the environment, the behaviors and values are indirect objects of the main educative task, and its instruments. What we seek, or should seek, with EE, in an implicit or explicit manner, is to transform society, and to transform the social relations, because we know that they contain a distortion

that brings as its consequence the ecological degradation of the world we live in. Our material as educators is ultimately the way in which we represent ourselves within the world – and not just the world as surroundings or “external” medium – and the way we relate with each other, as individuals and as communities, to incorporate it, to satisfy our needs, and to distribute the resources it gives us. The political substance of EE is expressed and manifested inescapably in how we represent (cognitive, symbolic, ethical and cultural levels) and regulate (economic, legal-normative, productive and reproductive levels) these relations.

**In the risk society made real,
Environmental Education is
made political**

Paul Virilio offers us an illuminating statement: “A catastrophe is like a miracle, but reversed”. That is to say, it is a revealing fact that helps us to suddenly perceive and understand aspects of social reality that normally go unnoticed, and that are seen under the light of an extraordinary event in a more distinct, clear and manifest way. The analogy with a miracle as manifestation of something occult, of that which is not easily accessible in the plane of normal life is here particularly appropriate.

During my lifetime I have directly experienced three black tides. Looking back at the reaction they caused, both from me and from my surroundings – the Galician society – I find out that the community changed its position and perception about this kind of event. They were three very serious “incidents”, especially in ecosystems as productive as the Vigo Estuary, which is largely responsible for the sustenance of almost half a million people. This spot of the Galician coast suffered the wreck of a tanker, the *Polycomander*, in 1970, whose spill left marks that can still be noticed. I was about ten at the time, and I remember vividly seeing from the window of my house

the ship in flames near the Cies Islands, which protect the entrance to the estuary. But “nothing happened”, it was just another maritime accident, a regrettable and unpleasant event whose ecological impact was ignored, and whose socioeconomic impact was underestimated. The sea, so goes a deep-rooted belief of the Galician maritime communities, “can cope with anything”. Indeed, the burnt up ship was made to float again and was kept in service for a few more years under a different name.

In 1992 I saw a second black tide: the spill of the *Aegean Sea*, grounded in the A Coruña Estuary in the northwestern tip of Galicia. This incident already caused some social complaint, stimulated by an ecological movement that stretched beyond its possibilities, and by the defensive reaction of some groups of fishermen already wary from past experiences (*Urquiola*, *Andros Patria* etc), who manifested themselves, even if not massively, to have the responsible pointed out, to demand preventive measures and to call for financial compensation. The motto *Never Again*, now converted into the banner of the social movement in response to the latest tragedy, was born at that moment.

And then the *Prestige* came at the end of 2002, and an unexpected social response was triggered with a mobilizing capacity inside the Galician society and with an influence outside the local context that astonished all, within and without, starting with those same mobilized citizens, and continuing with those responsible for dealing with the incident, especially those responsible for preventing such incidents, dealing with them properly, and mitigating the damage they cause once the black tides begin to sweep the shores. People that acted incompetently and that tried to distort what had really happened, not to avoid spreading unfounded panic, but to protect themselves from the political costs that could be derived from the blunders made when managing this crisis. It is worth recalling that the State

Government at that dreadful day was in the hands of José Maria Aznar, and that Manuel Fraga Iribarne was in charge of the regional Government, both politicians of the Spanish Popular Party.

Something must have changed to make the social reaction before those three events so substantially different. The catastrophe of the *Prestige* came at a moment when the Galician society, or at least a significant fraction of it, had already achieved a certain degree of maturity in what we could qualify as “environmental culture”. Moreover, it has been a disaster that has impinged on the whole Galician coast. It has, directly or indirectly, threatened the livelihood of a good part of the population, whose microeconomics and everyday life are intimately related to the sea. It is also an event difficult to understand and assimilate given its magnitude and the feeling of vulnerability and helplessness that the behavior of the authorities responsible for the emergency apparatus— at first erratic, then sly – has generated.

The feeling of threat, of being the victim of a catastrophe out of all control, grew and transformed into collective indignation when the cover up maneuvers of the public institutions and authorities whose mission and obligation was supposedly of guaranteeing a certain degree of protection were exposed. It has also been an emotionally devastating event; one has to recall that the sea has in Galicia, apart from a significant economic weight – is accounts for 12% of the region’s IGP – a symbolic relevance that places it among the identity traits of the Galician cultural imaginary.

The social intelligence had readily understood that the administrations were doing next to nothing to respond in an effective way to the threats, that the accident with the tanker had been managed very poorly, and that a series of inappropriate or hasty decisions – devoid of any rationality – had allowed the oil spill to hit the coast heavily. From this point of view the *Prestige* acted as a “heuristic detonator” that made an important sector of the society appreciate clearly the critical nature of the threat, notwithstanding

the general confusion and the illusion of “no problem” or “no catastrophe” projected by the administrations in charge of its management, and of the corresponding communication media.

In the face of the disaster, not only ecological but also political, it was necessary to put in action all social, intellectual, cultural, and educational resources that could help overcoming proactively the initial trauma; that created by the disaster itself, and the one engendered by the poor reaction of those who had the technical, economic and political means to avoid it or mitigate its effects. Some sociocultural keys can be identified to help understand the activation of that social response (Meira, 2004):

- **the identity key:** given the weight of the singularity of the Galician country, a community or nation integrated into the Spanish state with its own language and culture, and also given the symbolic and cultural role that the sea has played in the permanent construction of such identity;
- **the environmental key:** one of the hypotheses we have been working with is that the “third” of the Galician society mobilized in a more active way is largely nourished by what we could call the generations of Environmental Education. They are those cohorts that have been through socialization and schooling within the last thirty years, with access to a (formal, non-formal, and informal) education in which environmental issues have acquired a growing presence until they have become part of the common culture. They are generations with a certain environmental awareness, which was activated by the catastrophe. The majority of teachers and educators that have mobilized after the *Prestige* also belong to these generations;
- **the socioeconomic key:** it is no coincidence that in the Lower Estuaries – in southern Galicia – the most critical and dynamic social response to the catastrophe and its management was to be found, as it is also not by accident that the citizenly reaction was more feeble and limited in the Death Coast. In the former case we are dealing with the most

economically dynamic region of Galicia and the best articulated one from a social viewpoint, with a rich network of autonomous entrepreneurs and small and medium-size companies that live from the sea (seafood, aquaculture, fishing services etc); a collection of productive sectors and social agents with much to lose. In the latter case, we have one of the more dejected areas of the Galician territory: demography in recession, emigration, a frail economy etc. In fact, people in the Death Coast had little to lose, something that made their communities, including the ones most affected by the disaster, more vulnerable to the government strategies to contain the social and political impact of the black tides (injection of subventions and economic aid, subsidies etc);

- **the solidarity key:** there are no words to express the gratitude to the thousands of people who came from other regions of Spain and from abroad to help removing, literally with their own hands, the oil that came ashore. But it should also be said that two thirds of the volunteers involved were Galician;
- **and the political key:** many people discovered themselves as citizens in and before the catastrophe. Recalling the Anglo-Saxon terminology previously mentioned, the Galician citizenry took part in an accelerated process of “empowerment”: of taking conscience of the need to assume power, not that of the political parties, but the power – or counter-power – of the self-organized civil society. To this process of discovery and incorporation of reality the iniquitous role of the administrations contributed as an antithesis.

The catastrophe of the *Prestige* made it possible to distinguish clearly the mechanisms that operate in a risk society profoundly market-driven in its economic and cultural spheres. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck has examined this kind of situations starting from the analysis of other catastrophes (Chernobyl, Bhopal etc), affirming their “politizing potential” (1998a, 1998b). In the face of a catastrophe, we have to

become more reflective, to explain it and position ourselves preventively before it. The risk and the catastrophe turn the modern societies reflective; they situate them before the mirror of the threats associated with the levels of well being achieved. The catastrophe is an epiphenomenon of the risk: the risk can be ignored or one can accept to live with it, the catastrophe, and moreover the first person catastrophe, no. In this process, the citizens and the communities can begin to see themselves as political subjects and not just as passive subjects, victims or harmed. One of the main virtues of *Never Again* as a reactive and proactive social movement is that it has never asked for any compensation, but only demands rationality, the use of reason and political transparency in the management of natural resources and of the human-generated threats and, more specifically, of those more closely related to Galicia and to the sea. According to Beck, the catastrophes increase the political awareness of societies, and that was to a large extent what happened in Galicia: we decided that the citizens can also make politics, that we are subjects with capacity to take over and exert power, even though “the system” – the inertia of representative democracy – may tend to identify this field as the exclusive province of the parties and of those who control them. More than a few members of the political apparatus of the party in power (“professional politicians”) have complained about the interference from other actors (citizens, scientists, teachers, artists etc) in a field they regarded as uniquely theirs.

The active role of educators and of Environmental Education

To a large extent, the EE – both the formal and the non-formal – has helped to rationalize the catastrophe. It has done that from various perspectives, which we shall try to illustrate with excerpts from interventions of different teachers of secondary education who took part in six discussion groups in an equal

number of secondary schools in the Death Coast during the first semester of 2004, within the context of an ongoing study about the education and social response to the catastrophe given by the school communities in the district most heavily affected by the black tide. All discussions have been recorded and then transcribed.

Before scrutinizing the keys of the education response (see Figure 1) to reveal their eminently political nature, it is necessary to perform a brief contextualization. It all started, as in the whole of the Galician society, with an emotional snap. A teacher tells us in his own words about those first feelings of anger and impotence from which the need arose to construct a more positive response: *"In all the years I've been working, I've never cried so much as I did in the year of the disaster... (...) it was like... like a death... suddenly, such atrocity. For me it contaminated everything (...), I recall many afternoons I just couldn't stay at home, I went out to walk ... I was sick with the news, (...) I even left classes badly prepared... and I picked up the El País, the La Voz de Galicia... I recall sickness"* (teacher of the Carnota Secondary School, discussion group carried out on 18th June 2004).

Some keys of the response to the *Prestige* "in" and "from" the education system:

- The revelation: the "power of the EE" or the EE generation in the vanguard.
- The *Prestige* "does not come" in the curriculum... the reality of out there... and it demands urgent and innovative answers.
- The *Prestige* questions the "symbolic delocalization" with which the EE operates "within an order".
- In the face of EE "within an order" there emerges the conflict (intra- and extra-school), the contradictions, the opposed positions, the dialectics with reality... many centers create "alternative public spheres".
- Many teachers become "critical intellectuals" and social "activists".
- The "Administration" reveals its conception of EE: "the Circular". The desirable values appear as counter-values.
- EE changes into political education and political action... or is it the other way around?

Such emotional experience was previous to, and one might say necessary to open the way and motivate a more reflective response. The emotivity that filled the environment in many education centers is intimately related to that manifested in the more sensitive sectors of the Galician society: they constitute reactions that cannot be seen separately. In a situation of emergency, of defenselessness, the emotional empathy of those affected was one of the bases to create spontaneously a wide and tight social network where the subjects jumped from one social field to another, from one mobilized group to another, from one social role to another, interchangeably. Many teachers and many schools from all education levels came together in this social network, playing a more active role in the rural areas, where the "school's" the "teacher's" often were the only institution capable of generating a critical and alternative image of the situation.

Some keys of the response to the <i>Prestige</i> "in" and "from" the education system
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The revelation: the "power of the EE" or the EE generation in the vanguard. • The <i>Prestige</i> "does not come" in the curriculum ... the reality of out there... and it demands urgent and innovative answers. • The <i>Prestige</i> questions the "symbolic delocalization" with which the EE operates "within an order". • In the face of EE "within an order" there emerges the conflict (intra- and extra-school), the contradictions, the opposed positions, the dialectics with reality... many centers create "alternative public spheres". • Many teachers become "critical intellectuals" and social "activists". • The "Administration" reveals its conception of EE: "the Circular". The desirable values appear as counter-values. • EE changes into political education and political action... or is it the other way around?

The first element of connection between the EE and the social response to the catastrophe has already been seen: *the EE generations have placed themselves in the vanguard*. The environmental culture of the Galician society has changed in the last decades. When facing up to the complex reality of the contemporary world, the younger population incorporate among their main values and representations a certain sensitivity and conscience of the threats derived from the deterioration of an environment subjected to human overpressure. It is, certainly, an incipient and still not very articulated and profound culture, but it constitutes a social and cultural asset activated by the *Prestige*. A teacher, when reflecting about the reason for such an unexpected reaction, points out this generational variable: “Maybe it has to do with the generations [of teachers] that are working right now at the centers. I have the feeling that we begin to see in the centers a certain prevalence of people in their thirties, and, you see, we are people that, knowing much, knowing little, knowing what we know, we are very keen on doing things right, and on learning how to do them right, and on improving on everything we can, not just the education for teenagers, but if we can help with a grain of sand to make better the world we live in, let us do it (...) And in previous generations, of people now in their fifties (...) that was not so present” (Teacher from a secondary school in Carnota, discussion group carried out on 18th June 2004).

The Prestige does not come in the curriculum, but many centers and teachers reacted immediately putting in practice an emergency pedagogical action in response to a reality that spilled over the classes, that was impossible to ignore, that was just there:

“I don’t think it was immediate, when the *Prestige* happened, I remember I was listening to the radio, it was Sunday (...) I heard it was nothing, that the trickle [a government official actually described in

such words the fuel that flowed out of the *Prestige* to downplay it], and what else ... And you could see it all, and you went crazy, the youngsters were here, very nervous. Then I believe that it just happened in the class, we were having a class on visual language [says the Image teacher] and everybody was talking about the *Prestige* and I thought: - Well, how can I give a class on visual language and just talk about something else, and not make the subject coincide with everybody’s concerns, and then we began to think of a way to use visual language to express that preoccupation ...” (Teacher from a Secondary School in Carnota, discussion group carried out on 18th June 2004).

In the immediate pedagogical response given by the teachers and centers of primary and secondary education there are three pedagogical-didactical elements that should be stressed:

- the main source of information, including scientific information, about the catastrophe was the communication media, both those that tried to be thorough and accurate, and those that worked as instruments of disinformation and occultation of the truth; most of the original material for work in classrooms came from those sources: texts, information, opinions, scientific data and explanations, charts, photographs etc. The comparison of points of view between media with distinct “versions” of the catastrophe was a widely employed didactic strategy.
- additionally, many teachers put in practice the same journalistic techniques used by conventional communication media – press, television and radio – as part of their didactic instruments: interviewing the people affected, contrasting information, writing opinion articles, publishing school journals and magazines dedicated exclusively to the issue, carrying out photographic reports etc.

- the use of the NTIC to collect and exchange information, and to communicate with other schools in Galicia and abroad, to exchange specific didactic materials and to plan and develop common tasks and projects.

The *Prestige* questions the symbolic delocalization with which EE operates within an order. In EE there are more and more actions and experiences that are the pedagogical equivalent of the “no places” of anthropologist Marc Auge (2002): these contemporary spaces with no identity (airports, hypermarkets, stations, museums...), interchangeable and anonymous, “where the individual feels as a spectator and the nature of the spectacle does not really matter” (p. 91). Transporting this idea to the educational-environmental field there are many “no programs” (activities, equipment, didactic materials etc) that talk about generic problems, that trivialize and fragment them, that place them nowhere and that are interchangeable to any social scenario, that do not express in definite the local or global connection of the recipients with the problems. They constitute delocalized education practices and, for this reason, stripped of their strategic meaning. A clear example is given by the educative programs aimed at forming and informing the population on selective collection of domestic waste: they are interchangeable, they tend to reproduce the same model everywhere, and have all in common the fact that they do not question the model of society that produces the waste; they simply aim at the citizens being able to associate the color of a basket to a certain fraction of domestic waste so as to avoid errors in the separation process. All political meaning of taking conscience and all purposes of transformation of the social reality are lost. In the case of the *Prestige* both those dimensions could be clearly seen: the local one – we were the victims, it was happening here – and the global – it was a perverse manifestation of the globalization. We had and still have it clear that it was a catastrophe of globalization, of the

global market, of which we are all victims but also beneficiaries.

The Areanegra [black sand] group of teachers collected and channeled a major part of the response of the teachers’ community to the catastrophe. A peculiar fact is that the group defines itself more along the lines of the anti-globalization movements than as part of the “classic” movements of pedagogical renewal, which in Spain played a very important role in the innovations of formal education during the transition to democracy in the 1970s and 1980s. The group’s civic-political vocation was clear from the beginning, as was the transcendence of its pedagogical proposals beyond the overwhelming occurrence. In fact, it started working on the *Prestige*, but moved on to oppose the war against Iraq, and then to the inclusion in the curriculum of the struggle against gender violence etc. Areanegra is a movement largely integrated by teachers who work for the school community, creating in a few weeks a tight network of response. The network is not just of groups and schools, but also of people, people that act as the nodes of the network: “*Differently from other groups of teaching, Areanegra intends to have a global line of action around contemporary themes, starting from the maxim that nothing that is human is alien to us, particularly if we are talking about the education of people, of future society. Personally, I would include Areanegra in the worldwide anti-globalization movement, within this growing number of people that believe that a different world is possible, that stand up against neoliberalism and its consequences: the destruction of the planet, the destitution of the countries, and the growing inequalities, the feminization of poverty (...). We are not a pedagogical renewal movement, but a movement of response to the aggressions inflicted against these values or against human rights (...)*” (interview carried out with a teacher member of the Areanegra, 4th April 2004).

In the face of EE “within an order” – that order conceived avoiding any ethical, political, social or cultural questioning of the established

reality – there emerge the conflict, the contradictions and the opposed interests. The dialectics that emerges in a social scenario shocked by the black tides allows many teaching groups to constitute “alternative public spheres”. Giroux (1997: 36) uses this expression in the context of what he calls “postcolonial pedagogies” to designate those places that stimulate people to educate themselves “in the Gramscian sense of the word, of governing themselves as agents that can locate themselves in history, at the same time that they determine the present as part of a discourse and a practice that allow people to imagine and desire beyond the existing limitations and practices in society”. There were also important internal conflicts in those education centers and groups of teachers that exercised their autonomy, which is always relative, but with which we have to play: conflicts between teachers, between teachers and students, between teachers and parents, between centers and administrations etc.

But such tension is an inseparable and unavoidable component of an educational approach that questions and intends to transform established reality. These conflicts reveal, in fact, that the values defended by EE are actually counter-values, and are not, therefore, the dominant values in the society and market. This key goes unnoticed and does not manifest itself when one puts in practice an EE delocalized and depolitized, a “no places” EE for “no citizens”. An anecdote told in one of the discussion groups carried out with teachers illustrates this situation: *“In addition to the fact that the center was involved in the mobilization in this case, it got involved in many other things (...) Many activities were carried out in the center, it housed the Never Again platform and also other activity groups, then, just to mention, in one of the discussion forums the mayor of the city said that we were converting him, as if it was an insult! ...”* [another teacher continues] *“... this was a personal conversation with me over the phone...(.) after the 24 hours closed-doors meeting with the participants, well... after lots of activities, the mayor of the city tells me: - But R.,*

look at what you are doing, you are turning the Institute into a forum of debates... That was an “insult”, because he said it as an insult... unconsciously, because if he had thought about it he wouldn’t have said it... it was a slip of the tongue”. (Teachers of the Muxía Secondary School, discussion group carried out on the 15th June 2004).

In this social scenario many teachers began to play the role of critical intellectuals and social activists. Without giving up their professional roles and the ethical boundaries that come with them, the teachers more committed with “the reality” changed from “managers” or “mediators” of the curriculum to “intellectuals” in the sense given to this word by sociologists such as Giroux (1990) or Bourdieu (2001). To the French sociologist a critical intellectual is “someone who brings in to the political struggle his specific competence and authority, and the values associated to the exercise of his profession, such as values of truth or of selflessness, or, to put it in another way, someone who steps into the political field without leaving behind his demands and competencies of investigator”; and he adds: “in so intervening, she is prone to disappoint, or better said, to clash in her own universe with those who see in the commitment a violation of axiological neutrality, and in the political world with those who see in her a threat to their monopoly, and in general with all those to whom her intervention is a nuisance” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 38). A teacher expressed in his own words how it was to take up this position: “I believe it was essential, the participation... I believe that the key manifestation of this was the Human Chain¹; it seems to me that it was a most notable

1. The Human Chain was one of the main activities of conscientization and mobilization of the education world organized by Areanegra. It consisted of a human chain formed by secondary school pupils from all over Galicia joining two points in the Death Coast most affected by the catastrophe. It was celebrated on the 12th March 2003 and had the participation of more than 45,000 students and 3,000 teachers, despite the efforts of the Galician School Administration to set hurdles and prevent it from happening. More information about this activity and about Areanegra can be found at www.areanegra.org.

phenomenon, of much more relevance than was attributed to it (...) but in the pedagogical sphere it was already at that time castrated, subtracted of its power. Then, I think the first to react was the education community (...) in this, let us say, sociological level... afterwards, in the economic level the Guilds [reacted] etc. But in terms of conscience, of the critique... I believe the only sector that moved in Galicia was the education. (...) To the teachers, it was the trigger that made many people who were paralyzed wake up... that woke up in them this idea that educating is not just teaching equations... that is, it is something else, it goes beyond that". (Teacher of the Secondary School of Muxía, discussion group carried out on 15th June 2004).

When the values had revealed themselves as counter-values, when the "official version" already laid dejected at the feet of the "socially constructed truth" in many alternative, critical and interconnected spaces and social networks, the education Administration revealed itself by sending a "circular" to the centers. "The Circular" is a document several pages long containing, only apparently, a legal and normative statement. Its purpose was to demonstrate that the teachers, as civil servants, and the education centers subordinated to the Administration had the obligation of being "objective" and "neutral", threatening with disciplinary sanctions those that understood it otherwise. Among other legal subterfuges, it qualified the activities and didactic materials about the catastrophe and the social response to it produced by the centers as "publicity and propaganda", their production and public display being therefore forbidden in the teaching centers. The objective was, of course, different: to provoke self-censorship for fear of penalties, and to give support to the teachers and other directing teams and centers that had remained loyal to the official "truth", propagating it in their classes and, particularly, excluding from them everything that had to do with the catastrophe.

Paradoxically, "The Circular" encouraged even further, if that was indeed possible, the

political sense of those teachers and members of the education community more committed with the citizenly mobilization. A few statements by Don Manuel Fraga Iribarbe, President of the Government of the Community, about "The Circular" and its "meaning", taken from a press release distributed by Europa Press speak by themselves: *"At the press conference following the meeting of the Counsel of la Xunta, Manuel Fraga recognized that issues like the violations or the beating of children 'drive him crazy', but he warned that 'if there is a grave violation it is to the pupils' consciences perpetrated by some teachers. I do not have to say which political group they belong to'. Fraga indicated that the Education had forbidden publicity and propaganda at the education centers through a circular after receiving 'numerous calls from parents, teachers and even principals asking for and end to the use of schools as protest platforms against the war and for the crisis of the Prestige. 'That's a shame, an absolute lack of respect for the children, for the parents and for Galicia', warned Fraga, who explained that he had asked for 'the complete collection' of notices displayed at the centers, and that it is clear that they 'suggest the use of lots of money. It has nothing to do with freedom of expression', he affirmed (Europa Press, 20th March 2003).*

From our point of view the *Prestige* has put in evidence that EE is an essentially political playing field, even – and particularly – when defined as apolitical and ideologically neutral. If the ultimate aim is that citizens take part in the transformation of society along principles and values of equity, democracy, and sustainability, we must accept the field in which the game takes place. If, as educators, we wish to participate in the social change, we have to accept that the environment is the indirect object of our actions, and that our raw materials are the social relations and representations that those same people and human communities establish about the environment. Whilst accepting this strategic objective, it is necessary to question the visions

of EE that intend to define it as a field free of values and ideologically aseptic whose mission is to transfer “scientific” information about what the bio-physical environment is like and how it works, such as suggested, for example, in recent proposals of “eco-literacy” (Capra, 2003:290-295) or in readings of EE of clearly neoliberal inspiration (Sanera and Shaw, 1996); regrettably, this is and shall be an increasingly common alternative.

In a scenario of social and ecological catastrophe it is more likely that EE will transmute into civic and political education, or perhaps one should say that it is civic and political education that will transmute into EE. This has happened in Galicia at the teaching centers and in other social spaces. In fact, the boundary between the “formal education” and the “non-formal education” has become mostly diffuse. *Never Again* is a civic movement but it is also educative. When reading its manifestos and in its public actions, one of the foremost lines of action is the permanent interpretation and reinterpretation of reality: the official media tell us it is this, but we can understand it in a different way; they tell us we must stay passive and trust the specialized institutions, but we can take initiative and be proactive. Ulrich Beck (2002: 232) states clearly the starting proposition, which for us is the reaching point: “But why the political can only finds its place and develop within the political system? Who says that politics is only possible under the forms and bounds of the governmental, parliamentary or party politics? Perhaps the authentically political disappears in the political system and reappears, transformed and generalized, in a form that must still be understood and developed, as subpolitics, in all other social fields”.

Closing Remarks

The sociology of risk, such as formulated by Beck (1998a, 1998b, 2002) or Giddens (1993, 2000), uncovers that the main feature

of the threats afflicting contemporary societies is that these threats emerge to a large extent as unexpected and undesirable effects of modernity’s civilizing success. The degradation of the environment is one of these threats. The appearance of these new threats clashes with the aspiration of controlling all the contingent factors that generate insecurity, an essential part of the modern *ethos*, from the natural phenomena, for which we have equipped ourselves with a full administrative and technical-scientific apparatus of prediction, control and civil protection, to the imponderables that threaten a person’s existence – to which respond, in developed societies, the social systems (sanitation, social assistance, education etc).

The new threats, the environmental and others that are being derived from globalization (the economic instability, the North-South imbalances, the migration flows, the international terrorism, the religious clashes etc), open a chink in the feeling of security of the “welfare societies”. It is a “perceived risk” of low intensity that brings preoccupation and disquiet, but that seldom motivates to action, either because there are no alternatives in sight, because it is seen as a threat in the long-term, or because the costs of any changes are assessed as intolerable. In the meantime, it is the problems of daily life, of the present, that concentrate most of the effective attention of the citizens (the employment, the security of the citizens, the economic stability etc). That is what explains that at the apex of the *Prestige* crisis in December 2002 the event, with 28% of citations, did not rank better than a third place in the list of the main problems worrying the Spaniards, according to the Center for Sociological Research, the Spanish government’s demography institute (CIS, 2003a), topped by “the unemployment” (64.9%) and by “ETA’s terrorism” (46.6%). Only a month after that, in January 2003, and still in the full wake of the catastrophe, the same question (CIS, 2003b) put the event in fifth place (14.0%), below the problems of “unemployment” (62.3%), “the ETA’s

terrorism” (51.6%), “the citizen’s insecurity” (27.0%), and “the immigration” (14.2%). In the social barometer of July of that same year “the *Prestige* disaster” already received only 0.1% of citations, occupying the 24th place among the citizens’ concerns (CIS, 2003c). These data refer to the whole of the public opinion in Spain; it would be interesting to have specific results for the Galician population to allow a better judgment.

The doubt raised by these data is if the *Prestige* is the tree that does not let us see the wood, or if it is the tree that shows us that there is a wood beyond. That is: if society is capable of rationalizing the catastrophe as the expression of a more global and invisible threat, or if it will simply see it as a contingent and decontextualized phenomenon. We could say, for instance, that the *Prestige* is not, actually, “the catastrophe”, but that it is a local manifestation of the “true catastrophe”: it is estimated in 5 million tons the amount of oil and its derivatives accidentally spilled into the oceans, which is

equivalent to saying that the amount spilled by the *Prestige* corresponds to roughly 1% of that amount (Murado, 2003). Indeed, it is estimated that the main source of sea contamination by hydrocarbons are the emissions by the industry and the urban concentrations (37%), followed by the “normal” discharge resulting from the traffic of tanker ships (33%, due to the washing of tanks, cargo transfers, minor spills etc), and only then, in third place with 12%, the spills from accidents such as that involving the *Prestige*. This is, therefore, an insidious and imperceptible catastrophe: a part of the background noise that constitutes the new awareness of the risk. It is, above all, the most difficult catastrophe to construct and represent in the educative processes: we cannot face a problem and seek solutions to it if we do not even perceive it, and if its real threat is ignored or sufficiently fuzzy to prevent the triggering of the defense mechanisms activated by the *Prestige*. This is undoubtedly the big challenge faced by Environmental Education in a risk society.

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