

## Conversations with a Catalan Polymath

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I first heard of Juan/Joan Martinez-Alier sometime in the second half of 1987. I had just returned to India, after a spell as a visiting lecture at Yale University, prior to which I had written a dissertation in Calcutta on the history and prehistory of the Chipko movement. Now, living and working in Bangalore, I met a man called Paul Kurian, who had studied at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. JNU was a hotbed of student radicalism, sort of an Indian Berkeley. Like most males who had passed through that university, Paul wore a beard and carried a *jhola*; however, unlike them, he thought for himself. The left-wing student leaders at JNU worshipped at the altar of Stalin and Mao. Paul told his classmates that if they indeed wanted to combine intellectualism and Marxism, then the chap whose writings they should study was named Leon Trotsky.

After JNU, Paul went off to work with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and with Solidarity in Poland. Somewhere along the way he picked up a book called *Ecological Economics*, a history of how environmental ideas had been suppressed by mainstream economists, whether Marxist or Neo-classical or Keynesian.

Paul Kurian was fascinated by the book and determined to bring its author to India. He gifted me a faded photocopy of *Ecological Economics*, and I read and marked it up very closely. I was deeply impressed by its learning and its scholarship but had doubts about some of its conclusions.

Three-and-a-half decades later, I still have with me that bound photocopy of Juan Martinez-Alier's *Ecological Economics*. It has travelled with me as I have moved jobs and cities, always finding a place in my bookshelves. Through the 1990s, when I was an active researcher in environmental studies, I dipped into it often, but in recent years I have not had a chance to look at it. Since many readers of this festschrift know the book well, let me share some of the marginal comments I made on it when I first read it three-and-a-half decades ago.

Early on, on page 5, I underlined this phrase with approval: 'There has been a long-standing divorce between Marxism and ecology'. Then, a few pages later, I endorsed this methodological credo: 'I have tried to avoid writing this book in the form of an a priori exercise in legitimation of a putative disciple of ecological economics which would have been in statu nascendi for about 100 years. I have also tried not to alter the other authors' ideas in order to turn them into background support for today's left-wing "ecologism"'. Leafing further, I find that among the phrases I had highlighted was this one, from page 43: 'However, a decrease in the price of oil does not mean that oil reserves in the world have increased'.

Many of the thinkers profiled by Martinez-Alier were new to me, and they wrote in languages I had no access to. My copy of *Ecological Economics* has many passages from these writers underlined for possible future use in my own work. I was

learning an enormous amount as I went along, but, being young and argumentative, and Indian besides, I wanted to express my disagreements as well. Thus, when the nineteenth-century anarchist Sergei Podolinsky (one of the book's heroes) is quoted as saying that 'Every nation suffers from foreign rule', I appended the comment in pencil: 'Marx on British India' (a reference to the fact that in a newspaper article from the 1850s, Marx had argued that colonialism sometimes had *both* destructive and regenerative effects). Reading the section on Patrick Geddes, I find that, while underlining many phrases and sentences that I found striking, I also remarked: 'Doesn't seem to have read his Indian town plans'.

Martinez-Alier had shown how the chemist Frederick Soddy thought 'science had proved at least as much a curse as a blessing to mankind', adding: 'The anarchists, in their few remaining strongholds, did not read books or at least did not read Soddy and believed fervently in technical progress'. This elicited from me the comment: 'Only in the West – cf Gandhi in the 1920s!' (for that gentle Indian anarchist certainly believed that science had proved as much a curse as a blessing to humankind). Then, when the author mourned the lack of interest that Marx and Engels had in the work of proto-ecologists like Podolinsky, I appended the remark: 'Technological optimism is one of the main stumbling blocks with regard to a rapprochement between Marxism and ecologism'.

Martinez-Alier's magnificent, scholarly and utterly non-teleological history of ecological ideas in economic thought ended with a 'Political Epilogue'. The first comment I made in this epilogue was complimentary. Against the author's observation: 'A new field of knowledge must be constructed not only intellectually but socially. At least in the short-term, it is of little use publishing if you do not fit into an academic or political group; "parish or publish"' – I had written: 'Nice!' But as I carried on reading I became more combative. On the basis of his research into the past, and the ecological devastation he was seeing in the present, Martinez-Alier remarked: 'I am puzzled by the fact that that left-wing ecologism has grown in the 1970s, and is still growing, not so much in the Third World among part of the youth of some of the most over-developed countries'. He asked: 'Why are there not strong ecological movements in India, in Africa?' To this I answered, on the margin: 'There are – see the CSE [Centre for Science and Environment] reports'. Then, when Martinez-Alier wrote (on the basis of reading books by parochial British authors) that 'there are almost no ecological social movements with roots in the Third World', I responded: 'Rubbish'.

Notwithstanding these disputes and disagreements, I agreed with my friend Paul Kurian that this was a work of defining importance, and we had to find a way to get the author to Bangalore. Now Paul was both a renegade Marxist and an impecunious one. However, he had a brother, Siddhartha, who ran a well-funded NGO in Bangalore. Paul prevailed upon Siddhartha to organize a conference on the Indian environmental movement. The programme was drafted by Paul and myself; we invited scholars and activists from around the country, as well as one foreigner, the author of the aforementioned *Ecological Economics*, Professor Juan Martinez Alier of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Among the Indian participants were the country's leading ecologist, Professor Madhav Gadgil of the Indian Institute of

Science, and one of our most experienced environmental activists, Ashish Kothari or Kalpavriksh.

The conference made possible by the Kurian brothers was organized in Bangalore in August 1988. The venue was an ecumenical Christian centre on St. Marks Road, named Aashirvad, where the out-of-station participants were also staying. The morning the meeting began, I went early, to have breakfast with the speakers. I was asked by Paul to sit with the chief (and only foreign) guest. Juan Martinez Alier was of medium height and wore rimless spectacles. He walked slowly and talked softly. In that first conversation he introduced himself as 'a lapsed Marxist'. It was a brilliant description, and I soon adopted it as my own.

After the conference ended, Juan had a free day before returning to Barcelona, so my wife Sujata and I took him to see the sights outside Bangalore – the Hoysala temples of Belur and Halebid, and the Jain shrine on a hill, Shravanbelagola. Although much older than my wife and I, Juan steadily strode up the hillside, while we unfit Indians panted and stumbled behind him.

At the time, Juan was 50, while I was 30 – an age difference that loomed much larger then than it does now. Through that long day, driving from temple to temple, I was able to flesh out the story of his life – his upbringing in Franco's Spain, his education in Oxford and the years of exile away from his homeland, his first studies of agrarian sociology in Andalusia, his travels in Latin America, his return to Spain after the return of democracy to the country, his greenward turn after reading the works of the British chemist Frederick Soddy and the maverick Ukrainian socialist Sergei Podolinsky.

Juan Martinez-Alier was both a polyglot and a polymath. His first languages were Catalan and Spanish, yet he spoke French, German and English well enough to make puns and jokes in them. Hitler's slogan *Blut und Boden*, he liked to say, had in practice become *Blut und Autobahnen*. (And he had a more than adequate knowledge of Portuguese and Italian as well.) To me, who had one-and-a-half languages (fluent English plus conversational Hindustani), this was at once deeply impressive and deeply humiliating. Meanwhile, seeing him effortlessly traverse the disciplines, an economist who became an anthropologist before moving to history and ecology, encouraged me not to be embarrassed about my own (more hesitant and more limited) intellectual transgressions. Juan had extensive first-hand knowledge of North America, Latin America, and Europe; and this trip to India was the beginning of a long immersion in the ecology and politics of a fourth continent, Asia.

I had been greatly influenced by a youthful reading of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, through it (and some other encounters) rejecting the dogmatic Marxism of my teachers in Calcutta. When Juan was growing up, the book was banned in his homeland, so he only read it when he went to Oxford to study. Later, on a visit to Paris, he met some Spaniards who had worked alongside Orwell in the anti-Stalinist resistance group called POUM. He hung out with them in the émigré bookshop in the Latin Quarter called Ruedo Iberico, nourishing for future use the democratic spirit that Franco had sought to extinguish within Spain itself.

When we set out that morning for our tour of the Mysore countryside, Juan Martizez Alier and I were merely scholarly acquaintances. We returned to the city

at night, as friends – for life. Some months after he had returned to Barcelona, I wrote to him that I was contemplating a long essay on the ecological thought of Lewis Mumford, whose books and fugitive essays I had read at Yale. I had, with Juan's assistance, identified three kinds of environmental ideologues, whom I called 'Scientific Industrialists', 'Agrarians' and 'Wilderness Thinkers', respectively. I now told Juan that my study of Mumford showed that he, almost uniquely, did not fit into any of these categories. In fact, he incorporated and transcended all three.

Juan wrote back:

Do not forget to trace [the Scottish polymath] Patrick Geddes' influence on Lewis Mumford, and to explain also which were the origins of Mumford's anarchism. Geddes belongs to some extent to your 'Scientific Industrialists', in fact he does not, because what you mean is rather 'Ecological Managerialism' (even perhaps 'Socio-Ecological Engineering'), into which the American Technocrats of the 1930s, and also [the forester Gifford] Pinchot, would fit. Geddes was more of an organicist, but not an Agrarian either, and not a Wilderness mystic. There is a current of ecological and Urban Planners and Regional Planners (Geddes, Ebenezer Howard, Ballod-Atlanticus, later Mumford). Geddes was influenced by [the anarchist geographers] Kropotkin and Reclus, but also by [the sociologist Frederic] Le Play.

Juan's letter continued:

If you look up [Friedrich] Hayek's 'Counterrevolution of Science' (1952) you will see that he classifies Mumford with Otto Neurath, [Frederick] Soddy, [Lancelot] Hogben, Geddes as 'social engineers', too concerned with the study of energy flow, all of them enemies of the Market, all of them descendants of [Henri] Saint Simon, all of them potentially totalitarian utopianists. You have to deal with this issue, how an anarchist utopianist as Mumford, could be classified as an enemy of freedom. ... It would also be interesting to see his position on the Spanish Civil War (I remember vaguely a connection with Luisa Berneri, who wrote a book on utopias, and whose brother Camilo was an Italian anarchist killed in Barcelona in May [19]37, in the communist-anarchist fights). It would be interesting also to see how he weathered the McCarthy period.

This was a letter of advice, instruction and encouragement, the sort of letter I could never have got from one of my mentors at Yale, or from anyone anywhere else in the world. The breathtaking lack of parochialism was at once cultural, geographical and intellectual.

In 1991 I was invited to spend a term at St. Anthony's College, Oxford. I wrote to Juan, who hopped across from Barcelona to visit me. He knew the town well, since he had done his doctorate at St. Anthony's. I found that all his old friends in Oxford called him Whoo-an, pronouncing the J as Y; whereas I, who knew him only as someone who had renounced Marxism for Ecology as well as Spain for Catalonia, called him Jooan.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A few years later, my friend was to formally change the spelling of his name, becoming Joan, as in his fellow Catalan, the painter Miro. This has caused much confusion; since some of his early books have him as Juan. Did he, some scholars now wonder, have a sex change? Like the economist Deirdre, once Donald, McCloskey? Or are these two different people, husband and wife or perhaps father and daughter? When citing his works myself, I solve the problem by referring to him as 'J. Martinez Alier'.

One day, while walking to Juan/Joan's old College, we bumped into Jairus Banaji, a brilliant Indian Marxist who had been an undergraduate at Oxford and a graduate student at JNU before working with trade unions in Bombay. Now, in his forties, he had returned to Oxford to write a doctoral thesis on the olive oil economy of ancient Rome. When I introduced Juan, Jairus more or less prostrated himself. 'The author of *Landlords and Labourers in Southern Spain!*', he exclaimed. 'That's the finest modern treatment of the dialectic between the formal and the real subsumption of labour. On my shelf, your book lies between [Karl Marx's] *Capital* and [V. I.] Lenin's *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*.'

Fortunately, Juan did not spoil the moment by telling Jairus what he had already told me; that he was by now a *lapséd* Marxist.

Through the 1990s, Juan and I met every other year, in places around the world. Under the auspices of the Social Sciences Research Council, we assembled a working group on 'The Environmentalism of the Poor', whose members included the Indian feminist economist Bina Agarwal, the Mexican agro-ecologist Victor Toledo and the American political scientist Eric Hershberg. One meeting I remember with particular poignancy was organized by me in New Delhi in January 1993. It was an anxious time for me, both politically and personally; the Babri Masjid had just been demolished, catalysing Hindu-Muslim riots across northern India, and Sujata was going through a difficult pregnancy. In between our work sessions at the India International Centre Juan and I went for walks in Lodi Gardens, our conversations calming my nerves and soothing my anxieties.

Another meeting I remember for its display of Juan's sense of humour. Both of us had been invited by the Institute for Socio-Ecological Research in Frankfurt to speak at a conference on 'Sustainability and the Social Sciences'. After the conference ended, the participants were taken for a tour of the city, with the hosts proudly pointing out local initiatives to promote sustainability. One such was an incinerator that burnt the city's wastes to produce energy. As the guide told us in excited detail about this cutting-edge technology, Juan laconically remarked, 'At least they only burn human wastes in incinerators nowadays'.

Juan's wit was mostly mischievous, and I later told him that this caustic exception was perhaps some sort of Freudian rebellion against his romantic companions. His first wife, the anthropologist Verona Stolcke, was German; while his second wife Martha Giralt taught German. Although he had many German friends (including his collaborator on *Ecological Economics*, Klaus Schlüpmann), he had some sort of special feeling against the country, which may have had historic roots – Hitler's support to Franco – but also perhaps aesthetic reasons, the fact that compared to the Englishmen he had lived with Germans had a rather heavy-handed sense of humour.

This Frankfurt meeting was held, if memory serves, in 1997. The next year Sujata and I left our kids with her parents and went to Spain for a working holiday. Juan had arranged for me to give talks in his university in Barcelona, and in Granada and Jaén too, with a visit to Cordoba added on. Juan took us on an architectural tour of his native city, the museum on Picasso's juvenilia and Gaudi's buildings among its highlights, and for a drive into the Catalan countryside as well. Then we went to

Granada, where Juan's friend, the environmental historian Manuel Gonzalez de Molina, was likewise a splendid host. We walked around the old city, where we encountered a group of Catholic nuns, sourced from Africa since the locals were becoming ever more irreligious and spent an afternoon in the Alhambra.

From Granada we drove to Cordoba, where our host was the sociologist Eduardo Sevilla. After allowing us to see the Mesquita and other sites on our own, in the evening Eduardo took us for a tour of the old town. The sociologist had, like his friend Juan, spent a lot of time in Latin America, where he had developed a liking for the drink known as maté. So, as the darkness fell and the lamps came on, we sat in the square named after Cervantes, the three of us sipping the drink Eduardo had brought along. A quarter-of-a-century later, I retain vivid memories of that enchanted evening, as our host, large of body and larger of heart, filled our cups as we talked.

As a designer with a serious interest in architecture, Sujata was enthralled by what she saw in Catalonia and in Andalusia. She was very fond of Juan and enjoyed his sense of humour almost as much as I did. It remains the nicest trip I ever made with my wife. The only problem was the food. It was difficult, really difficult, to be a vegetarian in Spain, although I told Juan that he might console himself that in Germany Sujata had found it even harder.

There were other meetings in Spain organized by Juan where I went alone. One was held in the Andalusian town of Baeza, intense discussions in a church-turned-conference centre with a visit to the lovely little town of Ibiza thrown in. Another meeting was held in Andorra, where on an off-day I went for a long solitary walk, the oak forests and the streams reminding me of my boyhood in the Himalayan foothills. On the drive back to Barcelona, Juan told me of the complicated history of the principality, suggesting that its peaceful recent past might be a model for a solution in Kashmir, which could likewise become an autonomous dominion in which the two large countries bordering it had an avuncular rather than avaricious interest.

Some years later, Juan came to stay with us in Bangalore, with a draft manuscript and his son Ricard in town. During the day, Richard went to school with our children while Sujata and I and Juan worked. In the evenings we chatted and gossiped. Juan was particularly taken with our dog, a gentle black Labrador whom Sujata had named Foucalt (pronounced 'Fuko'), as a joke of her own, aimed at the pomo poco stuff then all the rage in Indian academia. It was a happy as well as productive time, for the manuscript Juan was revising was published as the book we know as *The Environmentalism of the Poor*.

By now, I had myself moved away from environmental research. However, while Juan could no longer try out new ideas on me, I could certainly try out mine on him. I was now writing on the history of Indian democracy, and my friend's formidable knowledge of European and Latin American history helped me place my findings in some sort of comparative context. He no longer had any need to send me drafts of his manuscripts, whereas I had an instrumental interest in continuing to send him drafts of mine. I remember with particular gratitude the help he gave me in writing the introduction and epilogue to an anthology of Indian political thought.

In our years working together, Joan and I had developed a shared distaste for an environmentalist who travelled around the world (always in the first-class cabin)

while preaching the virtues of village economics and small-scale agriculture. We thought this person hypocritical as well as wrong-headed, for relentlessly demonizing modern science and valourizing ancient Hindu ‘wisdom’ as the solution to our environmental challenges today. In November 2009, after Juan had sent me mails from various locations in Western Europe, the United States and Latin America and then fallen silent, I wrote to him: ‘You back in Barcelona? Your carbon footprint is approaching [name redacted]...’. I then added: ‘By the way, my air travel and hence impact on the earth has drastically reduced once I abandoned environmental for political history – why, I wonder?’

To this taunt Joan responded: ‘Am planning to live 95 years, and spend the last 15, or 10, in a village, growing my own food (if any), or perhaps in a sailing boat, so that the CO<sub>2</sub> average comes down noticeably’. I responded: ‘Keep those years for writing your memoirs, which I will render into the Queen’s English’.

Nine years later we had an email exchange that was infinitely more portentous. In September 2017, the campaigning journalist Gauri Lankesh, who also lived in Bangalore and whom I had known, was murdered by Hindu fundamentalists. The day after she was killed I received a mail from Joan. Since his first visit to India in 1987, my friend had returned often, working with and inspiring young ecological economists, and travelling through the countryside mapping environmental conflicts. In the 30 years since we had first met he had come to know my country rather well.

Now, on hearing of the assassination of a writer in my city, Joan thought I might be at risk too. He knew I often attacked Hindu fundamentalism in my newspaper articles, where I also made clear my distaste for the ideology and personality of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. So he wrote suggesting that I go out India for a spell, perhaps to London, ‘a 3 months working holiday’, or else in Barcelona, where he lived. ‘Living outside for a while would not stop your presence in internet and newspapers in India’, he remarked.

Joan’s advice stemmed from personal affection, and from an acute sense of history. He had himself grown up in Franco’s Spain and then spent many years overseas. His first books were published in emigré editions in Paris. He had gone back to his homeland only after democracy was restored to it.

I wrote back to Joan, saying that I was in London, en route to the States, to see my daughter (then studying at Harvard) and to speak at a conference. I would be back home in 2 weeks, I said, adding: ‘And then I will stay put there. For the prospect of an enforced and extended exile fills me with dread. My karmabhumi [place of work] is India; there I will live and die.’

To my profession of patriotism, Juan answered:

If they killed Gandhi, getting rid of the biographer might seem a minor job for some of these crazy people, in Bangalore or elsewhere in India, protected by powerful people. Your roots in India cannot be doubted at this point of your life, you will be 60 next year. This is where you have lived, have written your books, have influenced and do influence public opinion and will die and be cremated – no doubt with some appropriate rituals.

However, death should come as late as possible (as also in my case), provided that our brains are in working order, as they obviously are. This is one of your duties, to remain alive

(for your family but also for your country). If there was a yellow fever or cholera epidemic in Bangalore, you would take some precautions. I am glad you are in London, and then in Harvard, good libraries to spend some months there and correct the proofs of the Gandhi book and write your columns.... A working holiday. Nobody talks of exile, this is not the word. It's rather coming and going.

'You have seen harsh and horrible times in your own country, when you were young', I wrote back to Joan: 'I am seeing them in my country when I am in late middle age. Modi too shall pass, as Franco did.'

Joan now sent a mail with the subject line: 'One thing you could do', the text reading: 'In your travels and lecture tours in America etc. and in Europe you could get a group of younger people from India (mostly Indian graduate students and young professionals) to set up a civil society organization representing the values that you defend, based on the Constitution of India and its founding mothers and fathers. Something opposing Hindutva at the ideological level, with a name that represents this. There are hundreds of thousands, millions of Indians outside India. Many of them manual workers, shopkeepers... also.'

This suggestion emanated no doubt from Joan's own life history. It was important to sustain, outside India, the democratic values of the Indian Republic, so that – as had happened in Spain – these values could one day reclaim the land and its Constitution from those who sought to destroy it.

I'd like to end this essay where I began, with the book I read just before I first met my friend and companion of three decades and counting. In the 'Political Epilogue' to *Ecological Economics*, Juan (not yet Joan) Martinez-Alier asked 'the question on the plausibility of international ecological neo-narodnism as an ideology for the dispossessed of the earth'. He continued: 'It is doubtful, however, whether ideas originating in the First World are fit for consumption in the Third World. Who will be the intermediaries, what distortions will take place in transit?' To these questions I had, back in 1987, posed a question of my own on the photocopied page: 'What about ideas originating in the Third World?'

After Juan/Joan came to India later that year, he began asking that question too. The meeting in Bangalore acquainted the visiting Catalan scholar with a vigorous environmental debate in India, itself inspired by popular struggles such as the Chipko movement in the Himalaya and the fisherfolk's movement in Kerala. Unlike the 'full-stomach' environmentalism of the West, these livelihood struggles represented an emerging environmentalism of the poor.

Through the 1990s and beyond Joan came often to India, being inspired by scholars and activists and teaching them a great deal in return. He was also spending a lot of time in Latin America, particularly in Ecuador, studying shrimp farming on the coast and indigenous knowledge systems in the Andes. Within his own continent he embraced the European project enthusiastically, making close connections in France and Germany in particular, even as he was becoming more fervently committed to the creation of an independent Catalan state. And he was visiting and speaking in the great universities of North America too.

Back in 1987, Joan hoped for the emergence of 'international ecological neo-narodnism as an ideology for the dispossessed of the earth'. But, he wondered,

‘whether ideas originating in the First World are fit for consumption in the Third World. Who will be the intermediaries, what distortions will take place in transit?’ Thirty-five years later, we can say that many such intermediaries have since emerged, among whom certainly the foremost is the author of *Ecological Economics*. He has interpreted Catalonia to Spain, Spain to Europe, Europe to North America, Latin America to India and India to Latin America, the Third World to the First World and vice versa. He has not been alone in this task, of course, but amongst all of us he has conveyed the most wisdom, as well as been responsible for the fewest distortions.

[Ramachandra Guha’s books include *The Unquiet Woods* (1989), *Environmentalism: A Global History* (2000), *India after Gandhi* (2007) and *Gandhi: The Years That Changed the World* (2018). He lives in Bengaluru, which was formerly known as Bangalore.]

## **Joan Martinez-Alier and the Crisis of Civilization, Knowledge, and the Human Species**

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ONE. Time has passed. It has almost run out. We will soon be or not be assessed by historians of environmental and critical thinking. Of course, so long as humankind can transcend what is the second most dangerous phase in human history (paleontologists agree that the first phase occurred when *Homo sapiens* were reduced to a minimum and were trapped on the coast of South Africa due to a freezing climate). After all, our species is the only survivor of the ten species constituting our genus. Time has passed and what we have watched like a distant horror movie has drawn close without our even noticing. We are now enveloped in it. From mere fanatical movie spectators, over a few decades we have become actors and actresses in the drama. The crisis of the human species is above all a crisis of civilization. It is the crisis of a modern, industrial, capitalist, technocratic, patriarchal, and anti-ecological world. However, it is also a crisis of knowledge since we are experiencing an epistemological turning point. Western and Eurocentric thinking has been breaking apart, and the cracks have reached not only the defenders of the system but also its critics. This epistemological crisis, a profound reframing of science’s main theories and methods, constitutes an extensive scientific transformation in the sense set forth by Thomas Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1996). This work is a reflection about the most important science written about in the twentieth century, with more than 110,000 citations (Google Scholar). For all of the aforementioned, we are experiencing the