

Comment

Sustainable development is a hoax: we cannot have it all

Unlimited desire is bound to destroy a world of limited resources

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Wherever in the world people experience the consequences of ecological ruin, they say: "Things can't go on like this." Every time we hear of the extinction of some fragile creature whose name we scarcely know; whenever we learn that the past year has been one of the hottest on record; when we see oil-coated seabirds rescued from some spillage; each time statistics are published showing that the highest rate of growth in cancers is among those affecting the human reproductive system - cervix, ovaries, prostate, testicles, breast - we are roused to repeat: "Things can't go on like this."

But when the bills come in, when the mortgage payment is due, the credit-card account, the holiday deposit must be paid; when we see how far a new generation is bonded to perpetual growth of the economy, we know things cannot possibly not go on like this. They have to. Our income depends on it. We must find refuge in the contradiction of a world where livelihood is at war with life.

We have been living for a long time in this dual consciousness. The idea that change is vital for long-term survival must coexist with the certainty that any change in the way we answer need is unthinkable. Conserving the resource-base on which all social and economic systems depend strikes against the even more compelling need to protect the system of wealth-creation, by the grace of which we buy our daily bread or corn or cassava or rice.

This apparently insoluble dilemma has led to a terrible immobilism and political paralysis. People's feeling of powerlessness turns them away from politics. Apathy, in this context, should not be taken at face value. It represents, rather, withdrawal, disengagement. Discussions on these issues, if they take place at all, do so inaccessibly, in cabals of experts, in secret places set apart from daily experience. When the basic concerns of humanity are excluded from a rigged and cloudy political "debate", what could be more rational than opting out of it?

It isn't surprising that people find it impossible to live in this contradiction. Most desperately seek to escape. Anything is preferable to oppression and impotence. We are overwhelmed. We hope it will all go away, or be dealt with by those more knowledgeable than we are. Maybe it can be postponed to some future date - just as we have filed away all the other unpaid bills. If we can defer the day of reckoning in our daily lives - usually by borrowing more - why can we not do so in the global arena?

But we know this is only buying time - that last commodity in the universal market. When George Bush the Younger refused to sign the Kyoto convention on global warming

on the grounds that nothing must be allowed to interfere with US economic interests, he was echoing the wisdom of George Bush the Elder, who spoke his famous words before the Rio summit that "the American way of life is not up for negotiation". Their commitment to a fundamentalist economic salvation simply writes the ecological imperative out of the scenario.

Yet it was believed that the solution to the great clash between ecology and economy had been discovered in the 1980s: this was the idea of "sustainable development", triumphantly enshrined in the Rio declaration. Intra-generational equity would be balanced with inter-generational justice to ensure that we do not take more from the Earth than we give back to it. The excitement generated by this formula concealed the possibility that it might be a contradiction in terms: when unlimited desire is unleashed in a world of limited resources, something has to yield. The "fruits" of industrialism turn out to be strange hybrids - perhaps, ultimately, inedible.

Like all the brave concepts offered up by environmentalists, sustainable development was doomed to go the way of the rest of the treacherous lexicon of developmentalism - empowerment, participation, poverty-abatement, inclusiveness, and so on: ideas absorbed and redefined in terms amenable to privilege. Sustainable now means what the market, not the earth, can bear; what originally meant adjusting the industrial technosphere so that it should not destroy the planet has now come to indicate the regenerative power of the economy, no matter how it may degrade the "environment". Sustainable is what the rich and powerful can get away with.

And they have got away with a great deal, as the statistics of inequality tell. Capitalism - or, under its many criminal aliases, globalisation, industrial society, the economy - must appear to reconcile growth with conservation. The political management of the contradiction involves reassuring people that we can painlessly have it all. We can all get richer and grow greener at the same time. It is even suggested that we need more wealth to protect the environment.

Globalisation is premised on the promise that the poor may become a little less poor only if the rich become immeasurably, abusively richer: if it had been the intention of humanity to wreck the Earth, no more effective formula could have been imagined. If the industrial paradigm were to start with a recognition of the finite carrying capacity of the globe, this would immediately raise the issue of how resources are to be allocated; and distributive justice - that old spectre which wealth and power thought they had exorcised - would come back to haunt the world.

In the decade between Rio and Johannesburg, the conflict between economy and ecology has become more acute. Despite efforts to banish it from an increasingly banal domestic politics, it haunts the consciousness of the age. While some have turned away from politics, seeking a haven in private life, others have sought more plausible answers; to which the rise both of the racist right and of the anti-globalisers testifies. The far right states with admirable lucidity: we are privileged; they want in; we will not permit it. The outlaw left equally disturbs the control of politics by conservatives of all hues.

Xenophobic nationalisms are pitted against an internationalism of social justice. This is the new struggle; and it rises directly out of efforts to suppress it - the uneasy, and above all, unsustainable, truce between natural and human-made systems.

In defiance of all the carefully wrought conventions, the extremists are defining issues declared off-limits; they are portents of the struggle to come. Whoever believed that economic globalisation would be without political consequences that would tear through the tensions and pretensions, and break out of the choiceless consensus of the new order? No doubt the powers at Johannesburg will do their best to dissimulate all this behind yet more commitment to sustainability, poverty-abatement and environmental integrity; the better to gain a little more time for the paralysing proposition that although things can't go on like this, yet they must.

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