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Human and Social Aspects of Sustainable Development. Equality vs Desire

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The term "sustainable development" appeared in the 1960s as a natural corollary to another, namely ecological crisis. That decade was one in which human activities were beginning to reach the limits of tolerance of the geophysical processes directly connected with the conditions of human existence on the planet. The degradation of the environment with its negative effects on the processes of generating and sustaining life sparked vigorous debate on man's relation to nature, redefining the moral and political dimensions of Western thinking in this domain.

This term replaced the concept of development as informed by the economic theory of the immediate post-war period and the subsequent decolonisation of Asia and Africa. When in 1949 President Truman spoke of American economic aid to underdeveloped countries, his arguments were both moral, concerned with the wretchedness of those populations, and political, in favour of bolstering the so-called free world in its opposition to socialism. Economic aid would keep those countries out of the Communist camp, eliminating political risks that would have negative consequences for the capitalist economy. A similar political and economic rationale lay behind the Marshall Plan for European recovery under American control (Kaplan, 2001). Development, in other words, was seen as a product of the Cold War, and the development model proposed for poor countries was framed with a view to helping them become consumer societies, thus serving the ideological and economic goals of the capitalist system. At that time, the early years of the 1970s, capital needed a global platform and large-scale infrastructures to help it achieve its programmatic goals. Economists describe this as the big push, a phenomenon with its own inherent contradictions that led (in the '80s) to rejection of its origins – the economic aid plans of the preceding decade – and a re-examination of capital's strategic aims. Development in the sense of imposing on the countries of the South the values and models of the countries of the North stopped being the motto of the Western world and was transmuted into sustainable development, introducing a new framework of vision, ecological and environmental, based on respect for the limited and non-renewable resources of this planet (Brunel, 2004).

Is there a definition that can render the content of this concept with clarity? Is it a programme for action, or a new conception of things based on different epistemological approaches and theories? In what relation does it stand to Marxism and neo-Marxism? What are the qualitative ideological differences – if any – between these approaches, and in what terms can they be expressed? These are the questions that this paper attempts to answer.

Beginning with the conceptual distinction, one might say that sustainable development is that form of development which does not permit human interventions that create serious problems for ecosystems or have an irreversible impact on the biosphere, with negative consequences for the life of the planet and future generations.

The Report of the UN World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Report)¹

¹ In 1982, in the context of "Stockholm plus 10", the UN commissioned a report on eco-development. Chaired by Norwegian Environment Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Commission began its work in 1984. The report it returned in 1987 (the "Brundtland Report") sets out the official principles of what we call sustainable development, and calls for an "Earth Summit" where

defines Sustainable Development as “the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Report, 1987: 43).

The aim and the content of sustainable development are shaped by the combined action of different ideological currents of thought (Georgopoulos, 2001 and 2002; Papadimitriou, 1998; Raptis, 2000; Sunderlin, 2003). The nature preservation movement, the nature study movement, political ecology, liberal, social and socialist environmentalism, bioregionalism and radical environmentalism each constitute a different approach to solving the environmental problem. Some environmentalists focus on implementing a simple corrective patchwork of environmental protection measures, without challenging the course and direction of society and the economy; others envisage a different socio-economic system, with new institutions and structures, new patterns of social relations, and new forms of wealth distribution and interaction with nature. The first category is the weak environmentalism that takes liberal policy and the capitalist economic system as given and tries to manage environmental problems within that framework. The other category is that of trends involving a left-wing political outlook, which has a different epistemological foundation. These epistemological differences create a variety of currents, some of which we will be looking at in this paper. This is deep environmentalism as well as social and socialist environmentalism.

There is a direct link between the appearance of these currents and the conditions created by late capitalism. Consumerism, the society of the spectacle, the phenomenon of increasing inequality, multiethnicity, population shifts, the privatisation of the public sector, the urbanisation of the rural environment and new forms of power and exploitation provoke interesting debate and reflection on the philosophical and ideological foundations of Western industrial capitalist society. The 1970s spawned movements contesting the values and fundamental principles of industrial society and modernity. At the same time, critical thinkers were approaching these phenomena from different points of view and publishing important works. Harvey, Eagleton, Jameson, Marcuse, Habermas, Baudrillard and Debord all challenged the absurdity of consumerist society and the cynicism of capitalism and proposed a re-orientation of culture, society and politics within the logic of Marxism or with a neo-Marxist approach that incorporates psychoanalytical theories into its thinking (Charles and Lipovetsky, 2006; Kondylis, 1991; Jameson, 1999; Giddens, 1990). The rationalism of the modern age was severely criticised for its effects on mental health, valuing designification and presenting grand anthropocentric narratives that organise human lives from the top down, automatically assigning everyone to a collectivity and disregarding his particular needs and wishes. The ensuing (but still in the '70s) post-modern period redefined cultural values and tenets and produced new intellectual achievements, known as post-structuralist (neo-Marxist) theories: these deal with small narratives, rehabilitating the individual from his isolation, abolishing hierarchies and loss of identity and substance, of causality and interpretation. Science and the new technologies contributed to this intellectual production, with theories of complexity stimulating philosophical inquiry in new directions. Websites, potential reality and the collapse of certainties in mathematics and physics acted on theoretical and critical thinking, contributing to the construction of new approaches to truth and reality. Into this new scientific and technological world came new readings of Nietzsche, Freud and Lacan, while the works of philosophers like Deleuze influenced the production of knowledge across the whole spectrum of the social sciences. Elements of both Surrealism and Romanticism entered into the new intellectual mix that fed social critique and an anarchist attitude as the “global village” came into being.

Although this intellectual production assumed imposing dimensions, it did not monopolise the reaction to late capitalism. Thinkers who remained faithful to rationalism and the “objective” Marxist approaches, holding to sociological rather than psychoanalytical analyses, have made substantial contributions to the intellectual output of recent decades, opposing not only late capitalism and the civilisation it produced but also the anarchist critique and reaction of neo-liberalism. The class structure of society, the capitalist mode of production and the relations of production that developed within that framework, the distribution of wealth, the role of electronics, and more broadly of science and the new technologies, in the growth of capital and the consequences of that phenomenon for social organisation, culture and the environment on the global scale – these are the concepts that determined the approach to and understanding of contemporary social phenomena.

The influence on the worlds of science and the arts of these two main currents in contemporary left-wing thinking is obvious. So is their impact on ecology, in the shaping of the trends of deep, social and socialist environmentalism.

The first of these currents rejects anthropocentrism and adopts the concept of the total field, within which all phenomena co-exist outside hierarchies and causal relations. There is a link between this biological egalitarianism and the analytical-combinatory thinking that, according to Kondylis (1991), abolishes substances, arguing the existence of ultimate component elements that continuously form new combinations. These combinations are constantly replaced by new, and in principle equivalent, ones. Everything can and should combine with everything, because everything is on the same level, a state of affairs that precludes certain combinations from taking precedence over others. This is a critique of the anthropocentric worldview, which proposes a self-organised network of singularities that function on the basis of desire and not social normative principles.

The other two currents, not content merely to dispute anthropocentrism, propose a new ecological ethic. They concentrate their critique on the socio-economic system itself, which is based on the institutionalised sovereignty of man's exploitation of man and his attempts to master nature as well. They hold that the destruction of the environment is the outcome of the logic of the capitalist mode of production, and see the concepts of sustainable development and the law of surplus value as mutually contradictory. They argue that the Marxist critique of the capitalist economy remains an unrivalled tool for understanding that the crisis in man's relation with nature is rooted in the social relationship between human beings, that is, in the mode of production. They construct their theories using basic Marxist concepts like the class struggle, economic imperialism and the exploitation of the worker, and share the early Frankfurt School's criticism of "scientific socialism" as overly optimistic with regard to the unlimited power of science, technical checks and supremacy over nature. To that School's critique of instrumental discourse, some of them propose, in differing degrees, a return to a pre-Marxist / Romantic critique of industrial society. Inspired by Adorno, Timothy Morton (2007) wrote his *Ecology without Nature*, which discusses the relation between man, society and nature. Morton sees the image of man as different, and separate, from nature as rooted in 18th-century Romanticism, and he borrows Adorno's concept of non-identity: the otherness that exists within the self, the moving force of the world, a force that changes itself, that drives beyond itself, that creates and creates itself.

In Morton's view, the core of the problem lies in our view of nature, its role, and its relation to man. Žižek drew heavily on this work for his 2007 lecture at the University of Athens, even using the same title: *Ecology without nature...* Adopting a Lacanian approach to Morton's ideas, he argued that ecological ideology is conservative and that we should extend Lacan's motto "The big Other doesn't exist" to nature: "The underlying message of this predominant ecological ideology is a deeply conservative one: any change can only be a change for the worse. So what is wrong here? What is wrong I think is the ... principal position ... that there is something like 'nature', which we humans, with our hubris, with our will to dominate, disturbed ... [W]e know Jacques Lacan's motto, 'The big Other doesn't exist'. I think we should extend this to nature. The first premise of a truly radical ecology should be, 'Nature doesn't exist'. So again what we need is ecology without nature, ecology that accepts this open, imbalanced, denaturalized, if you want, character of nature itself" (Harvard Press Publicity, 6 November 2007, "Žižek on 'Ecology without Nature' ", www.harvardpress.typepad.com/hup_publicity/literary_criticism/index.html).

What these approaches to the "ecological catastrophe in which we are living" have in common is their contention that nature is a social construct. Nature does not exist outside of man, independently of man. Man is an element of nature. Man and the environment are socially constructed: that is, they are formed within the material activity and interrelationships of the people who constitute the societies occupying specific places at specific times. And both of them – man and environment – emanate from the material and representational practices of their social groups and sets and cannot be separated from them. In this sense, the social individual creates himself and his environment within a continuous reciprocal and dialectical relation with 'internal' and 'external' parameters. The natural environment is part of these processes of social construction, and its quality is directly linked to the manner in which they are organised. To understand this quality it must be examined in the context of social formations, modes of production, social relations and cultural models and values. As John Huckle says in his article on "Reconstructing Nature; Towards a Geographical Education for Sustainable Development": "Things are the constitutive and constituted moments of systemic processes and it is impossible to separate things from the network of systems within which they are embedded. Part and whole, organism and environment, nature and society are all related: the one constitutes the other and there can be few grounds for knowledge that seeks to understand the one without reference to the other. Dialectics seeks to explain the general laws of movement in nature, society and thought and reflects four principles: totality (everything is related), movement (everything is constantly being transformed), qualitative change (the

tendency to self organisation and complexity), and contradiction (the unity and struggle of opposites)” (Huckle, 2002: 68).

The present ecological catastrophe should be examined in the context of the prevailing social model, that is, the Western capitalist system. This economic model, with its logic of perpetual growth, production that serves the laws of profit and consumption and is based on the exploitation and the surplus value of labour, on social inequalities and class differences, creates calamitous relations with the biosphere and leads to environmental impasses.

The capitalist mode of production is antithetical to nature and its evolutionary processes. Production is based on completing the processes of the economic cycle in as short a time as possible, the sole aim being to amortise the capital investment and increase profits. This imposes on natural processes a rhythm and a framework that are alien to them. The exploitation of the planet’s natural resources does not take into account the time necessary for their creation or regeneration. It is not the system’s lack of suitable mechanisms that is responsible for destroying the environment, but the logic that lies behind this production system. That is why talk about ‘sustainable development’ cannot but be confuted by the logic of capital itself: sustainable development and the law of worth are mutually antagonistic concepts.

The disgraceful approach to managing these problems in the context of the capitalist economy is seen in the attempt to impose a worldwide market in ‘pollution rights’ in response to the objective of reducing the quantity of greenhouse gases. Advocated by the United States, this mechanism was accepted by the European Union. This is a dangerous development, which commodifies pollution and turns it into a source of profit. More than that, it increases the dependence of the developing countries on the North. In a mechanism that fixes a tradable quota of pollution for each country, the power to decide belongs to those with the economic strength to trade, polluting when they see an interest in doing so. The indebted countries of the South and East would be able to sell their quotas to the northern states, despite the fact that they already pollute much more.

The reaction to the environmental dangers should be a reaction to the free market economy, a reaction to the forms of late capitalism and their social and cultural consequences for the planet. Radical changes in economic and social structures are a prerequisite for remedying the environmental and social blind alleys that have been reached. Adoption of a single attitude towards the social and ecological problem will lead to a new relation between civilisation and the natural world, abolishing the phenomena of man’s alienation from his living environment, and by extension from nature. Nature is not a desired object that man has to acquire and subjugate, whether in the context of a logic that dictates squandering its resources in the name of unbridled capitalist growth or in that of a more sceptical attitude that, without denying the needs of capital, tries, with institutional tools and regulatory arrangements, to achieve a balanced compromise between man and nature. Nature is not what exists outside man. Man and nature interact within the same system and are constructed socially through material and intellectual practices. Social justice, equality, social solidarity and the abolition of exploitation are the revolutionary events that will overthrow the contemporary relational reality between man and nature. The social movements will have to incorporate the single, cohesive, social perception of man and nature into their goals and demands, intervening radically in the ways of addressing the present ecological crisis. One of the key fields of battle is education, in which the ecological problem occupies an important position. The selective information provided, following purely technocratic, institutional lines, does nothing to foster a real change in mentality and cultural behaviour with regard to the problem. This has philosophical, ideological and economic-political dimensions that must be placed at the heart of educational mechanisms, to inform the citizen and build up his socio-ecological awareness. Marxist and neo-Marxist views seem to agree in relation to the coherent single perception of man and nature and of the latter as a social construct. Where they disagree is on the level of the behaviour of the individual – interactive or transactive – within the broader scope of his life, in the existence or absence of hierarchies and in the origin of the inversions that for the Marxists are located on the economic level, while the neo-Marxists give equal or sometimes greater weight to the loss of identity of the individual, to the non separation between life and concept. This refers to a broader debate on relations of power on the psychoanalytical and political level and their role on the individual and social scene (Newman, 2005; Bauman, 1992). Psychoanalytical elements may usefully be used in approaches to social phenomena, but it is the economy in its dialectical relation with the cultural sphere that is the starting-point for revolutionary movements against the inherently exploitative and inegalitarian phenomenon that we call capital.

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