SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ECOLOGICAL MODERNIZATION: A RADICAL HOMOCENTRIC PERSPECTIVE

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The commonly discussed forms of ‘strong’ sustainable development are rooted in either ecocentric or anthropocentric perspectives. Both eco-socialism and social ecology constitute anthropocentric (or ‘homocentric’) strong sustainability: being essentially humanistic but also embracing stewardship of nature, environmentally benign but centred on social justice. The bases of this development model are reviewed. Its desirability is argued from the perspective of a socialist critique of the alternative anthropocentrically-grounded version of ‘sustainability’ that is widely supported today, known as ‘ecological modernization’. It is argued that ecological modernization is at best only weakly sustainable. Indeed, contemporary Marxist readings of capitalism’s inherent contradictions suggest that this development model is not sustainable at all in the long run. Global modernization, whether purportedly ‘ecological’ or not, is likely to foster continued attempts at displacement and externalization of both environmental and social costs. Current corporate reactions against both environmentalism and social democracy are therefore unsurprising. © 1998 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment.

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STRONG SUSTAINABILITY

Some recent commentators on sustainable development (SD), notably Pearce et al. (1993), have differentiated between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ forms. There is sometimes a tendency to assume that strong SD inevitably carries ‘a requirement to preserve intact the environment as we find it today in all its forms’ (Beckerman, 1994; 194). In Beckerman’s understanding this means that strong SD would not allow the substitution of human for natural capital: gains in human welfare at the expense of radical transformation of the ‘natural’ environment are not to be countenanced.

Such a stance would be unreservedly ‘ecocentric’; that is, based on a green theory of value (Goodin, 1992) which holds that nature has a value in and of itself—an integrity which is not compatible in any way with the goals of development as modernization. Pearce et al. (18–19), however, basing their typology on O’Riordan’s (1989) classification of environmentalism, characterize such a stance as ‘extreme’, and based on deep ecology’s preference for bioethical
preservationism. They identify an alternative form of strong sustainability which is ‘communalist’.

This alternative would indeed accept that some, at least, natural capital cannot be regarded as substitutable by human capital if development is to be sustainable, but it also holds that a form of development should be possible which would be, to use Dobson’s (1996) definition, based not only on obligations to nature but also equally on the requirements of human welfare (material and aesthetic). In essence it believes that both the human and non-human needs of present and future generations could be secured if a radical alternative to present arrangements for securing economic and social welfare were established.

Such an approach to strong sustainability is anthropocentric rather than ecocentric (indeed Dobson argues, probably correctly, that any concept of SD must be fundamentally anthropocentric), but it is not, in Merchant’s (1992, 61–81) terms, ‘ecocentric’: that is, to be equated with the goals and methods of development as modernization under capitalism. Rather, it is ‘homocentric’: that is, impelled by humanistic goals alongside a notion of stewardship for nature, and owing much of its theoretical perspective not only to the utilitarians but also to Marxism. A homocentric ethic ‘sets up the fulfilment of human needs as a priority, but gives full consideration to nonhuman nature in the process’ (Merchant, 1992, 73). Both social ecology and eco-socialism would be included under the umbrella of homocentric environmentalism—eco-socialism here is regarded most emphatically as not being compatible with statist versions of ‘socialism’, having roots particularly in early Marx and in William Morris (Pepper, 1993).

As such, the approach to SD is clearly radical, requiring far-reaching social change embodying fundamental principles of socialism, but melded with environmental goals based on stewardship. My purpose here is to sketch out some basic tenets of this strong, homocentric, conception of SD, and why some consider that it is necessary: that is, why the current alternative of SD conceived of as ecological modernization (EM) cannot in the long run succeed and is not really sustainable.

The radical homocentric view insists that sustainable development should not merely be environmentally benign. An essential and complementary dimension is that of social justice and equity, in both space and time. An important aspect of this condition is that future generations should have similar options to those which our generation enjoys: options to enjoy and know nature as we do now, in all its diversity, fecundity and beauty, as well as to use it indefinitely to derive material advantage.

**CAPITALISM AND ECOLOGICAL MODERNIZATION: CAN THEY PRODUCE SUSTAINABILITY?**

What is ecological modernization?

Ecological modernization is a concept introduced by the EU’s Fourth Environmental Action Programme (Baker, 1997). Essentially, it describes a set of processes and perspectives whereby capitalism is currently trying to achieve its version of sustainable development. EM is currently replacing the earlier phase of crude, environmentally damaging, industrial capitalism. For capitalism, crucially, sustainability includes the premise that the system of capitalism itself must be sustained.

Christoff (1996) has reviewed the concept of EM. He describes it as a set of processes by which the content and style of environmental policy in the West have changed in the 1980s, involving, for instance, the precautionary principle, a push for integrated regulatory approaches, voluntarism and market-based incentives. All these are seen as alternatives to regulation and force, and they have ostensibly led to greater integration of economic and environmental policy in countries such as Germany and Japan, The Netherlands and Scandinavia, whereby such countries seem to have achieved decreased energy and materials use per unit of GNP produced.

These processes include:

- EM as a set of technological adjustments and innovations which would anyway have been undertaken to improve market competitiveness, and where environmental gain is incidental (fuel efficient cars); and
- EM as a ‘policy discourse’ (Christoff, 1996), where new goals are assumed in public policy, which are supposed to inform all economic policy and activity. An example is the Fifth EU Action Programme for the Environment, incorporating such principles as the polluter pays, the precautionary principle, burden of proof on actors rather than the damaged party and that environmental protection can be profitable to firms. The Programme advocates that these principles should underlie all EU social and economic policy. This discourse, says Christoff
(1996, 482), is ‘utilitarian’, holding that economic growth can be reconciled with resolving environmental problems, and ‘allowing governments to back away from regulation’. However, there are some obvious reservations about EM.

Some problems of EM

First, some of the environmental improvement which has been achieved has come at a cost of displacing environmentally harmful activities to newly industrialized and less developed countries. We have been receiving in the mid-1990s a rising amount of publicity about the steady flow of toxic wastes from Western countries to India, for instance.

Second, neither the technological adjustment nor policy discourse aspects of EM necessarily diminish total resource consumption, which is what radical environmentalists demand. This is instanced by the basic contradiction of a situation where the EU’s Fifth Environmental Action Programme runs alongside the objectives of the Single Market. Yet the latter was set up to achieve more growth, more consumption, more trade at a distance and more transport, leading to more roads and pollution.

In the same way, the social justice aspects of sustainability in the peripheries of the EU, at which structural adjustment programmes are now aimed, are soon going to be offset by massively increased tendencies in the Single Market for wealth to be accumulated and concentrated, not necessarily even within the EU (profit repatriation to Japan and the US from branch plants in the UK and Ireland, for instance).

Third, EM as currently conceived is only ‘weakly ecological’, says Christoff, for it is economically reductionist, attempting to monetize the environment. This therefore makes it subject to the objections to monetization often voiced by environmental groups (see Jacobs, 1991, for instance). It is a ‘version of ecological sustainability in the wasteland of a vastly depleted biological world’ (Christoff, 1996, 486). Furthermore this makes it dependent on technocratic elites (scientific and economic experts) and state control.

Fourth, it is not truly international and holistic. It does not take into its accounting the kinds of displacement cost mentioned above, nor the environmental/social costs of so-called ‘efficiency gains’ through globalization of the economy and so-called ‘comparative advantage’ in trade. These often do harm to indigenous economies and cultures. Neither are the costs of inordinate transport reckoned for—a 1997 World in Action programme from Granada TV gave the example of jeans for sale in shops in Shropshire, UK, made from cloth actually produced in that county. Yet the cloth had travelled to the far ends of Europe in order to exploit cheap labour in the processes of being made up. On any measure of long-term SD this practice, which is rife in the post-GATT global economy is extremely irrational, and unsustainable.

Fifth, says Christoff, EM is conceived as the only, exclusive, way to ‘development’ and ‘sustainability’, ignoring the diversity of possibilities raised by different cultures and approaches to economics. In other words, it is part of, not a counter to, the mainstream modernization model. This model carries with it the disembedding of people from social systems (Giddens, 1990) and risks of a new order of impact and scale, e.g. Chernobyl, global warming.

These risks may produce a ‘reflexive modernization’ process, according to Beck et al. (1994), whereby, in reaction, it is recognized by people disenchanted with the older industrial modernization that over-production must cease, that our relationships to nature and each other should be re-embedded in locality and place and that local cultures and knowledge systems, different from the universal industrial modernization model, should be encouraged. Essential to their perspective is economic localization in order to achieve true economic democracy (not merely the ‘subsidiarity’ of EU programmes for development, which can often be accompanied in fact by rigid economic control from the centre). However this theory of reflexive modernization, which presents a kind of self-correcting mechanism in Western social and economic systems, might be said to underestimate some of the realities of underlying economic processes.

For, as Christoff points out, EM is essentially a political strategy to try to accommodate the environmentalist critique of the 1970s on with the 1980s deregulatory neo-liberal climate. It is capitalism ostensibly with a greener aspect—and as such it ‘avoids addressing basic contradictions in capitalism’.

CONTRADICTIONS OF CAPITALISM

What are these basic contradictions? Marxist analysis seems as germane here as it ever
was. The group of academic Marxists associated with the journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* has recently reinterpreted the contradictions of capitalism in environmental terms (see for instance O’Connor, 1994).

The ‘first contradiction’

Economic sustainability in capitalism requires profits. Profits come from the constant accumulation of capital and its subsequent reinvestment to expand production. This requires constant expansion of consumption. Interference with profits therefore threatens the economic sustainability of capitalism. Yet capitalism threatens its own sustainability when it drives for productivity increases, which it must do to maintain and expand profit. For a major part of productivity involves undermining the capacity of labour to consume, because of the constant drive to lower total labour costs (see Johnston, 1996). So growth is constrained by limited demand—there is a demand side crisis. This has manifested itself in depression, war and Keynesianism in the West in the 1920s to 1950s, all of which have led to welfarism and high-public-expenditure programmes, further eroding profits.

The ‘second contradiction’

Faced by this demand side crisis individual capitals have attempted in the 1980s and 1990s to restore their profits and lower their costs, but this, in turn, has led to strategies, partly against public spending, and partly against pressure to internalize social and environmental costs, which ultimately degrade the material conditions of capitalist production. These strategies have undermined the health, welfare and wellbeing of the workforce, and they have degraded the environment, thereby in the long run lowering the productivity of the factors of labour and ‘land’. Such undermining essentially leads to ‘bottlenecks’ in production. They therefore constitute a supply side crisis, whereby sustainability of capitalism is further threatened by its own internal logic.

According to the theory of reflexive modernization referred to above, with increased risks to better informed and increasingly cynical (about modernization) populations, new social movements demand reforms. This can be viewed as a process whereby capitalist societies attempt to put the conditions of production back on track. That process ought to lead to meaningful SD, where social and environmental costs of capitalism would be internalized to firms. Yet, as suggested, this is inherently damaging to profitability, because internalization, at least in the short run, increases costs and decreases flexibility of accumulation.

So industry attempts to ‘rationalize’ production further, engaging in a backlash against the pressure of new social movements, including the green movement. Capital now demands deregulation and voluntarism, and the lowering of taxation—for instance British industry’s recent strictures against the EU Social Chapter.

Thus we have recently seen a wave of reactions against internalization of social and environmental costs (and therefore against social justice and ecological sustainability) in the West, through the diversion of resources and investment to the ‘tiger economies’. These (including some in the existing EU, such as Ireland) boast of cheap labour costs, and many make light of the effects of current forms of industrialization on the environment too.

Reactions against environmental regulations and protection were seen in America by the repeal by the Reagan/Bush administrations of environmental laws passed in the 1970s (Faber and O’Connor, 1989). Currently, there are the attempts by the Global Climate Coalition (including companies like Shell, Exxon, Texaco and Ford) to advance a sceptical line on global warming and undermine talks to cut greenhouse gases. These attempts include the funding of research from climatologists who question the whole global warming thesis. The fossil fuel lobby has spent millions of dollars trying to persuade governments not to restrict energy use. Both John Gummer, UK Environment Secretary until 1997, and John Houghton, Chair of the UN Global Warming Science Working Group, have accused the science practised by this group of being inadequate and definitely not independent (Observer, 9 March 1997). Moreover, although Shell UK has been lobbied by some of its shareholders on its environmental record in Nigeria, the board of this company has steadfastly tried to resist this lobbying. In fact we can now speak of the global spread of an ‘anti-environmentalism’ movement. This has been documented by Andrew Rowell (1996), and it consists of front groups for large corporations, anti-environmental PR firms, right-wing legal foundations and others, created specifically to deconstruct sustainability by working to repeal legislation and more generally encouraging anti-environmentalist sentiments.

Meanwhile, capitalism’s increasing failure to meet the social justice aspect of SD is signified...
by a widening gap between rich and poor in ‘advanced’ economies, where underclasses are being created amidst wealth by capital’s demand for a ‘flexible’ workforce—a euphemism for undermining the workforce’s economic and social wellbeing and security. Nineteen million people in Britain live on the margins of ‘poverty’ (an income of less than £105/week); fourteen per cent (8m) are totally dependent on welfare and 7.5% of all dwellings are unfit for human habitation (these are British Government figures reiterated in the Churches Report on Poverty in April of this year (Observer, 13 April 1997)). What has happened to the theories of ‘trickle down’ and ‘rising tides raising all boats? New Zealand, the UK, Norway, Australia, the Netherlands, Japan, the US, West Germany, France—all these had rising income inequality from 1977 to 1990, according to the recent Rowntree Inquiry into Income in Welfare. Meanwhile we heard from the UN in November 1996 that no less than one-third of the world’s workforce is unemployed.

In Europe the meeting of EMU convergence criteria by member states will continue pressures to curtail the public and corporate expenditure necessary to stave off these effects and to create environmental and social sustainability. In the long term EMU will lower transaction and transport barriers to businesses, helping them to become more ‘efficient’ in a narrow, traditional sense, and boosting economic growth by taking advantages of economies of scale, but this will encourage greater spatial concentration of industries, implying greater regional economic divergence: firms huddling together in clusters of excellence instead of being evenly distributed.

All this is capital doing what it must do, because any attempt to increase the real efficiency of labour and environmental services, via proper long-term sustainability measures—which must include regional equalization—would inevitably inhibit short-term maximization of economic gain. However such short-term economic horizons are inescapable because of the primacy of accountability to shareholders and the imperative of showing rapid profits and dividends, to attract share buyers.

APPROACHES TO ECOLOGICAL MODERNIZATION

Market environmentalism, welfare/interventionist environmentalism and market-based incentives: all these approaches to EM share the view that the environment must be economized in order that it should only be used to the point where environmental costs are counterbalanced by welfare benefits. Beckerman and Pearce are among those who have argued that this is a better discipline than direct government command and control. The way to do it, according to free market environmentalists, is by establishing property rights to environmental goods and services, drawing them into the spheres of commodity production and circulation, and therefore securing ‘efficient’ use and allocation. The inexorable ‘logic’ of this is to argue, as has Beckerman, that it is acceptable to use up the environment if the resulting environmental loss is outweighed by gains in welfare; that is, natural and human capital are more or less infinitely substitutable.

Setting aside the problems of trying to make any meaningful calculations of the ‘true’ costs of the environment, about which volumes have been written, this completely discounts the radical environmentalist’s arguments about intrinsic value, existence value and any other intrinsically non-monetizable value of the environment. All that is being done by present mainstream green economics is to give the environment an exchange value, not a use value. The latter is something that can be determined only politically, and by the whole community. And of course monetization makes the principle of sustainability, which is concerned with futurity, very difficult to operate, for who can foretell what will be the monetary values to future generations of present environmental goods and services? The commonly used approach of using the current discount rate, based on interest rates, is highly problematical, while there are larger difficulties involving commensurability between environmental, social justice and economic variables (see Jacobs, 1995).

Furthermore, environmental costs and economic gains tend to be calculated, in the market-based approach to sustainability, as the aggregate of individual costs and gains, so that the notion of social and community costs is difficult to operationalize and justify. This is the classical liberal version of society as no more than the aggregate of atomized individuals: a version which is clearly not appropriate for the 21st century.

The property rights strand of market based environmentalism also tends to underestimate the immense difficulties and bureaucracies potentially involved in allocating and defending those rights (Mishan, 1993); doing this these would certainly, and paradoxically for free-market environmental-
ists, put the EM process further into the powerful hands of legal, bureaucratic and technical elites.

A RADICAL HOMOCENTRIC ALTERNATIVE

The aim

This must be true economic democracy, which ultimately abolishes economic power itself, except through direct citizen participation in economic decision making. This principle is fundamental to eco-socialism and to social ecology. It alone would enable environmental factors to be internalized according to the judgement of the whole community, thinking, presumably, on behalf of future generations as well as its own, because it would be clearly in its interests so to do.

For true economic democracy to be possible, there must be common ownership of the means of production and distribution. This goes alongside distribution according to need, so that equality of esteem rather than equality of opportunity becomes the touchstone for the distribution of environmental goods and services, as much as for all goods and services. The same applies for environmental losses. In the process of sacrificing environmental goods for welfare gain it is usually whole communities which suffer from the losses (in global warming effects, for instance). Consequently it is only right and sensible that the whole community should share any benefits (in a meaningful way rather than via spurious arguments involving the mythical trickle down process).

However the notion of community here is not synonymous with the state, as it is in some forms of so-called socialism. It is localized direct, bottom-up democracy, hinging on susidiarity, which is the political form that follows from the economic empowerment of localities and regions.

Complementary to this is the principle that local communities should try to be able to meet at least their own basic needs, although there would be trade in non-basic needs. However this latter would be trade for mutual self-reliance, not trade involving strict reciprocity based on money profit, and increasing dependence of some nations on others, as at present.

None of this is to be confused with autarchy, or turning one’s back on globalization, or indeed on modernization and economies of scale when there really are such economies to gained on the basis of wholistic calculations which take into account as much as is realistic all members of communities in time and space. For the confederal principle should apply, whereby decentralization and subsidiarity are set within regional, supra-regional and global confederations of interests (Fotopoulos, 1997).

Detail

There are many versions of how such principles might translate into practice. Some are remote from what we have now, except in small communities or non-'modernized' economies. They may amount to stateless and moneyless economies, but, whether this is so or not, they are strongly founded on intra- and inter-generational equity, production for need and bottom-up community structures and control. This disposes them towards the top of the sustainable development ‘ladder’, equivalent to the ‘ideal model’ of SD (Baker et al., 1997, 9). Other versions are closer to small-scale capitalism and ‘strong’, rather than ideal, SD.

Failing rapid revolutionary change, this eco-socialist/social ecology model would have to be founded on the spread of some existing, but minority, institutions and arrangements; such as credit unions, local exchange and trading systems (LETS), community land banks, basic income schemes, farm-to-doorstep distribution, local energy production based on renewables, municipalization of bureaucracies, community and neighbourhood groups and collectivized, self-managing enterprises.

 Transitional compromises as they all may be to some eco-socialist purists, nonetheless these institutions could have long-run revolutionary potential. Douthwaite (1996) presents a highly persuasive analysis and description of them in operation today, with particular reference to examples drawn from Western Europe.

What all versions of this development model have in common is that the aims of production are not economic growth for private profit. They are community defined aims, likely to incorporate environmental and broader social and individual goals, including perhaps the generation of fulfilling and satisfying work, a sine qua non of enhanced quality of life in strong SD.

A CONCLUDING PROBLEM

It is important to stress that none of this should imply a return to pre-industrial models, nor does it mean a post-modern-style rejection of all universals in favour of local anarchy. Clearly such radical models of SD, which deconstruct
many of the features of industrial (i.e. capitalist) modernization, nonetheless themselves require the tools of modernization for there to be ‘thinking and acting both globally and locally’, i.e. media to publicize what is going on: and international agreements and policing.

This is not to deny that there are potential contradictions which might arise between the globalization of thinking, awareness and regulation, and the drive for localization of economy and culture and the principle of subsidiarity in radical homocentric SD. Here is a problem that any radical movement which opposes the global hegemony of capitalism has to grapple with.

The Red–Green Study Group (1995) concisely summarizes a rational and eco-socialist response to these contradictions:

Many greens and other adherents of new social movements claim that both liberalism and socialism advocate and impose universal principles in a way which fails to respect diversity, whether this takes the form of ethnic, gender, religious or cultural difference. We do not accept that equality of access to resources, equal political rights and equality of respect are incompatible with respect for diversity. On the contrary, they are necessary conditions for diversity to flourish. Our guiding principle would be: all differences are to be welcomed except where they threaten the equal rights of others to liberty of expression and self-respect... In the long run a green socialist perspective must envisage global rights and responsibilities being exercised on the basis of equal access to resources at a sustainable level by all citizens of the planet. At the same time, we are agreed that the concept of subsidiarity, appropriately defined, is the best basis for deciding which decisions should be taken at which level—with a bias towards the lowest, smallest, most local level that makes sense.

Despite this clear statement, it must be acknowledged that there are no easy solutions to some of the problems that arise because of this tension between the local/culturally-specific and the global/universal, and much of the detail of eco-socialist/social ecology SD needs still to be worked out. Herein, perhaps, lies a major challenge to socialism in the 21st century.

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BIOGRAPHY

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