

## Culture and Environment

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I will discuss certain relations between culture and the global process of increasing ecological unsustainability. One of the many factors which make it difficult to change the process into one of decreasing unsustainability is the shift in ways of thinking from that of ecology to that of environment. The latter term suggests that we have to do with something *outside* humanity, something we regrettably are dependent upon. It is easier to mobilize people and money if we acknowledge the human tendency to self-destruction through policies that not only spoil our nests, but lead away from our basic goal in life, whether it is called happiness or not. The increasing ecological unsustainability is something much nearer to our souls and selves than we have traditionally assumed in the West.

It is today often acknowledged that overcoming the increasing ecological crisis, the still increasing level of ecological unsustainability, leads invariably to problems in the humanities, in sociology, and political sciences. It even fosters new branches like environmental diplomacy. The Canadian government decided to stop complaining harshly about air pollution in Canada due to US pollutants *provided* the government of the US agreed to a trade treaty favourable to Canada. It is today accepted that every major ecological problem has a social and political aspect. Furthermore, it is clear that technological invention, even of a revolutionary kind since the '60s, such as solar energy, had practically no influence on the curve of increasing unsustainability. Whether the use of an ecologically salutary invention is adopted on an appropriate scale depends upon social and political factors. Unfortunately these factors are neglected in research and development programs. Natural science has a higher cultural standing, and governments now gladly spend money on studies of climate, the ozone layer, and similar unpolitical issues.

Turning the attention to the situation in the Third and Fourth Worlds, old stable cultural traditions still play a decisive role. Among such traditions we very often find ecological, sophisticated, and beneficial technologies and ways of life. The influence of industrial societies, including that of mass tourism, has increased in strength in this century and has with few exceptions been negative.

An example: The traditional Sherpa culture in Nepal has strict rules regarding how to make use of trees and bushes for heating. Living between 2000 and 4000 metres in the Himalayas with long cold winters, the vital need was clear. But only dead trees were used. With tourism the Sherpas got jobs, especially as mountain guides and porters. Their mobility increased immensely. There was, to use an expression about the development in European Community, an avalanche of transport across traditional borders.

The ethics and practice in relation to forests and vegetation in general had been local in the sense of protection of natural resources locally, not in general. So, as soon as the Sherpas were far from home, they would cut and burn everything, for instance, in order to secure hot showers for tourists every morning.

In short, wonderful ecological ethics and practice in many non-industrial countries had often or mostly local areas of *validity* and *dominance*. It turned out that the tourists' way of life generally was conceived by the Sherpas as one with very little ethical and other constraints, and nevertheless capable of securing a fabulously high material standard of living. Large scale corruption has been a regular consequence, with few notable exceptions.

A very important development since the '60s has been the emergence of a drive among people in the Western industrial nations to join the minorities in the Third and Fourth Worlds to re-establish ecologically sane technologies and ways of life in general. One group, called social ecologists, comprises a subgroup, for instance in Uruguay, living and working among the "poor" to support the few, mostly very old people, who still remember and make use of those technologies.

The introduction of Western, mostly unecological, technology has mostly a devastating influence on culture and upon the state of the economy, for instance requiring imports and help, and increasing the distance between rich and poor. (For example, the influence of the so-called green revolution based on Western agricultural technology.)

Unfortunately the co-operation of Westerners who are competent to work in the spirit of the above-mentioned subgroup of social ecologists, is not favoured by Western colleges and universities. Effective co-operation with “poor” people requires not only knowledge of cultural anthropology and ability to live a life in a foreign country that is not provocative and strange, but also requires willingness to stay there for years. And Westerners should be fairly sure that when they come back to their own countries they are either able to find a job, or are helped to be trained in available kinds of jobs.

If the devastating ecological trend in the Third and Fourth Worlds is going to be changed, it is necessary that the institutions in the West understand their responsibility either to decrease Western pernicious influence or to change it into a beneficial one.

Every year counts. To teach environmental ethics, as it is now accepted at many Western colleges and universities, is a very indirect help, especially because it is mostly meta-ethics, that is, academic discussion about various theories *about* ethics. Even in academic institutions, ethics was what is now called 'normative ethics' prescribing (and discussing) duties, obligations in various sorts of life situations, and wise guidelines. Also, of course, discussing consequences and evaluating guidelines in the light of consequences. One of the reasons governments in many industrial countries now finance environmental, academic ethics may be that it costs so much less than studies centering on social and political means to fight the ecological crisis, and much less than doing, on a proper scale, anything about the crisis. One may compare the 50 years from 1830 to 1880 when there was much *talk* about the misery of labour, and women of the aristocracy weaved and sewed clothing for the poor; there were constantly fund-raising to help the poor, but on a scale that was completely insufficient. As now, economics was used as an explanation: more wealth among the wealthy must be accumulated in order to change conditions in a decisive way.

There are today two different basic attitudes towards non-human beings. According to the so-called anthropocentric, no non-human being can have value in itself, it can only have instrumental value, that is, value as a means for humans. Among contemporary philosophers, Habermas has such a view. The other basic attitude holds that non-humans may have value in themselves independent of what they can be for humans.

As long as there were a moderate number of humans with moderate means to interfere with the richness and diversity of life on Earth, it did

not matter much for the planet how they conceived their relation to the Earth. But now, with an enormous number of people, and a practically infinite capacity for destruction, how they feel about nature is of great importance. The simplest reason for this is the ignorance of the long-range effects of their interferences. A so-called green society is expected to be ecologically sustainable. The term is mostly also used in such a way that a society deserves the name only if the peace and distribution problems are also largely solved.

There is unfortunately a tendency to talk about the environmental crisis rather than the ecological crisis. Environment is conceived as something *outside* of humanity. Humans are clearly *inside* the ecological systems of the Earth, and the societies of humans have the same *kind* of need and right to be protected as societies of other living beings. The rapid extinction of non-industrialist societies is an ecosystem degradation and destruction. The threat of the extinction of cultures has an ethical aspect, and belongs to the proper problematics of general ecology. Protection of human cultural diversity is a genuine part of the protection of biodiversity.

Writers who characterize a (future) green society sometimes make it clear that they describe a utopia, others intend to describe a future society that will be a reality if the ecological crisis is overcome.

There is in my view a regrettable tendency to talk and write about green societies as if they will be realizations of only one culture. In my opinion, the absence of deeply different future cultures would be a calamity. Richness and diversity of future cultures is for me a great ideal, perhaps the only way towards further developments of the human species. Diversity of subcultures, as we see them today in, for instance, big cities, cannot replace diversity of cultures. In at least a couple of decades there were thousands of new musicians in a certain part of New York City, thousands who lived in and for music. As long as the children were exposed to very different lifestyles and value systems, no specific culture was created. No traditions, no completeness.

Most pictures of conditions in a green society suggest a rather uniform way of life. I reckon that some people will relish conspicuous consumption. Some will be victims of unsatisfied greed, some will delight in ecologically expensive gadgets. But in the latter case the owners of these gadgets will have to live ecologically inexpensive in other ways. The laws or mores should tolerate great differences of lifestyles. Today we know how some people may spend 90 per cent of

their income for purposes for which others would not even spend 5 per cent.

The protection of richness and diversity of life forms is compatible with a variety of political systems. But national socialist and fascist systems are intolerant of deep cultural diversity and therefore cannot furnish a basis for a green society. There is a great literature comparing communism, socialism, and capitalism. Also vertical versus horizontal societies are compared, and tightness versus looseness. As long as only vague descriptions of countries are offered for comparison, next to nothing can be concluded about relative merits on the way to ecological sustainability. The presumption among most writers is that democracies are best. The argumentation is weak because it mostly relies on historical and contemporary evidence, that is, on actual ecological state of affairs. Authoritarian, hierarchical, Buddhist countries have often been used as examples of countries with great chances of remaining ecologically responsible in spite of not being democracies, but they are not industrial societies. If the democracies of the West do not within 50 years change their ecological policies in the direction of decreasing unsustainability, the catastrophic situation may be reached when “strongmen” are able to acquire power and change policies by decrees. My guess is that ecological dictatorship has no better chance to be realized than ecological democracy.

One may ask what is the relation between the various *existing* forms of systems of economy, technology, family relations, reproduction habits, religion, and so on, and the relative prospects of leading to ecological sustainability? The answers are in many ways hypothetical, because it is difficult to say to what degree a deplorable or less deplorable situation of a country is due to the system. The so-called systems are changing all the time, even in the cultures called traditional. One cannot easily predict how a worsening ecological crisis will be met. People read that we, because of our irresponsible behaviour, might cause a new ice age, or a meter high rise of the water level of the ocean, even within a hundred years, and many get concerned. They approve appropriate measures to be taken. But when they read what might be the effect of continued population explosion, they often are reluctant to approve ethically acceptable, appropriate measures. There are or have recently been cultures with norms favourable to the stability of the size of the population. Among animals, biological processes that limit reproduction are fairly common when resources are small or dwindling. For example, there are insects which every autumn, anticipating winter and spring time scarcity, produce fewer females. Resources on remote islands are in an obvious way limited and this has motivated appropriate

customs. Malthus thought that Norway's agricultural population had customs that counteracted the blind drive of procreation. On the whole, cultures today do not have institutions favourable for early stabilization and *reduction* of population.

The small minority of 500 million who are responsible for most of the degradation of life conditions on Earth tolerate cultural patterns today that favour irresponsible reproduction. A 10 per cent decrease of the birth of unwanted children would make richer European countries enter the process of population decrease before long. The increase of criminality among children from age 10 to 15 testifies to the presence of devastating cultural trends that incapacitate adequate education.

Many people active in the fight against the ecological crisis look forward to green societies where children, from the time they are able to walk, have access to patches of free nature without having to go across dangerous streets. But this requires architectural revolutions. As it is now, *the street* is often a cultural centre.

There is, in short, much to be learned from the study of cultures in the past and the present, but the global state of affairs is so complex that any fairly simple *general* conclusion about relative merits of different cultures is highly speculative. What we know as members of Western democracies, whatever their cultures, is that we are heavily responsible for the increasing unsustainability.

The above reflections have the modest aim to emphasize the importance of increasing efforts in every country under every sort of conditions, political, cultural, and so on, to turn the tide from increasing to decreasing unsustainability.

This conclusion is compatible with a certain mobility of area of concentration: some groups may concentrate on overcoming definite dominant ideological or spiritual aspects of their culture (in a wide sense of the word), others may concentrate on reforms of the economic systems, still others may concentrate on the fight against the implementation of an ecologically horrendous concrete plan or a source of horrible pollution. The frontier of kinds of work is long, and discussion about what is most needed to do should not degrade into polemics.