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### **Sustainable Development as a Paradox**

The problem with sustainable development is not so much the word “sustainable” (it can even sound rather nice) as that of “development”. The association is explosive, toxic. To the extent that the “rich countries developed the backwards ones”, development was a huge, paternalistic undertaking lasting throughout the euphoric post-war period (1945-1975). The concept was part and parcel of the social engineering goals of international experts. It was always the others who had to be developed. But the whole process became bankrupt. Development, however, fell less a victim to its manifest failures in the South than to its successes in the North. The conceptual shrinkage now affecting development results from the shift towards “globalisation” and what this mystificatory slogan vehicles. The Empire of One Way Thought answers to the One World Myth. This move from development to globalisation implies the implosion of what gave a semblance of consistency to the developmentalist myth: the thesis that all mankind would somehow benefit from a trickle-down effect.

However, though the empty rhetoric of development and the practices associated with voluntaristic expertocracy no longer hold much sway, the eschatological creed bearing on a material well-being for all still stands strong. Anyone who dares question the developmentalist faith will be accused of heresy. Developmentalism embodies the very logic of economics. Within the economists’ paradigm there is room neither for the ecologists’ care for nature nor for the humanists’ respect for man. Development, it is claimed, is for real, whereas alternatives (and particularly sustainable development) can only be illusory mystifications. But development has always been and will continue to entail a cultural uprooting and a lack of social autonomy.

Hence what comes after development must articulate collective well-being other than in terms of material gains at the loss of natural balance and social equity. It is crucial to make a definitive break with “the end of the world” ethos inevitably included in the price of development and globalisation.

Consequently, I have no intention of discussing the economic cooking about strong or light substitutability connected with light and strong substitutability between nature and capital. It is clear that President Bush has a conception of strong substitutability and light sustainability. For me, “light sustainability” means in fact that the market is the solution. In consequence, humanity and the planet can perish, business not!

We can see the paradox at two levels: the contradiction of the so-called “sustainable development” in itself and the inconsistency of wanting to realise it through “ecological economics”.

## I. Sustainable development as an oxymoron

*Sustainable* means that human activity does not have to create a pollution rate that is superior to the capacity to regenerate the environment. This is nothing else than the application of the principle “responsibility” enounced by the German philosopher Hans Jonas: “Operate in such a way that the effects of your actions are compatible with the permanence of an authentically human life on this earth.”

Indeed, sustainable does not refer as much to development as to *reproduction*. Sustainable reproduction reigned on our planet more or less until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is still possible to find among the elderly people of the Third World “experts” in sustainable reproduction. The artisans and the peasants who have maintained a greater part of their ancestral ways of doing and thinking often live in a state of reasonable harmony with their environment—at least they are not predators of nature!

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the French minister Colbert showed himself to be an expert in sustainability by compiling his own edicts on forests. He recommended regulating the felling of trees to ensure reforestation and the planting of oak—which it is still possible to admire—with a view to providing 300 years later the wood for the masts of ships.

These and similar measures are opposed by mercantilist logic. One could say thus: this is sustainable development. But then it would be necessary to say it of all those peasants who, like the grandfather of the Greco-French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, used to plant their new olive and fig trees, whose fruits they would not have seen, because they were thinking of future generations; and this is not a result of any explicit norm but simply because their parents as well as their grandparents and others before, had done the same thing for generations. In those conditions, the word development had no particular meaning. It would be better in theory to avoid it. But it cannot be so. The historical and practical meaning of development is linked to the program of modernity and is fundamentally opposed to the word “sustainability”. It clearly shows that the *development* which has dominated the planet for two centuries is the cause of present social and environmental problems: exclusion, overpopulation, poverty, different kinds of pollution (mad cow disease, global climate changes and so on). By adding the adjective “sustainable” to “development”, it is not usually intended to bring development again for discussion but only to add to it a superficial ecological component.

By short-sightedly concentrating on the damages caused to the environment, it is possible to avoid the holistic or global approaches to an analysis of planetary dynamics. It is the latter phenomena which are intrinsic to but ignored within the economic megamachine which works on the basis of a universalised competition without any concern for global effects and embodying a faceless *modus operandi*.

*Sustainable* development is only one of the last in a long line of conceptual innovations which are simply part of a dream in face of the harsh reality of economic growth. In order to comprehend the pessimistic judgment which we can express with regards to the

probability and consistency of sustainable development and the contradictions thereof and so as to draw practical consequences, it is necessary to remember the contradictions and misadventures of the so-called “good development”. We must not forget that development ideology embodies the full rigidity of economic logic. There is no place in this paradigm for the respect of nature as claimed by ecologists.

The claim of development and economic growth as the essential objective of human societies is based on the famous *trickle-down effect*, which has been exalted by the euphoric myths of modernity. And yet this tempting construction does not stand up to a serious examination. So many paradoxes beset the economist’s reasoning that the miracle turns out to be a mirage. I will dwell on these paradoxes: “needs creation”, accumulation and ecological.

### 1) The paradox of the creation of needs

It is through the creation of psychological tensions and frustrations that economic growth claims to satisfy the basic needs of humanity. It seems that economics cannot stand on its feet without using poverty as a crutch. Not only has the economic imagination literally invented “scarcity” but also the experience of poverty constitutes a condition of growth. The pressure of necessity serves as a motor for putting people to work, while the creation of the indispensable mass demand occurs by exacerbating new needs. The traditional systems for protecting people against poverty are, directly or indirectly, seen as obstacles, brakes on and resistance to development and are denounced as such by the experts. Simultaneously, the same economic theory makes growth a condition for eliminating poverty.

Thus, after the devaluation of the CFA franc in West Africa, the prospects for exporting meat opened up for certain countries such as Burkina Faso or Mali. The meat of the Sahel is now competitive with that of Argentina or the surpluses of the Common Market. The World Bank finances projects for developing livestock in these countries. However, the experts tear their hair out when they meet herders who really do not see the need to increase their flocks beyond what is necessary, just to make money. “What shall we do with all that money?” they ask. Such economic disappointments are quite frequent in the Third World. Many similar anecdotes could be recounted.

Therefore, no growth without need, no remedy to poverty without plunging the population into indigence. True, this could be an example of a dialectical process, but it is not proven and the paradox gives rise to suspicion. As for the question of poverty, growth does not seem able to escape this major contradiction. Its attenuation during *Les Trente Glorieuses* (the Glorious Thirties) in the countries of the North thanks to the trickle-down effect and the generalized diffusion of the fruits of growth: was it not achieved, in fact, by exporting poverty to the South?

### 2) The paradox of accumulation

Growth is presented, thanks to the trickle-down effect, as the miraculous remedy for inequalities. It would enable difficult reforms of structures, such as agrarian reform, to be circumvented and soften social conflict. The general idea is that rather than disputing the shares in a small cake it would be better to agree on making the cake bigger so that everyone has more and all have enough. It is a very attractive proposition, but at the same time, economists are unanimous in agreeing that accumulation cannot be achieved without a large inequality in incomes. Here again, we have a new dialectic. To solve inequality of conditions you must start by increasing the inequality. This is necessary if there are to be enough savings for investment to take place and ensure the take-off of the economy. Redistribution among the community, which often saves the “poor” in the South from plummeting into indigence, is the black sheep of the economists. In most development models, a certain inequality is, quite cynically, a necessary precondition of accumulation. We may transpose the paradox in the field of ecology. The sacrifice of the environment is necessary for the “take-off”, but growth is indispensable to bring remedy to the damages caused.

What invalidates the whole ideology of growth is the fact that the trickle-down effect is an imposture. It has apparently functioned relatively well in the industrialized countries, particularly in the Glorious Thirties. But, with the globalisation of the economy and the uncertainties in Western economies since 1974, especially in employment, things are not going very well. While at the planetary level the mechanism never functioned anyway. Between 1950 and 1987, according to the World Bank’s own statistics, while the world’s revenues multiplied by 2.5, the gap between the richest and the poorest fifth of the population grew from 30:1 to 60:1. All evaluations agree on this. “In 1960,” says a UNDP report, “20 percent of the richest inhabitant of the planet disposed of revenues that were 30 times greater than the 20 percent of the poorest. In 1990, the revenues of the richest 20 percent were 60 times greater.”<sup>1</sup>

### 3) The ecological paradox of growth

The obsession with GNP means that all production and all expenditure is positive—including those that are harmful and those that the latter renders necessary to neutralize their effects. “All remunerated work,” notes Jacques Ellul, the French philosopher of technology, “is considered as added value, a generator of well-being, while investment in the anti-pollution industry does not add to well-being at all—at best it allows well-being to be conserved. No doubt it sometimes happens that the increase in value to be deducted is greater than the increase in value added”.<sup>2</sup> This is more and more likely. “A happy person, notes Hervé Martin, does not take anti-depressants, does not consult psychiatrists, does not attempt suicide, does not shatter shop windows, does not spend the day shopping for things as expensive as they are unnecessary, in other words, participates only marginally in society’s economic activity.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UNDP, “World report on Human Development”, UNDP, New York, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Ellul, “Le bluff technologique”, Hachette, Paris, 1988, p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> Hervé René Martin, *La mondialisation racontée à ceux qui la subissent*, Climats, 1999, p. 15.

For instance, the increase in need for medical expenses is largely the cause of a GNP rise. However, for a constant rate of population growth, can this increase be the indicator of an improvement or a degradation of health care? Or is it simply the indicator of *its* conservation in comparison to constant attacks upon the environment?<sup>4</sup>

If we try to estimate the reduction of the growth rate by taking into account the damages caused to the environment and their consequences to the natural and cultural wealth of a country, this would often result in zero or negative growth.

In 1991, the USA spent \$115 billion—that is, 2.1 percent of its GNP—for the protection of the environment and that is not all. It was calculated that the “Clean Air Act” would increase this cost by \$45 to \$55 billion a year.<sup>5</sup> True, the evaluations of the cost of pollution or the cost price of de-pollution are extremely delicate, problematic and, of course, controversial (the bill for Chernobyl is not yet established and the discussions are continuing!). It is estimated that “the greenhouse effect” could cost an annual amount of between \$600 and \$1,200 billion in the years to come: that is between 3 and 5 percent of the world GNP.

The World Resources Institute, for its part, has tried to evaluate the reduction in rates of growth if there were to be a levy on natural capital from the viewpoint of sustainable development. For Indonesia, for example, the average yearly rate of growth between 1971 and 1984 would be brought down from 7.1 percent to 4.0 percent—and that takes only three resources into consideration: the destruction of forests, the draining of petrol and natural gas reserves, and soil erosion. The German economist W. Schultz has calculated, on the basis of a non-comprehensive list of pollution sources, that the damage incurred by the Federal Republic of Germany in 1985 would amount to 6 percent of the GNP.<sup>6</sup> Could one even then be sure of having compensated for all the losses in “natural capital”? Under these conditions, is not growth a myth? “Imagine a huge forest fire devastating considerable reserves of previous woods,” writes René Martin, “throwing enormous quantities of carbon gases, responsible for global warming, into the atmosphere, depriving men of their habitat and their modes of subsistence, provoking erosion of the soils and destroying for decades the harmony of the landscape... From the economic perspective this catastrophe would be contributing to a sudden increase in the GNP (therefore to a quantifiable increase in national wealth) equal to the cost of the rescue services put into action: firemen, care personnel, gas for emergency vehicles, reconstruction, maintaining and replenishing fire-fighting materials, remuneration of undertaker’s staff... The higher the number of casualties, the greater the enrichment of the country.”<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, debate on the term “development” is not just a matter of words. It is not possible to show that development can be different from what it has been up to now.

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<sup>4</sup> Jean-Marie Harribey, “Le développement soutenable” Economica, Paris 1998 et “L’économie économe” L’harmattan, Paris 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Figures given by “Le Monde”, 22 November 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Hervé Kempf, “L’Économie à l’épreuve de l’écologie”, Hatier, Paris 1991, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> Hervé René Martin, La mondialisation racontée à ceux qui la subissent, Climats 1999, pp. 14-15.

Development has been and *is* the Westernization of the world. Just as there are sweet words, there are poisonous words that penetrate into the blood like a drug, subverting desire and obscuring judgment. Development is one of these toxic words.

## II. The inconsistency of ecological economics

The environmental problem is, in the last analysis, due to the fact for nature to remain outside the exchange mercantile sphere. No mechanism can oppose its destruction. The competition and market economy that allows us to buy goods in the best possible conditions, as Adam Smith's dictum requires, has disastrous effects on the environment. Nothing can limit the plundering of natural resources, an activity which, in its excess, guarantees profit and economic efficiency. The natural order has neither saved the dodo of the Mauritius Island nor the blue whales, nor the Fuegians (the former inhabitants of the Tierra del Fuego).

The plundering of the deep sea and the halieutic resources seems to be irreversible, but some World Bank experts are satisfied because humanity, substituting the plundering of natural resources with synthetic analogues, has greatly expanded its sphere of industrial production (in this case the breed of *tilapia* in waterculture).

The waste of minerals continues in an irresponsible way. The gold diggers or the *garimpeiros* of Amazon or the big Australian companies in New Guinea (as long as they manage to obtain their desired objective) will not withdraw for any reason. In our system, every capitalist—actually every *homo economicus*—behaves like a gold digger. This exploitation of nature is no less violent or dangerous when it means to keep our waste hidden within “nature's dustbin”.

The globalisation process occurring at present continues to aid and abet the planetary destruction of our *Oikos*. Exacerbated competition pushes the countries of the North to manipulate nature without any control and those communities of the South to exhaust their non-renewable resources. In agriculture the intensive use of the chemical fertilisers, pesticides and systematic irrigation together with the use of genetically modified organisms has led to the destruction of soils, the exhaustion and pollution of water reserves, erosion, the spread of parasites, and the risk of catastrophic epidemics.

Because of world deregulation, there is no longer any limit to the search for cost reduction and to this suicidal vicious circle. It is a *real* game that leads to slaughter among individuals and populations at the expense of nature.

The situation deserves careful reflection and can be appreciated concretely via three cases amongst others: cocoa, banana and fishing. I will, however, examine only the cocoa case, although I refer the other cases in my book “L'autre Afrique” (Albin Michel, Paris 1998). When the world price of cocoa was at its minimum in the 1980s—causing a dramatic economic crisis in Ghana and the Ivory Coast—the World Bank experts encouraged and financed various plantations in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines consisting of thousands of hectares of cocoa trees. This was done specifically because it was still

possible to make a profit by speculating on the workers' poverty in those countries to the detriment of nature.

To complete that "natural process", the Europeans at Brussels, feeding the sole steading of England, have capitulated in the face of the chocolate lobbies. They have retained a definition of chocolate as a product that may contain 15% vegetal fat (and that without any possible control) instead of cocoa butter. In so doing, they have engendered a loss for the Ivory Coast and Ghana of some billions of dollars. Can one be scandalized if some planters have pulled out cocoa plants to grow hashish instead?

As Nicolaus Georgescu-Roegen noted, the waste and pollution produced by economic activities are not part of the normal functions of production. He highlights that by adopting the model of the Newtonian classical mechanics, economics excludes the irreversibility of time. The economic models develop in a mechanistic and reversible time. The consequence is an unconscious waste of scarce resources and an under-utilisation of the Earth's abundant solar energy.

In the last analysis, because nature does not conform to and is not structured by the laws of the market, it can be plundered and destroyed, only to be rebuilt afterwards by man in accordance with such laws. Finally, the offer of an artificial nature (synthetic water, bottled air, transgenic seeds, animal species genetically modified and industrially fed) will find the right price and at the same time will generate legitimate profits for producers and not only abusive revenues for the unemployed natives who were the real upholders of natural management.

Nonetheless, the raw materials necessarily prior to all these manipulations remain as "wild" gifts of nature with natural properties which are neither associated with "techno-science" nor market product.<sup>8</sup> The loss of wild species will not put an end to this bio-piracy or predatory behaviour. This is the paradox in which the agricultural/food-trusts and the pharmaceutical corporations collide in the undertaking of an integral *colonisation* of the living. They have been destroying biodiversity by developing and spreading only the useful genes (possibly manufactured in laboratories) but in order to do it they have had to draw from the existing raw material reserves. In fact, they are even forced to make certain the access to the disposable stock and to protect it.<sup>9</sup>

Yet a sole logic is supposed to govern the totality of reality: it is believed that market mechanism is able to solve the problems of the damaged environment. To include the environment in economic rationality the economists make an effort to put a price on it, that is, to translate its value in monetary terms. This is the aim of ecological economics. If these resources are the condition of human survival then they are priceless in a proper sense—a price cannot be put on the infinite. The resources as such are not the concern of

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<sup>8</sup> This point has been clarified by Hans Immler in several books. See for ex. "Vom Wert der Natur". Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Aubertin (Catherine) and Vivien (Frank-Dominique), *Les enjeux de la biodiversité*, Economica, Paris 1997.

the economist in as much as, the best of cases, but the economic value created and destroyed during the exploitation process.

Firstly, it is difficult to value the dangerous effects *before* they manifest themselves, or where those damages have become irreparable as is the case with the loss of vegetation or genetic biodiversity (be it in humans or animals).

Nuclear pollution, because of its long period of decontamination, gives rise to the same problem. For example, in 2010, France will have to manage 400 m<sup>3</sup> of highly noxious and long-lasting waste for a period of 10,000 to 20,000 years. With regards to these damages (damages that are *unlikely to be reparable*), the only prevention that exists is based on the notion of risk acceptability. But on which terms can a risk be considered acceptable?<sup>10</sup> Consider, for instance, the public debate about asbestos, where the damage caused can be related to large sections of the community. Even small amounts of it can be cancerous. The compensation cost for damages or the cost of avoiding the damage are difficult to evaluate—yet the experts seem to like playing with billions of dollars when they deal with the greenhouse effect, the ozone layer and bio-diversity degradation. Haven't even they been unable to evaluate, in monetary terms, the Chernobyl disaster? The economists who support market imperialism deplore the existence of natural resources, while simultaneously wishing that resources could have responsible and well-identified owners. "The victims of pollution, writes a lawyer, seem deprived of environment (...) This depends on the fact that the environment, once a common good available to everybody without considerable contrasts, has become a rare good of which—the polluters—take possession to the detriment of others."<sup>11</sup> The willingness to pay, that is, the *amount* that a person is willing to pay in order to continue to benefit from the environmental good—or similarly, the willingness to accept as compensation for the loss—would allow us to put an end to this problem.

This operation would be possible because of the concept of external costs or *externalities*. In essence, this would entail a social cost produced by the activity of people who do not pay for the effects thereof. There are many examples of this kind of behaviour: the factory that pollutes a river by forcing the users who live in the valley to clean up the water, or the exhaust gas of cars which causes the medical expenses of pedestrians.

The accounting of negative externalities made by the economists can be considered positively, but the concept itself of externality shows that it deals with a problem which is normally ignored by the mercantile logic. In fact, it is still within the economic rationality. What it finally implies within the economic framework is that the environmental crisis eventually leads to the solidification of the "productivist" *ethos* of technocratic society via its need to solve problems.

Finally, the integration of economic calculation with environmental elements as artificially accounted for in the mercantile realm, does not modify the nature of market

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<sup>10</sup> Charbonneau (Simon), *La gestion de l'impossible*. Economica, Paris 1992.

<sup>11</sup> See C. Martin, *Le droit de l'environnement* quoted in Marechal (Jean Paul), *Le rationnel et le raisonnable. L'économie, l'emploi et l'environnement*. Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1997. p. 42.



economy or the logic of modernity. Moreover, it does not change the obsessive research for profit which leads to the reduction of the social to mere accountable data. Abetted by a futurist, technophile mentality, man believes himself able to solve those problems that the technology previously created. Under the “pressure” of public opinion it is possible to deal with these problems. We need to recognise, however, that parliamentary democracy with its short-term elective mandate, does not favour the taking into account of long periods regarding future generations. We must ask ourselves: “Will politics be able, in the future, to express its role in counter-balancing the power of the trans-national corporations in tomorrow’s globalised system?”

During the Rio Summit in 1992, the United Nations Organisation wrote that it was necessary to control the environment through “rational and sound ecological techniques”, an expression that is found in the works of many experts. The disclosure of an internal note written by an eminent World Bank expert, Lawrence Summers, in 1992, is a premonitory example.<sup>12</sup> This distinguished economist, who has received the award for the best American economist and narrowly missed becoming Director of the World Bank, wants polluting factories reallocated to underdeveloped countries, and ultimately supports this reasoning with a rational calculation. The costs of cleaning up our mess are lower in Southern countries because of lower wages there. Likewise, the pollution costs are lower in the South because of the low level of pollution. “I have always thought that underpopulated African countries,” Summers writes, “are largely under-polluted: the quality of air is at a level *uselessly* elevated in comparison of Los Angeles and Mexico City.” In the case of a catastrophe, the price of a human life—calculated by economic indexes in terms of life expectation and wage rate—is clearly lower than in the North. The life of an Englishman is worth more than 100 Indians. In addition, the demand for a clean environment increases together with life expectancy: “We are obviously worried with the infinitesimal increase of factors causing prostate cancer risk in a country where people live long enough to be taken ill, compared with a country where 200 out of 1,000 children die before the age of 5.” The massive export of pollution toward the South will stimulate its development.<sup>13</sup>

The argument is in fact indisputable: it is better to die of pollution than to die of hunger. When you have to rationalise the ecology it is necessarily the logic of economy that ultimately imposes its law.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Courier international* n. 68, “Dernière trouvaille de la Banque Mondiale: polluer les pays pauvres”, 1992. See also, Michael Prowse, in *Financial Times*, December 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Yet in 1992, the export estimate of toxic waste of the last 5 years was of 10 million tons. The American government shows the example. It has, in fact, allowed the companies with a great environmental impact, favourable concession, to overseas delocalisation of greater polluting productive units, in this way it is possible to save the otherwise necessary investments. This possibility has been used by Motorola, General Instruments, Texas Instruments, Westinghouse, Cincinnati Electric. See Jean Masini and Neyereth Pourdany, “L’apparition de économies en transition: exemplarité nouvelle pour les maquiladoras mexicaines” *Mondes en développement*, vol. 2, no. 84, 1983.

<sup>14</sup> As Shiv Vivianathan says: “In the Brundland report, ecology is only seen as research for managerial efficiency.” In “Mrs. Brundland’s disenchanting Cosmos”, *Alternatives*, n. 16, 1991, p. 381.

## **Conclusion**

Sustainable development (or “durable” as we call it in France) is an *oxymoron*. It is a contradiction in terms and, in fact, appears as a terrifying or miserable word. At least with “un-sustainable” (non-durable) development, we could maintain the hope that this lethal process would have had an end. We could hope that one day it would be stopped, a victim of its own contradictions, of its failures, due to its unsustainable character, or from the exhaustion of the natural resources. We could reflect on “after-development” and work for a less desperate and damaged conclusion by putting together an acceptable post-modernity. This oxymoron of sustainable development takes away from us any perspective of hope. It promises us development for, and even as, an eternity!