
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ETHICS OR FROM EGO TO ECO

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Abstract

The authors of this study claim, that constantly sustainable development threatens the ever deteriorating environment. The level of air, water and land pollution is highly alarming. In addition, global warming as a serious menace is manifested by extreme climate changes in the last years. Many distinguished scientists have been exhorting specialists to solve this problem and there were numbers of political statements. Kyoto Protocol from 1997 is considered to be the most significant international political document concerning lowering the carbon emissions. It's validity has been extended by 2020 at Doha conference (2012). Major problem of both conferences has been the fact, that the USA and China, the largest polluters in the world didn't sign the treaties.

The authors point out, that the problem of a sustainable development is an ethical one in the context of ecology. Besides the above mentioned political failures, there is a globalizing and collective mentality of western society that is consumerism oriented and in disharmony with the nature. Authors can see the cause of consumer based behaviour as a desire for the consumption product, which is amplified by the media. Global society needs new ideals, new 'objects of desire' which are friendly to the nature, support modesty and a real quality of life. The new social ideal should bring the emphasis on the side 'to be' against 'to have'; it should introduce metanoia, a shift from egocentric actions towards holistic and ecological thinking and feeling. According to authors sustainable development can be possible only in radical change of human thinking.

Keywords: sustainable development, consumer society, ethics, spirituality

1. Introduction

There has been said and written a lot about the strategy of sustainable development of society since the end of 1960s. First news came from The Roman Club, then allegations were done by scientists, politicians, at conferences and summits later on. The idea of sustainable development originated upon recognising contrast between growth-based economic advancement and limited resources of nature. The fundamental idea of sustainable development is continuation of economic prosperity for future generations with the cardinal

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interconnection of social and ecological sphere. This was the main topic for important international conferences held in Rio de Janeiro (1992), Kyoto (1997) [1], Johannesburg (2002) and Dauha (2012).

Within a discussion about ecological crisis, the global warming is the greatest threat of present day, caused by emissions of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The ratification of Kyoto Protocol pledged to lower the amount of emissions polluting the air. With the exception of the USA and Australia, The Kyoto Protocol was ratified by most of the concerned countries. China, another large polluter was acquitted from the process of ratification. The Protocol wasn't signed by Russia as well while describing it as 'scientifically proofless' Regardless of previous statements, both Russia and China signed the Protocol in late 2005. Next conference held in Dauha (Qatar) in 2012 referred back to The Kyoto Protocol. The extension of the emission reduction till 2020 was the objective of aforementioned meetings. The USA and China, the largest polluters in the world rejected the proposed protocol.

The outcome of Dauha conference seems to be perplexed. Those countries that signed the protocol produce only 15 percent of worlds emissions of carbon dioxide which can't really stop, or even slow down the global warming. Therefore we may assume that we are loosing at the fight with global warming and, consequently, the sustainable development is seriously endangered.

What are the causes of these failures? Are there only political and economic interests behind? Or is it 'incorrect code' embedded in the whole western culture? These are the questions we would like to answer while firstly addressing the notion of sustainable development, which is considered to be the basic principle of the human society development nowadays.

2. To the notion of 'sustainable development'

The term - permanent sustainability of development was mentioned for the first time at The Biosphere Conference in Paris (1968). It was emphasised again in The Ecologist magazine, led by E. Goldsmith in 1972 by alleging that the basic problem with industrial way of life and its expansion lies in its unsustainability [2]. One of the first definitions in the world literature may be traced back in The Roman Club – *The Limits to Growth* by D. Meadows from 1972 [3]. Along with the other authors, Meadows has defined the permanent sustainable development as a state of a global balance, in which the amount of Earth population and capital is kept at the constant ratio and the increase or decrease tendencies are in need of a rigorous control.

The Question of permanently sustainable development has been discussed at number of conferences and seminars. Resolutions made at those events conclude, that developed basic needs of current generation mustn't disrupt the ability of improvement for future generations. Definition of sustainable development is predicated out of it and is embodied in Slovak environmental law: „*Permanently sustainable development of society is such a development, which retains the ability to appease the basic needs of current and future*

generations, while not lessening diversity of nature and conserving natural functions of ecosystems“ [3, p. 129].

However, the issue of permanently sustainable development has been analysed the most systematically and at the highest level at the UN environmental conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 [4]. The conference voted through five fundamental documents in support of permanently sustainable development. In these documents formulations were made concerning the priorities, which should be complied by every country in order to preserve a life on Earth for future. Three major strategies of sustainable development were identified on a basis of these priorities:

1. Ecological dimension – it is concentrated on maintaining diversified conditions and forms of life on Earth (Earth’s vitality and variety), and regulation of human activities in a country in line with carrying the capacity of natural ecosystem;
2. Economic dimension – it emanates from appraisal of the basic economic relation ‘profit–consumption’;
3. Social dimension – the main goal is to safeguard a ‘respectable’ quality of life for every human.

There is a widely accepted fact among the vast agenda of permanently sustainable development that human improvement mustn’t be indentified only with the idea of economic growth, but it needs to be targeted towards fulfilment of important social objectives (poverty reduction, quality of life improvement, improvement of education opportunities, health, etc.) and protection of environment, ecosystems, biodiversity, cleanness of air, water and Earth, which calls for rounded-off attitude towards governing the development of our society. All three aforementioned dimensions (ecological, economic and social) are connected via ethics that requires responsible human policies in regard of next generations’ future.

3. Sustainable development as an ethical problem

Nowadays we have enough scientifically based knowledge to prove man’s accountability concerning pollution of the planet and, especially global warming, the greatest threat to mankind. Based on this knowledge, the problem of permanent sustainable development has become an ethical one – man is responsible for his actions and also for the state of this planet to be kept for future generations. We can see the ethical extent of sustainable development in two ways: as ecological and social problem as well.

1. Man is held responsible for protection and further evolution of nature on each level. That’s the reason why the ethics should be global and universally binding. In relation to the universally binding ethics, authors like T. Brailean and co-workers contemplate the new economic model, the so called Theoeconomics [5]. It revolves around a shift involving renewable energy resources and harmless technologies that wouldn’t damage the environment. It has to be a kind

of technologies following the nature's model – by functioning renewably, effectively and without any contamination.

All people are more or less responsible for the current state of environment, but politicians have the actual power and possibilities to solve this crisis. Nevertheless, they are failing (USA and China representatives). There are mostly short sighted visions of their own economic prosperity taking place in a background.

2. Ethical context of permanently sustainable development is reflected also in a social dimension, specifically in relation to the poor, less developed countries. In countries dominated by poverty, where important ecosystems are endangered, i.e. Amazonian rainforest in Brazil, the question of economic and financial support is getting extremely important from the point of view of planetary ecological stability. In spite of this fact, financial help for less developed countries is not sufficient and while necessary ecosystems are slowly disappearing on the globe, people are inevitably shifting away from permanently sustainable development.

Although we have the knowledge, why aren't we able to act rightfully? Why isn't there a political will? It seems that the entire ethical problem has deeper roots in preferred and successfully globalized cultural models of western culture. We identify these role models as the idea of consumer society. These rules are followed by the entire society including the politicians. Especially their notions and specific programmes may be regarded as a materialisation and extension of public's wishes and desires (de facto voters).

So, what is the essence of consumer society? How would it be possible to change this 'code of consumerism', which is incompatible with the idea of permanently sustainable development?

4. To the origin and essence of consumer society

The origins of consumer society 'code' can be found in the beginnings of modern European culture. Since the Middle-Ages it went through a significant cultural shift. This shift was induced by the 'Black Death', a catastrophic plague that ravaged in Europe between 1347 and 1351. After this tragic event we can observe a paradigm change of thinking, which corresponds with the beginning of the Renaissance (1400). During the Renaissance, the emphasis is put on Earth-life world and man counted upon his own reason and capabilities, not anymore on Church that wasn't able to stop the plague menace.

In a background of changes, the important role, according to Ricoeur [6], was played by abstract rationality that covered all the life's domain in contrast to the Middle-Ages, when it was mainly balanced by faith. Abstract rationality broke free from control of the faith and started to expand on the field of Science and technology, later in politics and economy. That engendered the extraordinary civilization progress of modern Europe, incomparable with other eastern civilizations.

The Renaissance represented a shift towards the values of Earth-bound world. The basis of the currently called consumer society was laid in 19th century. Under the influence of the new technological inventions, the development of the civilization in Europe accelerated and created an industrial society, which promoted a growth of material wealth. After the crisis of over-production in 1870 [7], it came to shortening of working hours and rising wages and, suddenly, a common labourer was able to achieve an elementary affluence and began to act as part of the mass in a city environment. This trend was supported by penny press, distributed in society and enforced owning and consuming the product.

The idea of consumer society became a component of a materially prosperous happiness. This idea has been forming the lifestyle of western man up to now. We can postulate that it is a fundamental structural element of western culture, which confirms its ideal of consumer happiness and radiates it particularly through the mass media.

5. The influence of media to the creating of consumer society

Every new medium had a considerable duplicitous impact on a forming of a culture [8]: firstly, by the technology of medium itself, and secondly through the distributed content. This notion was backed by one of the most distinguished media theorists, McLuhan [9], who affirmed that the media are an extension of human and a message – media don't operate just by transmitting a content; they also operate by the character of media itself, which can be auditory, visual, etc. Communication contents are determined to some extent by the character of media.

The media are basically an enhanced cultural language. What is communicated is simultaneously a part of culture and – on the contrary – what is actual is communicated at the same time. We can regard both media and culture as conjoined twins. In modern times, press heavily influenced changes in European culture by producing identical printed copies. They have spread homogeneous ideas into a vast social space and have helped to make mentally and culturally homogenised society and thus create a mass society. And retroactively, the mass society influenced the press, which have intensely communicated mass information.

The new electronic media, especially the Internet, boosted up immense growth, communication and information availability, therefore the current epoch is referred to an information epoch. Our knowledge, thinking and feeling altogether are under the strong influence of the media – are mediated by the media. W. Welsch, one of the contemporary postmodern philosophers, claims that our knowledge is brought by the media and is basically of a constructive character: *“in our relation to media and in the way we use them, we, now, more than ever before, notice the constructive character of our understanding of reality. We understand that reality, as such, does not exist at all, that reality has always been a construction, man - made product – but we did not want to accept*

it before. Each one of the conservative criticisms of media in the sense of pre-media and inevitably valid and absolute understanding of reality is fundamentally wrong. It is based on a mistake that we have been freed of by our modern experience with media - on the idea that reality is present and not dependent on media and therefore it differs from a construction.” [10]

The media produce contents with consumer characteristics through commercials, TV series, movies, shows, etc., and at the same time construct the consumer based man's world. These media, although indirectly, support the consumer way of life with their technological pre-set. We agree with statement of author S. Gáliková Tolnaiová [11], that consumption is enabled by electronic media in a practical or technical way.

Content-wise, media influence is directly supervised by a marketing manager. H. Pravdová and co-workers claim that *„the goal of marketers efforts is the formation of a hedonistic consumer category – object of marketing and media projection of various desires, dreams, expectations, experiences or pleasures“* [12]. Media have the ability to convince percipients about the consumer way of life as unquestionable, mainly in a context of entertainment phenomenon. The idea is supported by the research of N. Postman who postulates that television is, first and foremost, a visual medium, promoting entertainment and consumerism, as oppose to the press. He says: *“entertainment is the common ideology of the whole communication television brings”* [13]. Postman does not find problematic that television offers programmes that bring entertainment, but all the topics are converted into entertainment. These programmes are meant to be for all the humankind in mass, similarly to modern printed media content, and do not differentiate between degrees of culture or entertainment. Everything is determined by demand, which ruins the original system of values, based on hierarchy. All that is applied to television is even more suitable for the Internet. Similarly to television, the Internet is an image medium, but offers many more possibilities for combinations and surfing.

Similarly to TV, the Internet doesn't brace up the abstract thinking and continual development of ideas as well, consequently it may simply become an entertainment medium in the hands of uneducated people and directly support consumer society.

6. Possibilities of the solution or from ego to eco

It may appear that the knowledge of a longstanding unsustainable development itself doesn't have the adequate effect to change the thinking and consumer gestio of man. How can the 'consumer code' be altered in society, that is generally affirmative towards it and which is reinforced by the current electronic media? What could break the stalemate created by consumer society and balance mankind development 'from ego to eco' – towards ecologic and holistic thinking, feeling and action?

We assume that every new ideal and value should stand against the consumer ideal and value of the consumerism itself, should be more attractive

than those consumerism oriented and should be supported by the media. I. Rusu tells about the importance of a presentation of new ideas by the media [14]: „*The media can contribute to the solving of ecological problems by publicity, information distribution and most important by public debate*“. In this context, a demand for developed critical thinking emerges [15] that could have a sufficient impact on a change of media content by shifting from consumer values to ecological ones.

If the last value was based on a consumer ‘happiness’ out of buying consumption products, the new value should be based on a ‘happiness’ out of a new quality of life. But how can the new quality of life be interpreted?

1. One of the possible visions of the new quality of life emphasises the vehemence of a simpler way of life based on, the so called green technologies and voluntary modesty. The ideal of voluntary modesty is supported by philosopher and eco-ethician Erazim Kohák. He claims that: „*the solution to ecological crisis isn't more effective technology, but more modest humankind. ... We should learn to live in harmony, for our co-existence with the universus of life to not burden the Earth beyond the borders of a permanent sustainability.*“ [16] According to Kohák, it is absolutely important to change our approach to life from egoistic to ecological and to life in harmony with nature and permanently sustainable development.

Unfortunately, this exact and reasonable vision can't happen in current society. Our society is too heavily imbued with consumer way of life massively promoted by media, especially the electronic media. These media visualise the own desires of society; they are on the side of consumer society, not voluntary modesty.

2. The trap of consumer society could be broken by the second version of a new quality of life based on the deeper self-realisation of man. Arne Naess, an ecologist, has already taken this path, inspired by eastern philosophy. Naess spoke about self-realization, achieving the absolute, deep and ecological Self, extending itself on other people and nature. „*Terms Ego, self and Self (deep, absolute and ecological Self) penetrated various philosophical systems, originally very narrowly linked to world religions. The impact of religions in industrial societies weakens and so is the philosophy of identification currently and practically unavailable. ... To underline the morality, punishing eco-criminals, economic sanctions and other negative instruments has it's own place, but above all, it's about positive path, education towards the greatest and broadest identification by extension of one's Self.*“ [17] In Naess eco-philosophy we observe a weakening of a former mysticism, present in every world religion. Although his eco-stance had a certain response, the impulse wasn't enough to enforce a needed man's transformation in society.

3. Authentic and living mystique may constitute the best way to new quality of life, which could be placed in position opposing the trend of consumer society. We may philosophically define mystique as a merger of consciousness and being. Being is perceived as something that simply is and transgresses everything confined, for example as a nothing, which is nonentity by its positive

definitions. The path for merger the consciousness and being leads through the unconsciousness [18], which can fully integrate into the consciousness with proper concentration and meditation. This path is often filled with plenty negative recording. Upon unblocking themselves, they release internal energies, that can considerably transform a man [19] followed with the feeling of a deeper redemption. These experiences could be the key to solve the problem of the consumer society, because they would lead to psychical independence from matter.

In each individual religion exists particular way of mystical self-realization as well, but, as it seems, the outcomes are very similar. In Christian mystique it resembles to a merger with God (Latin: unio mystica), which is described by Teresa of Ávila as a light in water, a drop of water in the see, etc., and they are in indifferent oneness [20]. It recalls the Indian spiritual tradition, according to which an atman (individual spiritual Self) is a Brahma (spirit of God). Taoism has a purpose in merger with Tao, the origin of everything, as well. Buddhism recognises a living nothingness, achievable by concentrated and watchful mind.

Mystique has the same ability of deeper spiritual merger in relation to the nature. We may mention the Christian-mystical stories about desert fathers living in a remarkably friendly relationship with animal. There had been often said, that a lion or a bear guarded their cave. The prototype of love for the nature is undoubtedly Saint Francis of Assisi. In the *Song of Brother Sun* and in *Admonitions* he celebrates the whole living and non-living creation. In both Hinduism and Buddhism, we may point out the idea of *ahimsá*, which means a prohibition of killing and generally hurting every living creature.

Manzoor A. Shah and M. Maroof Shah [21] claim, that „*none of the great religions alienates Man from Nature or turns its back upon Nature*“. Later on they state: „*Joorastrian prayers are full of praise of mountains, oceans flying birds and 'Mother Earth and all her good creations'. ... Hindu prayers and ceremonies are embedded in the love for nature to such an extent that some adherents worship practically all objects in nature. ...Sikhs claim 'God sleeps in the tree, dreams in the animal, and wakes in a man'. ...Buddhist prayer known as the 'Prayer for the Happiness of All that Lives' and paralleled in Hindu Sanskrit Prayer Sarve bhadvanti Sukhinah (i.e., all beings achieve happiness, enjoy health and become good) could only have been current in an environmentalist or ecofriendly religious atmosphere where salvation concerns just not an individual, but the whole of Manifestation.*“

Mystique, contained in every of the worlds religions represents a large potential, that could have significant transformative (metanoic) effects on a society upon unlocking itself. By interpreting the thinking of John Paul II, S. Ewertowski and A. Modrzejewski [22] also claim, that permanently sustainable development depends on human development, his spiritual and transcendental potential,

Mystique has to be put at the spotlight by some mystical or extraordinary spiritual personality, like M. Gandhi, John Paul II or Dalai Lama. However, it is

questionable, whether we have enough of these charismatic personalities or they are adequately presented by the media, for them to change the thinking and action of people. These personalities influenced the development in the world to some extent, but not enough to be actually structurally reconstructed.

4. The last, but negative option could be a fear that would force us to change our thinking and acting. Recently, the uneasiness from the climate change already exists; it endangers humankind not only ecologically, but economically and socially as well. Uneasiness could turn into an enormous fear with cumulative catastrophes that would terrify people enough into making cardinal changes in every part of life. Hans Jonas [23] chose a similar strategy towards sustainable life. He advised to develop a 'heuristics of fear' as a reinforcement of uneasiness of a possible future development.

Question is as follows – won't it be too late by then? Even if humanity started to radically shift in a context of sustainable development and stopped polluting the Earth only up to the extreme changes of nature, climate changes would still go on with their destructive doing for many years to come. That would probably deepen the already bad ecological outlook. For example, it could cause a breakdown of the infrastructure of the society, insufficient food, famine, migrations of population or even new wars.

7. Conclusions

Climate changes, caused by man and threatening the permanently sustainable development are currently an unquestionable fact. All people are ethically responsible for the sustainable development, but politicians even more, because of their power and possibilities for suitable solutions. However, as we pointed out, they fail miserably, because the biggest polluters of air (USA and China) didn't sign the Kyoto Protocol. The motive behind this is deeper and consists in a cultural code of consumer society, created by the modern European culture and is successfully globalised. Consumer society is backed and enforced by the media, unified by the idea of happiness. This model is in fact very attractive and there is no counterforce or counterbalance. There is couple of strategies to change this stalemate. The first, preferred by E. Kohak, is a voluntary modesty as a counterbalance against the consumer society, but practically without effect. The second strategy is self-realization by A. Naess. It has its own followers, but it doesn't represent sufficient force to change the society. The third counter-value could become a mystique, based on a spiritual background of every religion. The potential hasn't awoken yet and there are only few charismatic personalities such as John Paul II or Dalai Lama to move the masses from ego to eco – to the permanently sustainable development. The fourth option is fear, that's related to the self-preservation. Fear usually comes with critical situation, so it opens a question, whether it won't be far too late for any changes.

It can't be foretold how the situation will continue to develop according to permanently sustainable development. There could be too many scenarios,

ranging from overly optimistic to exceedingly pessimistic ones. One thing is certain, the consequences of a negative actions will affect its progenitor – man, because his position on the pyramid of life is the least stable.

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