

## **Sustainable development : with or without mankind ?**

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Without darkness, there can be no light. However the media tend to preach gloom and doom so we often miss or forget the brighter news. Risk prevention certainly falls under the sway of this media fashion, as seen in the example of acid rain and catalytic converters. Olivier Postel-Vinay (1992) describes the situation as follows : "at the end of the 70s and early 80s, the dominant theory was that deforestation in Europe and North America was caused by factory emissions of sulphur dioxide. Dozens of measures taken at the international level were designed to limit the damage caused by pollution. Five years later, the theory had changed. The guilty party was suddenly no longer acid rain but rather the deadly effects of ozone. The sun and car were to blame. As a result, the European Union decided to impose catalytic converters. No sooner had the ink dried on the law, than experts were forced to admit the unthinkable: the forests were suddenly on the mend, even much better than in previous decades! Of course by then, two collective errors and two important industrial policies had been implemented. The winners in both cases were the laboratories specialized in analysing the lower atmosphere or the forests. This was the beginning of the sweeping tide of 'scientific-ecology'."<sup>1</sup>

Given the all-mighty power of modern society some people actually believe that from now on they are responsible for the global warming. Yet, someone should remind these well-intentioned individuals that the dinosaurs did not need man to push them into extinction. The jury is not in yet on global warming and there is no proof that it is related to human activity.

All too often we forget to consider the logic behind the questions asked. Instead we rush like lemmings towards the illusory answer to a false question. If we opt to err on the side of caution, we should not take too many hard and fast decisions based on overly 'soft' information.

The principle of precaution also applies to the link between demographic dynamics and economic growth. When without proof yet still in doubt, the best option is the "as if" attitude combined with research. The main risk that the Western world faces will not come from the environment but rather from the demographic implosion caused by the 'baby-bust'. Although a major risk for the old world, surprisingly no preventive measures have been taken.

### **1. Jogging the memory of climatic variations**

Variations in the climate have less impact on developed countries than did economic and demographic fluctuations during the early Middle Ages. Technological progress has neutralised the effects of minor climatic changes. Actually, in major modern cities, residents are now exposed less and less to seasonal changes. The urban population lives inside, with artificial light and air. People travel underground. Nevertheless everyone's morale depends to a great extent on the weather, one of the day's main news items. How

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<sup>1</sup>Postel-Vinay, O. (1994), *Le Taon dans la cité : actualité de Socrate*, Édition Descartes et Cie.

would we react if all of Europe spent the summer in front of the fireplace because of constant rain, as it did in 1816? Or if two-thirds of all walnut trees froze, as in the winter of 1709? Or better yet, if there were eight soggy years in a row, as from 1313 to 1320 during which time the West waded up to its knees?<sup>2</sup>

Modern madness certainly throws a wrench into nature's works. It is actually end-of-the-millennium angst that we see resurfacing in this theme of global warming and the greenhouse effect caused directly by human activity. In reality, we know virtually nothing. As Jean-Paul Dufour <sup>3</sup>said: "Although new record highs were hit in 1995, past examples make it difficult to interpret the average increase in temperatures observed over the past century. Most researchers are awaiting new clues before rendering their verdict (...) as long as there are unknown factors in the way the world climate functions. The past reveals that major variations may arise cyclically without any long-lasting deregulation."

It is true that alpine glaciers have lost one-third of their surface area since 1860. It is also true that this warming of less than one degree within one century follows the cooling of the 'mini' ice age that lasted from 1550 to 1850, including a strong glacial thrust between 1600 and 1710. We are far from the optimal average temperature of the period between 800 and 1200. We need at least one or two degrees and even five to recover the "Warmzeit" conditions of 100,000 years ago. In the year 1,000, Greenland was indeed green, ice-free and colonised by Vikings. The earth is much colder today, and the much-discussed global warming has been noticeable only since the middle of the 1800s. Nevertheless, this too may simply be a minor fluctuation within the secular cycles that have already experienced several major amplitudes over the past millennia.<sup>4</sup> Actually, the fluctuation is not linear, since there was a slight cooling between 1955 and 1975 which made some people fear another ice age!

Although probable, doubts remain as to whether the natural oscillations of the climatic machine have indeed been affected by human activity. Yet nothing prevents us from wondering and researching so that we may behave in a more responsible fashion and prepare for the unavoidable and unpredictable.

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<sup>2</sup>Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Histoire des Climats depuis l'an mil*, 1 er volume, Éditions Champs Flammarion. The author reminds us that during "these eight wet years, 1313-1320, in which the entire Western world was up to its knees in water", the rain ruined the harvest, made seeds scarce, and led to horrible famines from 1315 to 1316. "the floods during these two years provoked irreversible damage, the loss of grains. Never was the number of dead as high in the 100 years from 1245 to 1347 as it was during those two years. There were also scorching summers during which the crops were seared underfoot, as in 1666. "In September 1666, the wood structures of London houses were so dry that the tiniest spark would turn them into a tinder box. The Great Fire of London in 1666 was no coincidence."

<sup>3</sup>Le Monde, January 11, 1986

<sup>4</sup>"Cf Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie (1983)

Yet how can we behave responsibly when the unknown factors in the environment are such that we may doubt the data and the solutions put forth. As Haroun Tazieff<sup>5</sup> asked, will the famous hole in the ozone layer, whose size and growth have been documented, continue in the usual uncertain way, according to volcanic rhythms?

Who benefits from this doubt? First, researchers who find funding and projects multiplied. Second, governments who, with little effort or spending, take advantage of the situation to put on the airs of a "good international citizen" even though they are unable to solve national problems and prevent public anger.

## **2. Babies and whales**

Sustainable development has suddenly become trendy. Its origins may be found in ecology, especially in the English-speaking world where the term was coined. Sustainable development combines a mixture of often antagonistic notions, from sustainability based on the environment to social acceptability. The two concepts are at loggerheads: the old greens, for whom growth is bad, and the modern greens, who know that there is no creation without destruction. Nature herself is cruel and does not let humans play the sorcerer's apprentice.

We should beware of the risk of a scientific and a green dictatorship and keep in mind the Heidelberg Appeal launched at the closing session of the Rio conference by hundreds of scientists from around the globe : "we want to make our full contribution to the preservation of our common heritage, the Earth. We are however worried, at the dawn of twenty-first century, at the emergence of an irrational ideology which is opposed to scientific and industrial progress and impedes economic and social development. We contend that a Natural State, sometimes idealized by movements with a tendency to look toward the past, does not exist and has probably never existed since man's first appearance in the biosphere, insofar as humanity has always progressed by increasingly harnessing Nature to its needs and not the reverse."

The appeal is missing a key component. It needs man to work for both mankind and the future of humanity. We hereby subscribe to an 'ecolo-realistic' vision of sustainable development but with a human face and a social dimension.

As a result, the development of 'megalopolises' cannot be considered sustainable if social tension inevitably rises and even increases in tandem with the stress of various imbalances or inequalities.

In urban clusters, the number one endangered species is the *homo sapiens* who can not live without dignity, autonomy, social ties and some meaning in life. Humans need space to

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<sup>5</sup>"Stratospheric ozone is not threatened to disappear whatsoever. Those who have been trying to make people believe otherwise are betraying a scientific truth." Haroun Tazieff, preface, *Ozone, un trou pour rien*, by Rogelio Maduro and Ralf Schauerhammer.

live and play. They need clean air, suitable architecture, and social relations. All of the above should also be part of any real sustainable development. Risk prevention should be considered here, too. In many fields, an increase in quantity triggers a decrease in quality.

What we condemn here are those short-term practices which are implemented to rationalize expenses yet lead to depreciation in future values (positive and negative) and overvalue the present. In other words, the inflated growth (flux) to the detriment of heritage (stocks). Although it may seem normal to consider the current value of a very far-off, although great, advantage as negligible, do we have the right to treat the risk of major drawbacks in a similar fashion using the excuse that they too are far-off?

Such practices will leave future generations with an inherited estate of cities, forests and waterways that are disfigured or polluted. Species have become extinct and hazardous waste continues to accumulate. The next generation will be obliged to pay for the sins of their parents who behaved as if tomorrow would never come. Yet Lester Brown told them that the earth was not an inheritance from our ancestors but rather a loan from our descendents.

In any event, development cannot be sustainable if there is no one left to maintain the diversity of our landmarks, memories, languages and cultures. Unfortunately the effects of the 'baby-bust', particularly in southern Europe, indicate that this diversity is threatened. The slow suicide of the old continent through low birthrates may not be as significant as the stockpiling of radioactive waste. It is, however, difficult to consider the issue in a world dominated by what is considered "politically correct"<sup>6</sup>.

What would the ecologists say if the fertility rate of whales plunged to a level less than half that of the renewal rate? They would surely alert the population to this global ecological disaster! Yet this is the pattern in northern Italy and Catalonia where fertility rates are lower than one child per woman. Perhaps one day what is politically correct will defend children and adults as fervently as whales.

Those who revel in seeing vast green spaces transformed into virtual nature preserves with no humans in sight are self-condemned to a sad existence in anarchic urban clusters. In short, development will never be sustainable if people continue to feel threatened in their diversity by the forces of uniformisation and levelling off of the very differences that they themselves have put into place.

Sustainable development necessarily keeps the future open-ended for the generations to come. It cannot be planned or organized without considering humanity. Planners, developers, leaders, should be just as attentive to humanity as they are to nature.

Young people should no longer be sacrificed on the altar of 'positive discrimination', invented specifically to protect threatened minorities. Youth should benefit from this form of discrimination, for as the humanist Jean Bodin said back in 1576, "the only wealth is humankind". Let us rediscover the path of population renewal. We need to lift the demographic taboos and renounce, as Jean-Claude Chesnais (1995) did, "this implicit, absurd, suicidal consensus adopted by all the social partners." This idea of 'the rising socialisation of the cost of old age and the rising privatisation of the cost of youth'.<sup>7</sup> If young people were to remain a minority, we would be condemning them to a solitary old age!

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<sup>6</sup>Cf. in this matter the "SOS Jeunesse!" cry launched by Population et Avenir, 35 rue Marbeuf, 75008 Paris. See also the controversy regarding this matter in the journal *Futuribles*, June 1996.

<sup>7</sup>Chesnais, J-C. (1995) *Le crépuscule de l'Occident*, Éditions Robert Laffont.