



## Environmentalists Must Also Undertake a Paradigm Shift

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"Development" is, above all, a way of thinking. It cannot, therefore, be easily identified with a particular strategy or program, but ties many different practices and aspirations to a common set of assumptions. Whatever the theme on the agenda in the post-war era, the assumptions of "development," like the universal belief in the superiority of economics, shaped the definition of the problem, highlighted certain solutions and consigned others to oblivion. Moreover, as knowledge is intimately related to power, 'sustainable development' thinking inevitably featured certain social actors (for example, international agencies) and certain types of social transformation (for example, technology transfer), while marginalizing other social actors and degrading other kinds of change.

Whereas in the 1970s, the main threat to nature still appeared to be industrial man, in the 1980s environmentalists turned their eyes to the Third World and pointed to the vanishing forests, soils and animals there. The crisis of the environment is no longer perceived as the result of unrestrained affluence for the global middle class in North and South, but as the result of human presence on the globe in general. No matter if nature is consumed for luxury or survival, no matter if the powerful or the marginalized tap nature, it all becomes one for the rising tribe of ecology bureaucrats.

The persistence of "development", the newly-found potentials for less resource-intensive growth paths, and the discovery of humanity in general as the enemy of nature, formed the conceptual ingredients for the type of thinking which received its diplomatic blessings at the UN. The world is to be saved by elite managers. The message, which is ritually repeated by many politicians, industrialists and scientists who have recently decided to slip on a green coat, goes as follows: nothing should be or can be done to change the direction the world's economies are taking. Problems along the way can be solved, if the challenge for better and more sophisticated management is met.

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As a result, ecology, once a call for new public virtues, has now become a call for new executive skills. In fact, UN development documents overflow with such formulas as "integrated approach," "rational use," "sound management," "internalizing costs," "better information," "increased co-ordination," and "long-term prediction." There is an almost total failure to consider any reduction of material standards of living and any attempts to slow down the plundering of the planet. In short, radical alternatives to development are blackballed, alternatives within development are welcome.

Nevertheless, it was an achievement for the UN to have delivered the call for environmental tools from a global rostrum, an opening that will give a boost to environmental engineering worldwide. But the price for this achievement is the reduction of environmental philosophy and ethics to managerialism. The task of global ecology can be understood in two ways: it is either a technocratic effort to keep development afloat against the drift of plunder and pollution; or it is a cultural effort to shake off the hegemony of tired Western values and gradually withdraw from the 'development race.'

These two ways may not be exclusive in detail, but they differ deeply in perspective. In the first case, the paramount task becomes the management of the biophysical limits to development. All powers of foresight have to be mustered in order to steer development along the edge of the abyss, continuously surveying, testing, and maneuvering the biophysical limits. In the second case, the challenge consists in designing cultural and political alternatives to 'development.' Each society is called upon to search for indigenous models of prosperity, which allow society's course to stay at a comfortable distance from the edge of the abyss, living graciously within a stable or shrinking volume of production. The difference is analogous to driving a vehicle at high speed towards a canyon: either you equip it with radar, monitors and highly trained personnel, correct its course and drive it as hard as possible along the rim; or you slow down, turn away from the edge, and drive leisurely here and there without too much attention to precise controls. Too many global ecologists - implicitly or explicitly - favor the first choice. We must, instead, deeply meditate upon and plan for the second.

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