



“Summary of article by Wolfgang Sachs: Global Ecology and the Shadow of Development” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 6: A Survey of Sustainable Development. Island Press: Washington DC, 2001. pp. 94-97

Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being

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Development is usually perceived as a process whereby all nations, Northern and Southern, move along the same path of increased economic production, although at different rates and from different starting points. In this article, the author argues that development has only widened the economic gap between the North and South and amplified Southern misery. Further, the term “sustainable development” has been co-opted to serve the interests of a Northern-dominated development process. The current view of international development agencies is that improving the management of development, rather than adopting different goals, is the cure for the environmental degradation and poverty that threaten the sustainability of the development process. This amounts to an extension of Northern global hegemony rather than true sustainability.

The Birth of “Development”

Since 1949, the objective of development policy has been to bring all nations into the global arena and get them to run in the race toward increased production. The world-view put forth by the North has been that catching up in the race is the only way to prosperity. Turning the South’s societies into economic competitors meant not only capital injection and technology transfer, but a complete deconstruction of their social fabric. Economic, political, and cultural institutions which were not compatible with market capitalism had to be revamped to achieve the textbook model of macroeconomic growth.

The result of this radical restructuring of Southern institutions has been the further widening of the gap between the North, where economic prosperity is concentrated, and the South, where the brunt of ever-increasing poverty and environmental destruction is felt. “During the 1980s, the contribution of developing countries to the world’s GNP shrank to 15%, while the share of the industrial countries, with 20% of the world population, rose to 80%.” (241) Why then do Southern nations stay in the race? Because “development” has created a strong global middle class composed of elites in the South and the majority in the North. “The internal rivalries of that class make a lot of noise in world politics, condemning to silence the overwhelming majority of the world’s people.” (241)

Ambiguous Claims for Justice

Ample evidence has demonstrated there is not enough room in the world for the environment to serve as the source for the inputs and the sink for the wastes of economic growth. However, the

South fears that environmental concerns will limit its opportunities for economic growth, opportunities already exploited by the North, before the abuse of nature was a concern. Thus the South has used “justice” as a bargaining tool for concessions from the North in the form of development aid, clean technology, or access to bioindustrial patents. Unfortunately, in so doing the South accepts the notion of Northern cultural hegemony. All societies thus remain caught up in a race for ever-increased technical capacity and economic power. “Limits to road-building, to high-speed transport, to economic concentration...were not even considered at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio.” (242)

Earth’s Finitude as a Management Problem

In 1962, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* introduced the idea that “development” and technological progress could be destructive to the environment, and gave rise to the environmental movement. But the 1980 “World Conservation Strategy” and the 1987 Brundtland Report promoted the idea that development itself is the only cure for developmental ills. The World Bank has defined sustainable development simply as “development that lasts.”¹ Thus the environment itself takes a back seat to anthropocentric concerns with increased consumption. The evolution of this world view can be traced through historical stages:

- **The 1970s oil crisis:** Concern about the finiteness of natural resources and how it would affect growth overrode concern for the health of nature. Nature became a pawn to be manipulated to further long-term development.
- **The development of post-industrial technologies:** It became evident that growth could be pursued through less resource-intensive means, thus increasing the productivity of nature. “Limits to growth” was transformed into a technological challenge.
- **The discovery of environmental degradation as worldwide condition of poverty:** The poor who are dependent upon nature for survival have no choice but to destroy it. Humanity was branded the enemy of nature.

As a result, better managerial techniques became society’s answer to environmental ills. Thus, the “sustainable development” promoted at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 amounts to a “technical effort to keep development afloat against the drift of plunder and pollution” rather than a “cultural effort to shake off the hegemony of aging Western values and gradually retire from the development race.” (245)

Bargaining for the Rest of Nature

Although the 1980s saw the rise of a global environmental consciousness stemming from the universal threat to the global commons (the Antarctic, ocean beds, tropical forests, etc.), international diplomacy is inherently less cooperative. Instead of uniting to preserve the commons, nations bargain with each other, and not always fairly, for the largest share they can possibly secure for economic use. Thus, environmental concerns become bargaining chips in the struggle of interests.

Because so many nations are struggling for so few resources in international negotiations, “limits” are “identified at a level that permits the maximum use of nature as mine and container, right up to the critical threshold beyond which ecological decline would rapidly accelerate.” (246)

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio established an international “recognition of the scarcity of natural resources for development,” rather than a commitment to a collective stewardship of nature. International environmental diplomacy thus encompasses four elements:

- **Rights to further exploitation of nature:** Who has access to dwindling genetic resources, tropical timber, ocean bed minerals, or wild animals?
- **Rights to pollution:** Who can pollute? Can pollution be “optimized” through the purchase and sale of pollution rights?
- **Rights to compensation:** Should the South receive compensation for disproportionate Northern resource use and cumulative environmental damage?
- **Overall conflict over responsibility:** Who carries the losses from restrained environmental exploitation? Who should foot the bill for transferring clean technology to the South?

Efficiency and Sufficiency

The net effect of the discussion on sustainability is that the idea of better management of development, or mastering nature’s complexities, has replaced the notion of “limits to growth.” The “efficiency revolution” aims to produce innovations that minimize the use of nature for each unit of output by “reducing the throughput of energy and materials in the economic systems by means of new technology and planning.” (248) Although this revolution is meant to cure environmental ills, it only serves to further entrench current notions of economic development in the global system for the following reasons:

- It is difficult to use efficiency strategies in countries in the early stages of growth. To export the efficiency revolution to the South would require Northern capital as well as hegemony.
- The information and service society can only succeed on top of the industrial sector and in close proximity to it. “Gains in environmental efficiency often consist of substituting high technology for energy and materials, a process that presupposes the presence of a resource-intensive economy.” (249)
- The technical knowledge required is concentrated in the North, and can be sold to the South, so the North again benefits to the detriment of the South.

The revision of means will not achieve environmental objectives without the revision of goals. In other words, the efficiency revolution is ineffective if it only serves to increase growth. For example, although today’s cars are more fuel-efficient than ever, the growth in the number of

cars used has eliminated these gains. Growth needs to slow down or the next round of growth will swallow the achievements of the efficiency revolution.

The Hegemony of Globalism

The claims of global management are in conflict with aspirations for cultural rights, democracy and self-determination. The ambitious goals of global environmental management require the dominance of “global ecocrats” over local cultures and political systems. Technical data about resource flows and environmental impacts “provide a knowledge that is faceless and placeless, an abstraction that carries considerable cost: it consigns the realities of culture, power, and virtue to oblivion.” (251)

Until recently, the North has been relatively unaffected by the negative consequences of the global development path, leaving its symptoms of sickness, exploitation and ecological destruction for the South to absorb. However, today, for the first time, the North is feeling the unpleasant repercussions in the form of immigration, population pressure, tribalism with modern weapons, and the environmental consequences of global industrialization. Technocratic environmentalism is the Northern response -- an attempt to manage the entire planet. “If there are no limits to growth, there are certainly no limits to hubris.” (252)

Notes

1. World Bank (1992).