

Revaluing Low Carbon Cultures: Learning to live with the earth

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Introduction

A sustainable future is unthinkable at present via a development paradigm and short-horizon political institutions addicted to perpetual growth (jobs, taxes, technologies, etc.). Nevertheless, 'sustainability' must be imagined in relation to this paradigm in order to get there from here.

Until now, the dominant paradigm of 'unlimited growth' has thrived on an ideology of improving on the past. 'Development' has meant overcoming cultural, political and material obstacles to the realization of modern, rational and consumption-driven societies. But today 'development' must be increasingly about how we survive the future, rather than how we improve on the past (and nature).

Improving on the past has produced social scientific knowledge (especially, but not solely, economics) that elaborates social laws and categories disembedded from ecology. Social systems undergoing development depend on natural resources and processes, but social theorists and policymakers have ignored this 'earthly dependence' ('economic externality') and its depletion of the natural world. And this outcome is intensified by capitalism's social inequalities (within and across societies) – such as the consumption of 80 percent of world resources by about 20 percent of the world's population.

Inequalities

Global inequalities, sustaining and sustained by the growth ideology, are ultimately responsible for the over-consumption of resources and environmental degradation. For Wolfgang Sachs (2003), 'global

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ecology' means that 'rational planning of the planet becomes a matter of Northern security', that is, subordinating ecology to development, as a Northern elixir, using waste/carbon sinks and biodiversity to sustain consumerism. Current generations of forest-dwellers, small farmers, pastoralists and fisherfolk still practising low-carbon lifestyles (and performing 'environmental services') are thus viewed as 'future generations' only insofar, as they are expected to out-migrate from their purported impoverished lives within nature, and join the 'planet of slums'.

The sustainability challenge means revaluing low-carbon cultures, reversing the separation of social life from ecological cycles and processes, and learning to live *with* the earth, not just on the earth. There is abundant evidence of the equal or greater productivity of diverse small-farming systems, which in turn restore soil and water health, regenerate natural carbon cycles, sustain biodiversity and stabilize rural populations. Unlike the unfulfilled promises of industrial agriculture to feed the world (now fuelling automobiles), mixed small and medium-sized farms are more likely to feed the whole world (not just those with purchasing power) and cool it at the same time. To de-industrialize agriculture means reversing the farm and energy subsidies that privilege petro-farming, and supporting the agrarian movements already mobilizing to demand the right of smallholders to exist, and, further, to produce society. They espouse an ecological principle by which to live, and represent a reservoir of knowledge and values that the 'developed' world discounts at its peril. Stabilizing these cultures, with land and commons rights, energy and food sovereignty rights to determine their own way of farming, with assistance for climatic impacts, is a baseline for a sustainable future.

Revaluing life economy

Revaluing that which has been devalued (smallholders and their cultures) and 'externalized' (ecology) is critical to rethinking the development paradigm. And it is happening already as the certainties of development begin to crumble. Food, energy and climate crises are redirecting attention

to the centrality of agriculture and its ecological services. Concepts of 'multi-functionality', slow food and community-supported farming are all gaining currency, formalized already in the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) report. They point to a future of decentralized social life, bioregional awareness and dependence, and reciprocity between growers and eaters that would reintegrate social and ecological life at more manageable scales. The mushrooming 'transition town' phenomenon is a vibrant example of communities beginning to imagine equitable, democratic and sustainable futures. De-growth philosophies are proliferating, as social theorists, feminists and activists foreshadow a 'life economy' based on relocalization, work reduction, job-sharing, valuing informal social reproduction activities, redistributing resources, restoring waste and nutrient cycles, urban agriculture, slow cities, and so on. Local food and energy systems are key to these experiments, with the goal of reducing unnecessary human mobility through redesigning landscapes to reduce urban/rural division and elevate access to relational goods.

Looking to the future

How will we realize such sustainable practices and values? By a combination of political ecology and a politics of the local – recognizing the climate of injustice promoted by the neo-liberal growth paradigm and working towards restorative social and ecological relationships. The point is that this work is underway in the interstices of a political-economic system already in an advanced state of political crisis and biophysical collapse. Unrest in Europe and the Middle East, and cascading food riots, express popular exhaustion with public privations of neo-liberal and authoritarian regimes. In agriculture, research on 're-peasantization' suggests that smallholders across the world are withdrawing from debt-inducing commercial inputs and rebuilding de-commodified farm ecologies (van der Ploeg, 2008). Such reinvention of farming as ecology is both survival necessity against a corporate food

regime and a reimagination of what is possible on the land (stabilization of diversified small-holding, rural employment, farmer reciprocity, agroecology, etc.). It is complemented by swelling food sovereignty movements and meanings – from securing land rights, through seed-saving networks, to municipal food policy councils. Such

agri-food experiments match local ‘energy descent’ practices of developing public services geared to rethinking citizenship to transcend the exploitation of labour and environment and the alienated consumption of goods and politics cultivated by neo-liberal capitalism. These are the values and practices that will ‘inherit the earth’.

References

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