

The Challenge of Sustainable Development and the Culture of Substantive Equality¹

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*To the memory of Daniel Singer
with whom we often conversed about
the untenability of our order of
structural inequality.*

1.

Two, closely connected, propositions are at the centre of this intervention. The first is that if development in the future is not *sustainable* development, there will be no significant development at all, no matter how badly needed; only frustrated attempts to try to square the circle, as in the last few decades marked by ever more elusive “modernizing” theories and practices, condescendingly prescribed to the so-called “Third World” by the spokesmen of former colonial powers. And the, corollary, second proposition is that the condition inseparable from the pursuit of sustainable development is the progressive realization of *substantive equality*. It must be also stressed in this context that the obstacles to be overcome could hardly be greater. For up to our own days the culture of *substantive inequality* remains dominant, despite the usually half-hearted efforts to counter the damaging impact of social inequality by instituting in the political sphere some mechanism of *strictly formal equality*.

We may well ask the question: what happened in the course of subsequent historical development to the noble ideas of *Liberty – Fraternity – Equality* proclaimed at the time of the French Revolution and genuinely believed by many long afterwards? Why had to be *Fraternity and Equality* discarded altogether, often with undisguised contempt, and *Liberty* reduced to the fragile skeleton of “the democratic right to vote”, exercised by a skeptically diminishing number of people in the countries which like to describe themselves as “the model of democracy”?² And that is far from the sum total of the bad news. For, as twentieth century history amply demonstrates,

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² It is enough to think of two recent examples: (1) the practical disenfranchising of countless millions, due to apathy or manipulation, and the electoral farce witnessed after the last US Presidential election and (2) the lowest ever participation of voters in the June 2001 General Election in Britain, producing a grotesquely inflated parliamentary majority of 169 for the Government party with the votes of less than 25 percent of the electorate. The spokesmen of the winning party, refusing to listen to the British electorate’s clearly warning message, boasted that “New Labour” had achieved a “land-slide victory”. Shirley Williams aptly commented that what we were witnessing was not a *land-slide* but a *mud-slide*.

even the meagre measures of formal equality are often considered an unaffordable luxury, and become unceremoniously nullified by corrupt and authoritarian political practices, or indeed by openly pursued dictatorial interventions.

After more than a whole century of promises for eliminating – or at least greatly reducing – inequality, through “progressive taxation” and other state legislative measures, and thereby securing the conditions of socially viable development all over the world, reality turned out to be characterized by ever growing inequality not only between the “developed North” and the “underdeveloped South”, but even within the capitalistically most advanced countries. A recent report of the U.S. Congress (which could not be accused of “left-wing bias”) admitted that the income of the top *one percent* of the American population now exceeds the bottom *forty percent*;³ a figure which in the last two decades *doubled* from “only” twenty percent, scandalous as it was even at that lower figure. These regressive developments went hand in hand with first stipulating a false opposition between “equality of outcome” and “equality of opportunity”, and then abandoning even the lip-service once paid to the (never realized) idea of “equality of opportunity”. Not that this kind of end-result could be considered surprising. For once the socially challenging “outcome” is arbitrarily eliminated from the picture and opposed by “opportunity”, the latter becomes devoid of all content and, in the name of the totally vacuous term of objectless (and worse: *outcome-denying*) “equality”, it is turned into the ideological justification of the effective practical negation of all real opportunity to those who need it.

Once upon a time the progressive thinkers of the rising bourgeoisie optimistically predicted, as indeed a great figure of the Scottish historical school of the Enlightenment Henry Home did, that the domination of one social being by another will be remembered in the future as a bad dream, because “Reason, resuming her sovereign authority, will banish persecution altogether, and within the next century it will be thought strange that persecution should have prevailed among social beings. It will perhaps be even doubted, whether it ever was seriously put into practice.”⁴ Ironically, however, in the light of the way things actually turned out, what now seems to be rather hard to believe is that the intellectual representatives of the bourgeoisie in the ascendant could once reason in such terms. For a giant of 18th Century French Enlightenment, Denis Diderot, did not hesitate to assert with great social radicalism that “*if the day-worker is miserable the nation is miserable*”.⁵ Equally Rousseau, with utmost radicalism and biting sarcasm, described the prevailing order of social domination and subordination in this way:

“The terms of the social compact between these two estates of man may be summed up in a few words: ‘You have need of me, because I am rich and you are poor. We

³ See David Cay Johnston, “Gap Between Rich and Poor Found Substantially Wider”, *New York Times*, September 5, 1999.

⁴ Henry Home (Lord Kames), *Loose Hints upon Education, chiefly concerning the Culture of the Heart*, Edinburgh & London, 1781, p. 284.

⁵ Diderot’s entry on *Journalier* in the *Encyclopédie*.

will therefore come to an agreement. I will permit you to have the honour of serving me, on condition that you bestow on me the little you have left, in return for the pains I shall take to command you'.”⁶

In the same spirit, the great Italian philosopher, Giambattista Vico, insisted that the culmination of historical development is “the age of men in which all men recognized themselves as *equal in human nature*”.⁷ And a long time earlier Thomas Münzer, the anabaptist leader of the German peasant revolution, pinpointed in his pamphlet against Luther the root cause of the advancing social evil in quite tangible terms, diagnosing it as the cult of universal saleability and alienation, concluding his discourse by saying how intolerable it was “that every creature should be *transformed into property* – the fishes in the water, the birds of the air, the plants of the earth.”⁸ This was a far-sighted identification of what was to unfold with all-engulfing power in the course of the next three centuries. As befits the paradoxical achievements of premature utopian anticipations, it offered from the vantage point of the far less settled structures of early capitalistic developments a much clearer vision of the dangers to come than what became visible to the participants directly involved in the vicissitudes of the more advanced phases. For once the social trend of universal saleability triumphs, in tune with the inner requirements of capital’s social formation, what still appears to Münzer as the gross violation of the natural order (and, as we know, what in the longer run endangers the very existence of humankind), to the thinkers who unreservedly identify themselves with the historically created (and in principle likewise removable) constraints of capital’s fully developed social order seem to be self-evidently natural, unalterable and acceptable. Thus many things become opaque and obfuscated by the shift in the historical vantage point. Even the crucial term of “liberty” suffers a reduction to its alienated core, hailed as the conquest of “the power to freely sell oneself” through the presumed “contract between equals”, in opposition to the political restrictions of the feudal order but ignoring, and even idealizing, the grave material and social constraints of the new one. Accordingly the original meaning of both “liberty” and “equality” is changed into abstract and circularly self-sustaining determinations,⁹ making thereby the idea

⁶ Rousseau, *A Discourse on Political Economy*, Everyman edition, London, n.d., p. 264. Rousseau also categorically stated that ‘liberty cannot exist without equality’. *The Social Contract*, Everyman edition, p. 42.

⁷ Vico, *The New Science*, translated from the third edition (1744), Doubleday & Co., New York, 1961, p. 3.

⁸ Thomas Münzer, *Hochverursachte Schutzrede und Antwort wider das geistlose, sanftlebende Fleisch zu Wittenberg, welches mit verkehrter Weise durch den Diebstahl der heiligen Schrift die erbärmliche Christenheit also ganz jämmerlich besudelt hat* (1524), quoted by Marx in his essay on *The Jewish Question*.

⁹ In other words, we end up with a double circularity, produced by the most iniquitous actual historical development: “liberty” is defined as (abstractly postulated but in real substance utterly fictitious) “contractual equality”, and “equality” is exhausted in the vague desideratum of a “liberty” to aspire at being granted nothing more than the formally proclaimed but socially nullified “equality of opportunity”.

of “fraternity” – the third member of the once solemnly proclaimed noble aspirations – utterly redundant as a matter of course.

2.

It is this kind of spirit that must be now confronted, unless we are willing to resign ourselves to the acceptance of the *status quo* and with it the prospect of continuing social paralysis and ultimate human self-destruction. For those who are the beneficiaries of the now prevailing system of crying inequality between the “developed” and the “underdeveloped” parts of the world do not hesitate to impose, with utmost cynicism, the impact of their self-serving irresponsibility – as they have done quite recently in the arbitrary dismissal of the Kyoto protocols and other environmental imperatives – by insisting that the countries of the “South” should remain stuck at their present level of development, otherwise they would grab to themselves “iniquitously preferential” treatment. They have the nerve to speak in the name of equality! At the same time they also refuse to see that the “North/South divide” is a major structural defect of the whole system, affecting every single country, including their own, even if for the time being in a less extreme form than the so-called “Third World”. Nevertheless, the tendency in question is far from reassuring even for the capitalistically most advanced countries. As an illustration we may add here to the earlier quoted US figure of the income of one percent outstripping that of forty percent the alarming rise in child poverty in Britain: in the last two decades, according to the most recent statistics, the number of children living below the poverty line has multiplied *threefold* in the United Kingdom, and continues to increase every year.

The difficulty for us is that viewing these matters in a *short-term* perspective, as the dominant cultural and political organs necessarily portray them, carries with it the temptation to follow “the line of least resistance”, leading to no significant change. The argument associated with this way of assessing the issues at stake is that “the problems worked themselves out in the past; they are bound to do so also in the future”. Nothing could be more fallacious than this line of reasoning, even if it is most convenient to the beneficiaries of the *status quo* who cannot face up to the explosive contradictions of our predicament on the longer run. Yet, as concerned scientists of the ecological movement keep reminding us: the “longer run” is by no means that long by now, since the clouds of an environmental catastrophe are visibly getting darker on our horizon. Shutting our eyes offers no solutions. Nor should we allow ourselves to be deceived by the illusion that the danger of devastating military collisions belongs irretrievably to the past, thanks to the good offices of the “New World Order”. The perils in this respect are as great as ever, if not greater, in that not even a single one of the underlying contradictions and antagonisms has been resolved through the implosion of the Soviet system. The recently announced abandonment of even the fragile and limited arms agreements of the past, and the adventurist pursuit of the nightmare project of “the son of star wars”, with the lamest possible justification of installing such weaponry “against rogue states”, represent a stark reminder in this respect.

For a very long time we were expected to believe that all our problems will be happily solved through socially neutral “development” and “modernization”. Technology was supposed to overcome by itself all conceivable obstacles and difficulties. This was at best an illusion imposed on all those who, for want of any outlet for their own active role in decision making, went on hoping that major improvements in their conditions of existence will be realized in the promised way. They had to find out by bitter experience that the technological panacea was a self-serving evasion of the contradictions by those who held the levers of social control. The “green revolution” in agriculture was supposed to resolve once and for all the world problem of famine and malnutrition. Instead, it created monster-corporations like “Monsanto”, entrenching their power all over the world in such a way that major grass-root action is required in order to eradicate it. Yet the ideology of strictly technological remedies continues to be propagandized to the present despite all the failures. Recently some heads of governments, including the British, started to preach sermons about the coming “*green industrial revolution*”, whatever that might mean. What is clear, nevertheless, is that this new-fangled technological panacea is intended, again, as a way to run away from the ineradicable social and political dimension of the ever-intensifying environmental dangers.

Thus it is no exaggeration to say that in our time the interests of those who cannot even imagine an alternative to the short-term perspective of the given order, and to the fanciful projection of strictly technological correctives compatible with it, directly collide with the interest of human survival itself. In the past the magic term for judging the health of our social system was “*growth*”, and still today it remains the framework in which solutions must be envisaged. What is evaded by the unqualified praise of “*growth*” is precisely the questions of *what kind of growth* and *to what end*? Especially since the reality of unqualified growth under our conditions of social metabolic reproduction happens to be *extreme wastefulness* and heaping up problems for future generations to face, as they must one day deal with the consequences of nuclear power – peaceful and military alike – for instance. The cousin of “*growth*”: the concept of “*development*” must be also subjected to the same kind of critical scrutiny. Once upon a time it was embraced without hesitation by virtually everybody, and major institutional resources were mobilized in the service of spreading the gospel of US type “*modernization and development*” in the so-called “underdeveloped world”. It took some time before it could be realized that there was something fatefully defective about the recommended model. For if the US model – whereby *4 percent* of the world population wastes *25 percent* of world energy and strategic material resources, and pollutes the world by the same *25 percent* – is followed everywhere else, we would be all suffocated in no time at all. This is why for us it became necessary to qualify all future development as *sustainable development*, in order to fill the concept with actually feasible and socially desirable content.

3.

The great challenge of sustainable development which we now have to face cannot be properly addressed without removing the paralizing constraints of the *adversarial* character of our social reproduction process. This is why the question of *substantive equality* cannot be avoided in our time, in contrast to the past. For *sustainability* means being really *in control* of the vital social, economic and cultural processes through which human beings not merely survive but can also find fulfilment, in accordance with the designs which they set themselves, instead of being at the mercy of unpredictable natural forces and quasi-natural socioeconomic determinations. Our existing social order is built on the structural antagonism between capital and labour, and therefore it requires the exercise of *external control* over all recalcitrant forces. *Adversariality* is the necessary concomitant of such a system, no matter how much waste of human and economic resources must be paid for its maintenance. Yet, the imperative for eliminating waste has clearly surfaced on our horizon, as a major requirement of *sustainable* development. For “economy” on the longer run must go hand in hand with rational and humanly meaningful *economizing*, as befits the core of its concept. But the meaningfully economizing way of regulating our social metabolic reproduction process, on the basis of *internal/self-directed*, as opposed to the now prevailing *external/top-down* control, is radically incompatible with *structural inequality and adversariality*. The Soviet type system had its own form of adversariality which ultimately resulted in its implosion. But no one should nourish the illusion that our type of capital system is immune to such contradictions, just because for the time being it can manage wastefulness and inequality in a more effective way.

In our societies the structurally entrenched and safeguarded determinations of material inequality are greatly reinforced by the dominant *culture of inequality*, mentioned earlier, through which the individuals *internalize* their “station in society”, more or less consensually resigning themselves to their predicament of subordination to those who make the decisions over their life-activity. This culture was constituted parallel to the formation of capital’s new structures of inequality, on the iniquitous foundations inherited from the past. There was a *reciprocal interaction* between the material reproductive structures and the cultural dimension, creating a vicious circle which trapped the overwhelming majority of individuals in their strictly restrained domain of action. If we now envisage a qualitative change for the future, as we must, the vital role of cultural processes cannot be overstated. For there can be no break out from the now dominant vicious circle, unless we succeed in operating the same kind of interaction – but this time in a positive emancipatory direction – which characterized social development in the past. From the present, in the longer run quite untenable, mode of social reproduction process to one no longer burdened with the destructive tendencies of the adversarial confrontations of our time, no instant change can be envisaged. Success will require the constitution of a *culture of substantive equality*, with the active involvement of all, and the *awareness* of one’s own share of *responsibility* implicit in the operation of such – non-adversarial – mode of decision making.

Understandably, in the creation of the long-established culture of substantive inequality even the greatest and most enlightened thinkers of the bourgeoisie in the ascendant, as children of their time and station, were implicated. Let me illustrate this point with Goethe's lifelong struggle with the meaning of the Faust legend, intended to represent humanity's quest for realizing its destiny. As we know, according to the pact of the restless Faust with the devil, he is bound to lose his wager (and his soul) the moment he finds fulfilment and satisfaction in life. And this is how the fateful moment is greeted by Faust:

Such busy, teeming throngs I long to see,
Standing on freedom's soil, a people free.
Then to the moment could I say:
Linger you now, you are so fair!
Now records of my earthly day
No flight of aeons can impair –
Foreknowledge comes, and fills me with such bliss,
I take my joy, my highest moment this.

However, with supreme irony Goethe shows that Faust's great excitement is misplaced. For what he greets (when blinded by Sorge) as the great work for conquering land from the swamps, in fulfilment of his own plan, is in reality the noise made by the lemures digging his grave. And only celestial intervention can, in the end, save Faust, rescuing his soul from the clutches of the devil. The greatness of Goethe is evident in the way he also indicates why Faust's quest must end in irony and insoluble ambiguity, even if Goethe cannot distance himself from the world view of his hero, trapped by the conception of "enlightened inequality". This is the summation of the Faustian vision:

*Only the master's word gives action weight,
And what I framed in thought I will fulfil.
Ho, you my people, quickly come from rest:
Let the world see the fruit of bold behest.
Man all the tools, spade, shovel, as is due,
The work marked out must straight be carried through.
Quick diligence, firm discipline,
With these the noblest heights we win.
To end the greatest work designed,
A thousand hands need but one mind.*

Clearly, the destination of the overwhelming majority of humankind to the role of "*hands*", asked to "*man all the tools*", in the service of "*one mind*", and obeying "*the master's words*" with "*quick diligence and discipline*", is quite untenable in the longer run, no matter how closely it resembles the now dominant actual state of affairs. How could we consider the human beings confined to such role to be "*Standing on freedom's soil, a people free*"? The instructions given by Faust to the

Overseer as to the way to control the workers, faithfully realistic though for our predicament today they are, reflect the same, untenable, spirit:

Use every means, and strive
To get more workers, shift on shift enrol,
With comforts spur them on, and good control.
Pay them, cajole them, use a press-gang drive,
A fresh report you'll bring me daily, showing
How my projected locks and dykes are growing.

And what meaning can we give to Faust's "great plan on behalf of humanity" when capital's social order is radically incompatible with the *comprehensive planning* without which the very survival of humanity cannot be secured? As Goethe's Mephistopheles describes the prospects ahead of us with brutal realism:

*What matters our creative endless toil,
When, at a snatch, oblivion ends the coil?*

"A thousand hands" in the service of "one mind" obviously cannot offer us any solution. Nor can the mystical Chorus of Angels in the last scene of Goethe's *Faust* counter the Mephistophelian threat of *oblivion* looming at the end of the road.¹⁰

In a somewhat more conflict-torn age Balzac, in one of his great novellas: *Melmoth reconciled*, takes up the Faust theme, rescuing in a very different way Melmoth/Faust – who, thanks to his pact with the devil, enjoys unlimited wealth throughout his life. There is no need for divine intervention in his case. On the contrary, the solution is offered with extreme irony and sarcasm. For Melmoth cleverly saves his own soul – when he feels death approaching and wants to get out of his pact with the devil – by making a deal with another man, Castanier, in trouble for embezzlement, exchanging his imperilled soul with the latter, who doesn't hesitate to enter the deal that confers upon him unlimited wealth. And Castanier's words, when he in turn hits on the idea of how he is to get out of ultimate trouble, by obtaining still another soul in exchange for his own devil-plighted soul, sum up in a striking way Balzac's sarcasm which brings up-to-date Thomas Münzer's prophetic diagnosis of all-encroaching alienation. Castanier goes to the Stock Exchange, absolutely convinced he will succeed in finding someone whose soul he can obtain in exchange for his own, by saying that on the Stock Exchange "*even the Holy Spirit has its quotation*" (*Il Banco di Santo Spirito* of the Vatican) in the list of the great banks.¹¹

¹⁰ From Part Two, Act 5, of Goethe's *Faust*. English translation by Philip Wayne, Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1959. English quotations are taken from pages 267-270 of this volume.

¹¹ The direct inspiration for Balzac's novella was a long tale by an Irish Anglican clergy, the descendant of a French Huguenot priest who fled France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. This work, by Charles Robert Maturin: the curate of St. Peter's, Dublin, entitled *Melmoth the Wanderer*, was first published in Dublin in 1820, and immediately translated into French. (Recent

However, it is enough to follow even for a few days the threatening disturbances on our Stock Exchanges in order to realize that Melmoth's solution is not more realistic today than Goethe's celestial intervention. Our historical challenge for securing the conditions of sustainable development must be solved in a very different way.

Extricating ourselves from the culture of substantive inequality and progressively replacing it with a viable alternative is the road we need to follow.

edition by The Folio Society, London, 1993, pp. xvii.+ 506, with an Introduction by Virendra P. Varma.) The big difference is that while Maturin's wandering Melmoth in the end cannot escape hell, Balzac's very different way of approaching the Faust legend, with devastating irony and sarcasm, transfers the story on a radically different plane, putting into relief a vital determination of our social order.