

Development and Environment

Reflections on a Subject Area of the Stockholm Conference
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"Eco-doom"

All major civilizations have produced their specific nightmares concerning the ultimate destiny of the human species and its habitat. In accordance with their respective approaches to life, apocalyptic visionaries have conceived of doomsday in terms of cosmic disasters, moral decay, biological occurrences or natural catastrophes. It is only logical that a sprawling universal civilization which has committed itself to the "Promethean path of unceasing making"¹ should visualize its eventual end — which, of course, is understood as being the end of everything — as a man-made happening. Eco-doom, when it comes, will be the result, in the final analysis, of unrestrained human acquisitiveness² inducing the "homo faber" to attack, subdue, conquer, exploit his environment for the sake of producing ever-growing quantities of appropriable objects. Demands for such objects are presently outgrowing supplies on a world-wide scale, due to rising expectations on the one hand and expanding populations on the other. Quantitative economy's answer to this would be growth, accelerated growth, more growth. At this point the modern doomsday step in: There are, according to them, insurmountable limits to growth³, "environmental barriers" in the face of which the cherished process of economic swelling will sooner or later come to a crunching halt. The carrying capacity of the earth, i.e. the capacity of the global environment to yield resources and to absorb waste, is finite, and signs of its beginning to become exhausted are already in sight. Instead of being ushered in by terrifying portents in the skies, savage-looking sea monsters creeping ashore or violent downpours of blood or other unsavoury substances, as earlier visions would have it, modern man's doomsday is foreshadowed by measurable air pollution, accumulations of pesticides in living organisms, growing deposits of non-recyclable waste, depleted fish resources, dying rivers, destroyed ecosystems. "Spaceship Earth" being ultimately one and indivisible, these symptoms, even when occurring locally, point to the imminence of global breakdown of man's biosphere. To save the world from this final catastrophe the only imaginable remedies would be the immediate reduction of population growth to zero and the imposition of radical checks on economic expansion⁴.

This brief outline may suffice to indicate the direction of the current intellectual endeavours to provide the ascendent economic world culture with a congenial eschatology. The concept is no doubt amenable to refinement through mathematical modelling and computerization (as has already been tried by the Systems Dynamics Group MIT). After all, mere doom guesswork would hardly satisfy the spirit of the age.

U.N.C.H.E.

The organizers of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Mr. Maurice Strong and the Preparatory Committee, had of course no intention to make the Stockholm meeting a kind of church-council to endorse or refute eschatological accretions to the

¹ Morris, Charles B., *Paths of Life*, New York 1956, pp. 85 sq.

² Tawney, R. H., *The Acquisitive Society*, New York, 1970, p. 29.

³ *Limits to Growth*, Potomac Associates for the Club of Rome, March 1972.

⁴ *Blueprint for Survival*, in: *The Ecologist*, January 3, 1972.

economistic creed. The proposition of physical limitations which may define the "carrying capacity" of our planet with regard to population, food production, natural resource use and "material" economic development was not to be voted upon by the representatives of 114 governments. What remained for them were rather a number of "environmental concerns" stemming from the generally accepted fact that man has acquired, "through the accelerating advancement of science and technology, the power to transform his surroundings in countless ways and on an unheard-of scale. Used wisely, this power can bring to all peoples the benefits of development and the opportunity to enhance the quality of life. Wrongly or heedlessly applied, the same power can do incalculable harm to the human environment"⁵.

What is wise and what heedless, science and technology will find out⁶, and rational planning will be "our essential tool"⁷ to reconcile eventual conflicts between quantitative economy and environmental requirements. Within this framework Promethean man may continue "constantly to sum up experience and go on discovering, inventing, creating and advancing"⁸. This, it seems, does not actually rule out the idea of eco-doom, it rather means a shift in emphasis: There are no insurmountable environmental barriers towards which growth, development, progress in their present conceptual shape are inevitably heading; instead environment appears as an object of technological management, and doomsday — if it comes — will be a consequence of gross environmental mismanagement, not a logical outcome of the working of the cherished system. If properly managed, the earth does not pose limits to growth! Mr. Sicco Mansholt, of the Commission of the European Communities, in his address to the plenary session of the Conference on June 8, 1972 disagreed with this philosophy and asked for political decisions to control economic growth and population expansion in a — as he said — finite world; whilst, on the other hand, his presidential colleague, Mr. Robert McNamara, of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, speaking on the same day, strongly supported the managerial approach and discarded all doom prophecies as the work of "alarmists", being at the best naive, and using imperfect mathematical models based on assumptions of more than doubtful validity⁹.

The latter line of thinking carried the day: Couched in the liturgical language of the United Nations and enriched by developmental ("...adequate earnings for primary commodities and raw material are essential to environmental management"¹⁰) and Maoist ("The struggle of the peoples of all countries against pollution should be supported"¹¹) accretions, the Conference "proclaimed" and "stated the common conviction" that indefinite growth could go on in case we only "shape our actions throughout the world with a more prudent care for their environmental consequences"¹². *Roma locuta?*

Founex Report

To the developing countries the new environmental preoccupations in the North which gained momentum almost from day to day during the approximately five years of preparatory work for the Stockholm Conference appeared at first sight as "yet another rich man's fad"¹³. At second sight they aroused alarm. Especially the "limits to growth" variety of environmentalism with its inherent advocacy of "stable state" societies must have come as a shock to the growth-oriented elites. For more than twenty years industrialized countries

⁵ Draft Declaration on the Human Environment, para 2 (Preamble); UN. Doc. A/CONF. 48/4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, para 15 (Principles).

⁷ *Ibid.*, para 11 (Principles).

⁸ *Ibid.*, para 2 (Preamble).

⁹ Comp. the interesting reviews of the two speeches entitled "We need a Bigger Earth", in: "Stockholm Conference Eco.", June 9, 1972.

¹⁰ Final text of Declaration, para 10 (Principles).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, para 6 (Principles).

¹² *Ibid.*, para 6 (Preamble).

¹³ Barbara Ward, *The End of an Epoch*, in: *The Economist*, May 27, 1972.

and their international organizations had shown an almost missionary zeal in propagating the gospel of economic growth in the Third World, in preaching achievement orientation and profit motivation, in promoting cultural change and innovational attitudes, in brief: in gearing so-called traditional societies to the application of the latest findings of science and technology for development and to the expansion of production as the absolute priority goal¹⁴. Now all this should have been wrong? It is no wonder that the message met with incredulity and suspicion in areas beyond the reach of Northern TV networks. How it was interpreted is evidenced by the statement of the Brazilian delegate to the Founex Panel Meeting in June 1971 saying that it seemed to him that three basic measures were being proposed: "(1) explicitly, the control of population growth in underdeveloped countries; (2) implicitly, a ceiling on the development of underdeveloped countries; and (3) explicitly, a reduction of the emission of major pollutants by developed countries."¹⁵ That most of the doom prophets in the industrialized countries had laid stress on massive transfers of resources to the Third World to usher in a state of world-wide 'semi-development' was probably not adequately advertised¹⁶. Anyhow, the authors of the Founex Report on Development and Environment¹⁷ did not waste time on considering the prospect that development might actually be taking place in a world of limited carrying capacity, with definite and not all too remote barriers to growth, where an eventual eco-doom would perhaps first exterminate the weakest sections of the species, and not those who are primarily responsible for its occurrence. The challenging question of whether the concept of a finite Earth may require rethinking with regard to the prevailing economic models of growth-based development was thus not touched upon. It is, after all, the eventual impact of "Northern" environmentalism and ensuing environmental policies on the position of developing countries in the world economic system which worries the leaders of the Third World, not the philosophy as such.

Subject Area V

At Stockholm the Subject Area V: "Development and Environment" appeared as item 14 on the agenda of the Plenary Session; its discussion with a view to including recommendations in this domain in the general Action Plan was allotted to the Second Committee. The Committee based its deliberations on the report submitted by the Secretary General¹⁸, especially on recommendations 30 to 40 thereof. Recommendations 30, 35 and 37 were, however, not discussed since they were deemed to contain arguments instead of proposals for action, and would therefore not be relevant to the Action Plan. The remaining recommendations were grouped as follows: 31 — Regional Cooperation; 32 to 34 — International Trade; 36 — International Distribution of Industry; 37–39 International Financing for Environmental Action; 40 — International Development Strategy. The Committee discussed these items on June 6th and 7th, 1972 and again on June 12th when its draft report to the Plenary Session was adopted. The Plenary Session considered the Committee Report on June 13th and 14th, 1972.

It appeared from the very beginning of the Conference that the issues raised by the emergence of environmental concerns in a world already seized by the idea of economic and social development in the less developed areas of the globe could in no way be confined to the consideration of one particular subject area only. Far beyond its formal location on the agenda "development and environment" became in fact an all-pervasive theme of the Stockholm Conference, dominating, or at least overshadowing, the work of all the Committees as well as that of the Plenary Session and the Declaration Working

¹⁴ See e.g. for agriculture: Regional Report of the Asian Agricultural Survey of the Asian Development Bank, 1968.

¹⁵ See note 13 *supra*.

¹⁶ Johnson, Brian, in: Population and Environment, Bulletin of the Institute of Development Studies (Sussex), Vol. 4 no. 1, p. 23.

¹⁷ UN Document GE 71–13738.

¹⁸ UN Document A/CONF. 48/10.

Group. No single observer (as e.g. the present author) can therefore give a comprehensive picture of the overall confrontation which occurred between North and South, not, however, without a number of criss-cross alliances in certain respects, at this first international meeting dedicated to environmental problems. Some signals had already become apparent at the UNCTAD in Santiago, but UNCHE in Stockholm brought the volley of new problems out into the open. To draw up a full check-list of these, however, scholars and politicians will most probably have to wait until the proceedings of the Conference become available. In a summarizing way it can at present safely be stated that, as the Conference did not indulge in discussing doomsday prophecies and ensuing propositions for system changes, but concentrated on environmental management as a means to see quantitative economy through, also the LDC's — as forecast by the Founex Report — restricted their moves to this more pedestrian domain.

LDC's concerns

Their primary concern was apparently to have the adverse effects on the human environment resulting from poverty recognized by the international community as being of no lesser significance for mankind's survival than those stemming from affluence-yielding production processes, though they may be of a different nature: Teeming billions scrambling for subsistence can do at least as much harm to the planet's natural resources and life support systems as booming industries and unrestrained consumers. Implicitly this argument seems to suggest a middle course for humanity identical with, or close to, Paul Ehrlich's "world-wide semi-development", but to say so would certainly have been too bold for Stockholm. The acceptable and accepted formula reads: "In the developing countries most of the environmental problems are caused by under-development . . . In the industrialized countries, environmental problems are generally related to industrialization and technological development."¹⁹ This sounds as if development, in its essence, means a process of gradual change from one set of environmental problems to another, presumably quite a new way of looking at it! Anyhow, the placing of poverty and affluence (manifested by pollution) in the same category of menaces to man's biosphere and the quality of life dependent thereon has its logic, even if no proper conclusions are being derived from this premise.

As a second major concern of the LDC's appeared the economic and financial aspects of environmentalism. Their delegates were fairly unanimous in treating the threats to the world ecological system stemming from production and affluence as the rich nations' "external diseconomies" which the latter should be made to internalize. The "polluter-must-pay" principle, advocated also by the OECD and the Federal Republic of Germany, if applied in this context, pushes the liability for environmental damages of this type on, first from mankind as a whole to the so-called rich nations, then from the collectivity of rich nations to individual national economies, further inside national economies to particular industries and finally, if identification is possible, to this or that industrial plant, giving the whole procedure a rather telescopic appearance. Somewhere along the line the telescope may get jammed, and the principle stops operating. Who is after all responsible for the doubling of mercury in some of the open seas which makes tuna meat unfit for American consumption? Maybe rich nations, but there most probably it ends. But even if the whole thing could be traced back to one individual polluter, and this gentleman could be compelled to dispose of his waste mercury in a more sophisticated way, would he not charge the cost for the additional technology required to the price of the goods he produces which are perhaps being purchased by developing countries? There are many more ways in which environmental measures of the industrialized countries may affect financial and economic interests of the LDC's which have been discussed before and at the Stockholm Conference and will certainly continue to be discussed thereafter. We should therefore not go into details here. If there really is "One Earth

¹⁹ Final text of Declaration, para 4 (Principles).

Only" ²⁰ as the environmentalist motto runs, the cost of keeping it intact and inhabitable for "myriads and myriads of years... with the promise of progress on a linear time scale" ²¹ by means of proper environmental management — the Stockholm charm against doom — will have to be distributed among those who can pay according to principles which are yet to be discovered.

In the third place, environmental management appeared and appears to LDC's as a potential rival priority to development aid as given by the developed countries. Many Asian, African and Latin American delegates at Stockholm voiced the fear that the new financial requirements of industrialized nations for environmental measures might lead to a reduction in aid flows from these to the Third World. In view of the tremendous popularity which environmental concerns have nowadays gained in Europe and North America, as also in view of a growing indifference toward LDC problems, this fear is not unfounded. National governments will most probably be able to obtain more popular support for even rather stringent environmental policies during the years to come than for their development commitments abroad. It seems, therefore, not surprising that amendments to certain draft recommendations were introduced in the Committees of the Stockholm Conference such as the Indian amendment to recommendation V/40 which reads: "It should further be ensured that the preoccupation of developed countries with their own environmental problems does not affect the flow of assistance to developing countries and this flow is adequate to meet the additional environmental requirements of such countries." Quite a number of other apprehensions of LDC's resulting from the present environmentalism of the industrialized world could be mentioned (operation of environmental product standards as trade barriers; environmental strings attached to financial aid; higher prices for industrial goods produced under environmental restrictions, etc.), but it may be more conducive to a general survey to add also some remarks about their hopes and expectations as they appeared at Stockholm.

Some Hopes

There is first of all the idea that, if threats to the world ecosystem (or global environment) are avowedly an international concern and poverty is avowedly one such threat, the claim of the LDC's for international aid to remove poverty becomes reinforced; environmentalism provides at least an additional justification. Since the existing rich nations are somehow or other responsible for the prevailing poverty in the Third World primary liability with regard to its adverse effects on the earthly biosphere rests with them. Once this principle is established, various aspects of poverty (housing, diseases, unhygienic conditions, illiteracy) can be shown in their environmental relevance — or, perhaps, be "environmentalized" — and presented as a case for international environment action. Pakistan did so in a fervent bid to bring illiteracy within the purview of international environmental policies (rec. V/31, subpara 10); India tried it with regard to funds for housing (rec. I/A), but could only enlist the support of other LDC's. On the whole, the environmental approach to poverty, if properly elaborated holds out the promise of becoming more convincing than conventional humanitarian and/or eudaimonistic lines of thinking, or even the philosophies of alleged enlightened self-interest revolving around the nightmare of growing revolutionary potential on the one hand and the hope for future markets for export goods on the other. What "environmentalization" could perhaps achieve in this respect can, of course, not be elaborated here.

Next to the prospects for Third World poverty in the content of environmentalism it is the eventual impact of environmental concerns on the international distribution of industries which has aroused some positive expectations among LDC's: — They may in this respect actually have comparative advantages, thanks to the still largely unexploited carrying capacity of their local environments with regard to the absorption of polluting wastes

²⁰ Some delegates from LDC's openly doubted this during the Plenary Session on June 12, 1972.

²¹ Bury, J. B., *The Idea of Progress*, 1932, new ed.: New York 1955.

from industrial production. Such capacity becoming scarce in industrialized countries and therefore subjected to costly technological management, may be available at lesser cost in some LDC's. Hence it has been proposed that "governments of the developing countries consider fully the new opportunities which may be offered to them to establish industries and/or expand existing industries" in which they may have the aforesaid advantages (rec. V/36). The problem of possible relocation of industries due to environmental factors is a very challenging one and deserves serious study by economists, ecologists and technologists; the simplistic formula of "pollution havens" in the Third World which are to be forestalled seems to be utterly inadequate.

Another optimistic aspect for LDC's has apparently been found in the fact that some natural products supplied by them could be used, instead of certain synthetics, in advanced industrial production with less polluting effects on the environment. Recommendations which aim at the reduction of the trade in, and processing of, synthetics and encouragement of their replacement by natural produces have been passed at the Stockholm Conference.

Finally, technical assistance and financial aid for the introduction of "technologies for protecting and improving the environment" in LDC's is being expected (rec. V/39; Declaration preamble para 7). Since hardly any environmental technology is environmental only, this could yield more general benefits, too.

Perspectives

The Declaration on the Human Environment passed at Stockholm, and the principles laid down there in have, of course, no legally binding character, but they will certainly serve as a political platform for the vindication of a variety of national interests in the international community. People will have to reckon with "environment" from now onwards also as a diplomatic weapon. Regarding the Action Plan it remains to be seen what the General Assembly of the United Nations will do about the recommendations contained therein. The problems of development and environment will crop up at Lake Success again in Autumn this year. Perhaps some of the statements made in this essay will then become obsolete. Nevertheless the development/environment overlap of which we have been talking here has certainly come to stay. In accordance with the general mood prevailing at Stockholm the LDC's represented there have marshalled their apprehensions and expectations around the more optimistic concept of unlimited possibilities of economic expansion, safeguarded by efficient worldwide environment management, not around the eschatological concept of definite limits to growth which are said to be already so close that there is very little time left to re-organize mankind for survival. Notwithstanding this official line of thinking scholars engaged in development/environment studies should not hesitate to consider the second alternative, too. After all, Stockholm has not furnished any proof to the effect that the doom prophets are in the wrong.