EGALITARIAN PERSPECTIVES ON SUSTAINABILITY

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Summary

Environmental sustainability intersects with equity in many ways and usually these objectives are mutually supportive – achievements in advancing one may help to obtaining the other. A greater sense of economic and physical security will open the possibility of greater environmental concern. The sustainable use of resources enhances long-term employment opportunities. Improved environmental justice removes politically easy ways to avoid expensive anti-pollution technologies. Poor nations and poor regions in rich nations are prone to poor resource and environmental decision-making.

1. Introduction

The human quests for equity and sustainability are bound up with each other in many ways. In combination, these two efforts capture the core of the long-term prospects of the human species. Equity involves a struggle for social fairness regarding the division of economic and social output -- and until recently there has been a tendency, albeit an uneven tendency, to greater equity associated with expanding per capita economic output. Sustainability is a goal wherein a society seeks to maintain in the long term both economic output and the environment which sustains both the economy and life.

Advocacy of sustainability initiatives sometimes presumes that ultimately there are material limits to human economic activities and, as well, to total human population. Thus there is some tension between these two objectives; however, there are also a number of mutual supports.

Some analysts suggest that optimal levels of sustainable economic activity have already been reached or are within sight, others are more hopeful. For example, von Weisäcker, Lovins, and Lovins argue that "factor four" is possible: that two times present global GDP can be produced with roughly half the present extractive activities and environmental impacts. Suffice it to say that it is probable that more could be done to expand the global economic "pie" without diminishing the prospects for sustainability. Clearly, more could be done as well to improve human lives without further expanding global economic output. Some environmental advocates would disagree with the former assertion and many business people and conventional economists with the latter. It remains the case nonetheless that, in principle, quality of life need not involve overall material advance and social re-distribution could improve without expanding total economic activity. More surprisingly, improvements in equity can help to support improvements in sustainability and vice versa. One need not deny the likelihood of tensions between the two in some circumstances to acknowledge this reality.

Politically, the view that sustainability and equity are often mutually supportive runs counter to the frequent assertion that advocates of environmental protection, including sustainability, are inclined to elitism. These assertions arise in the first instance from the fact that sustainability advocates are primarily concerned with the protection of nature, the rights of future generations, and "non-dollar" values such as human health and ecosystem integrity. Moreover, sometimes improving sustainability imposes current economic costs by disallowing imprudent fish and forest extractions, mandating significant pollution abatement expenditures, and seeking protection of unique remnants of nature and wild ecosystems. Such initiatives are from a "hard-nosed" perspective "impractical" – seemingly at least at odds with the uninhibited pursuit of maximum short-term economic output. Thus, in seeking to restrain the baser impulses and indifference of investors sustainability advocates are vulnerable to assertions that they are indifferent to human material needs and indifferent to the opportunities for the less well off implicit within maximum economic expansion.

However, maximum economic expansion is frequently unstable and, if achieved without a consideration of sustainability concerns, may be without enduring value. Moreover, much contemporary economic expansion would seem as likely to come at the expense of the poor as to redound to their benefit. Critics of sustainability seem to assume that having any doubts about the value of worldly goods for anyone in any circumstance, or even having doubts about total energy and materials use, is somehow the same as having doubts about meeting the needs of the poor. Caring about nonhumans is equated with not caring about humans. On the contrary, however, there are a number of indications that these assertions are wrong. To begin with, the conclusion that the total material pie is limited will render distributional concerns more, not less, important. In the 1970s, some neo-Malthusian environmentalists, such as Garrett Hardin, advocated protecting the well-being of the wealthy in a stringent future, but most contemporary sustainability advocates favor imposing future restraints, whatever they may prove to

be, on those most able to bear them. In other words, placing a high value on other species and future human generations is more a matter of going beyond a deep concern for less well off humans, than a replacement for it.

As well, to assert that monetary values are not the only values is not at all to reject monetary values, or even necessarily to lessen one's appreciation of the importance of economic and commercial success. Indeed, it is widely recognized that environmental values, including sustainability values, arise and endure primarily in prosperous and secure economic settings. Sustainability concerns can only exist if one is reasonably secure regarding the basic comfort of oneself and one's family. The implications of this reality are significant -- a politics of sustainability thus requires some minimum of societal economic success and some minimum of fairness in the distribution of shares in that success. Sustainability requires equity more than it threatens it.

Historically, the environmental movement itself arose in times and places of considerable prosperity. As Samuel Hays, the noted U. S. environmental historian put it: "Evolving environmental values were closely associated with rising standards of living and education . . . But with rising incomes something beyond necessities and conveniences now lay within the reach of many; they may be called amenities . . . Environmental quality was an integral part of this new search for a higher standard of living." Environmental and sustainability initiatives, then, seek to extend, preserve and diversify material comforts and to avoid the worst unintended environmental consequences associated with achieving human economic well-being. In general, limiting the current use of material and energy resources and restraining impositions on nature improves future material prospects rather than limiting them. The goal is better energy and material productivity, economic adaptation rather than restraint.

Thus, it is altogether inappropriate to see the world as divided between "practical" persons who advance economic growth and sustainability advocates who would restrain opportunity. In the end, the poor, not the rich, bear virtually the whole burden of sustainability failures. It is the poor who, out of economic necessity, live on whatever farmland is depleted. It is the less advantaged who will not eat fish if fish stocks decline, even if it is they who catch the fish -- markets will assure that outcome. When mines and forests are depleted, it is not the wealthy that will be unable to find work, or own an unmarketable home in an economically decimated resource community. Resource investors will have long since amortized their investments and transferred their yields to a distant community or nation. Sustainability is, thus, practical and inherently more mindful of the needs of the less well off -- perhaps an inability to think past weekly output and quarterly balance sheets is the more impractical.

2. Sustainability and Equity Linkages

Sustainability is not a zero sum game, but it does entail an enormous challenge to humankind. Sustainable economics seeks an optimum level of well-being for the overwhelming majority of humans for the long-term without incurring an unacceptable price in terms of overexploitation of resources or impositions upon the well-being of other species and future human generations. Many aspects of this challenge are already part and parcel of everyday environmental politics and policy. These aspects can be

broadly grouped under five major headings: 1) social class and sustainability, including the important sub-topic of employment security and sustainability; 2) North-South sustainability and equity issues; 3) the linkages with regional inequities within both rich and poor nations; 4) environmental justice issues; and 5) gender and sustainability. These topics will be considered separately here prior to drawing conclusions that integrate these considerations into our broader discussion.

2.1 Social Class and Sustainability

Social class is, of course, related in complex ways to such sociological variables as prestige, income, life chances, education, status, and power. In sum, these variables describe and define any society's social stratification system and its pattern of socio-economic distribution. Societies vary enormously in terms of the degree of, and basis for, distribution of society's economic and social rewards. Few societies have been as equitable as some of us might imagine they could or should be. Everything, including even the most basic of the earth's resources -- air, water, land and visual (and actual) access to nature -- are inequitably distributed in most, if not all, human societies.

As we have seen, it is also the case that both sustainability failures have differential effects socially, but so too can policies that seek to avoid those failures. As was seen in the 1970s, when energy prices rise, so too do food prices, affecting in both cases the poor much more seriously than the rich. Rising costs for the direct use of energy affects the poor and the middle class more than the wealthy because the latter spend a lower percentage of their income on energy (as they do on food). This is one reason why those who advocate carbon taxes as a solution to climate warming should also seek ways to offset negative equity effects of this pro-sustainability policy initiative (by reducing sales taxes or income taxes on lower and middle incomes, for example).

Nonetheless there are many reasons why the poor as much as the rich should favor environmental protection. Though no systematic global study has been conducted there is evidence that individuals and groups ranking lower within social stratification systems are more likely to experience potentially harmful environmental exposures. Those who suffered and died from exposures at Bhopal, probably the worst single release of toxic chemicals in terms of immediate health effects, were for the most part poor squatters. In general, those who live nearer to industrial sites or highways or what are called LULUs (*locally unwanted land uses* such as hazardous waste treatment facilities, municipal solid waste disposal sites or oil refineries) are on average less well off than those who do not. It is often not that such facilities are consciously placed among the poor as land values near such facilities are lower and are occupied by those for whom the cost differential is crucial. This situation is common within both rich and poor nations.

Studies of air pollution distribution patterns in selected North American cities suggest a parallel pattern. Urban air quality has been shown to be distributed by income in New York City, Chicago, St. Louis, Washington, D. C., and Hamilton, Ontario. In some cases there are deep historical residency patterns lying beneath this statistic (whereby better housing for the wealthy was constructed nearer to seasides or on higher, more windblown, ground). One must assume that it also results from patterns that dictate that

the less well off live nearer to transportation corridors and to heavy industries. Over and above these patterns, the well off can more frequently escape the confines of urban areas altogether.

Occupational exposures to environmental hazards are also patterned in class terms, but perhaps in a somewhat more complex way. The poorest workers in industrial societies are not always the employees most exposed to hazardous industrial chemicals. The lowest paid are frequently working in the retail, not the industrial, sector and even within the industrial sector some of the greatest exposures to toxics are in the chemical industry, mining and smelting, in proximity to coke ovens in the steel industry and perhaps in the plastics industry or in dry cleaning plants. In most cases here wages are within the medium range of industrial work and well above such sectors as retail. Some analysts have even suggested that those exposed are paid a wage premium for risk. If this is so, it is not so systematic as has been suggested because other studies indicate that beauticians, bartenders and the aforementioned dry cleaning workers have relatively high exposures to toxics and are not well paid. The greatest correlation between low wages and high occupational exposures to hazardous chemicals may be among migrant agricultural workers.

In many poorer nations access to clean drinking water correlates with social position and income. This may be less true in wealthy nations where the only distributional pattern of poor quality drinking water might be rural versus urban (with the greatest problems in rural areas where pesticides or landfill sites have contaminated drinking water). Again, there are no systematic studies for either poor nations or rich. In poor nations, however, problems associated with drinking water quality and quantity are widespread and intense and it is clear that the well off can for the most part buy their way out of the problem.

Two other dimensions of the relationship between social class and sustainability will also be discussed here. They are both important by way of offsetting some of the obvious tensions that sometimes exist, perhaps most visibly in wealthier nations, between less advantaged citizens and environmental activists, and between unionized industrial workers and environmental organizations. Both forms of tension exist despite the finding of opinion polling data that pro-environmental attitudes are well distributed both by income and between unionized and non-unionized citizens.

Labor-environmentalist tensions arise in circumstances where livelihoods are directly or indirectly challenged (or perceived to be challenged) by environmental protection initiatives, as in the case of forest workers or other extractive or polluting industries. Such tensions can result in a distorted political struggle. Distorted because, in many cases, pro-environmental initiatives will generate at least as many jobs as they might cost, but the potential new jobs have no incumbents to defend them. This reality should be widely understood, especially in an era when employment security is already severely challenged by globalization and automation. A brief subsection will consider the so-called jobs-environment literature, as well as more recent initiatives (especially in Europe) by environmental and other advocates of shorter workweeks. Also important is a little known history of cooperation between trade unions and environmental organizations that parallels and offsets some of the tensions noted above. This history

will also be discussed in a separate subsection focusing here primarily on a North American context (though existing as well within European green and social democratic parties).

2.1.1. Jobs and the Environment

Class-environment tensions have been widespread with regard to perceived threats to employment opportunities. A sense of threat has been particularly dramatic in the forest industry, but it has also arisen for workers in the nuclear industry, for coal miners, for ranchers (as regards protection or reintroduction of predators such as raptors, bobcats, cougars or wolves), for highway construction and packaging workers, and for farmers (regarding pesticide use). It exists as well within polluting industries where the cost of cleanup appears to threaten competitiveness.

These tensions exist notwithstanding a jobs and environment literature which has developed since the early 1970s showing that environmental protection generates significant net employment opportunities. For example, renewable energy supply sources are both more employment intensive and less environmentally threatening than are energy supply mega-projects. Energy efficiency improvement creates jobs in manufacturing, installation, and construction and recycling is highly labor intensive. Bottle bills, requiring that many types of containers be refilled and/or recycled, as adopted in ten U. S. states, are net generators of employment. Sustainability-oriented urban reconfiguration and public transport expenditures also create net employment gains, as does pollution abatement and environmental restoration.

Overall, though the jobs gained are more numerous than the jobs lost, this does not necessarily help those who lose their jobs. That would only be true if transitions were accomplished in a fairer and more gradual fashion. In the early years of environmentalism (in the late 1960s) few environmentalists thought very much about the employment and equity implications of the initiatives they advanced -- industrial society, indeed, was seen by some of them to be itself problematic. Some early environmentalists advocated a return to a more agricultural way of life, though this view did not have broad political appeal. As well, at that time environmentalists were often distrusted by those on the traditional political left. The jobs-environment literature, and as we will see shortly, did much to soften this mutual distrust.

Since the 1960s environmentalists, including European green parties, have become much more thoughtful on questions of equity and employment opportunities. Some sustainability advocates came to suggest that, given advances in the automation of industrial production, the time has, or soon will, come when there should be a decoupling of employment and income. Some have argued that wealthy societies could replace present transfer payments (social security, unemployment insurance, welfare, food stamps) with a universal social income. That is, all adults might receive supplemental income and thus there would be no disincentive to working (as with welfare) and no disincentive to education (as with unemployment insurance).

It is more widely argued, however, that there is a fundamental socio-environmental problem in the distribution of work and the absence of full employment. It is now

widely realized among sustainability advocates that the key to improving social equity is the achievement of full employment. Whether full employment is achieved by expanding employment associated with sustainability (as in energy efficiency improvement, recycling and reforestation) or in expanding non-work income sources or in widespread (gradual) reductions in work time or some combination of these, the objective and outcome is essentially the same. Full employment promotes both fairness and better treatment of all employees, especially those in less desirable occupations. This outcome and greater employment security in turn advances concern with sustainability and environmental protection. Work time re-distribution in particular is now seen by many sustainability advocates as perhaps the single best way to integrate equity and environmental values.

The gradual reduction of work time to a level that assures widespread full employment might lessen pressures to push ahead with doubtful resource extraction projects. It might even restrain some pressures for rapid non-selective economic growth within already wealthy nations, presumably without disallowing all growth. Further, it is argued, a social adjustment might be allowed which has been overdue since the majority of women entered the workforce -- both parents might finally be freed to contribute additional time to domestic life and child-rearing. That is, if the standard workweek were reduced to four days (32 hours), each parent could spend one additional day of the week in the home, leaving only three of seven, not five of seven, days when neither parent was present during working hours. As to family income, the presumption of most '32-hour' advocates is that the reductions in income would be less than the reductions in work time because absenteeism declines and productivity (per hour) increases with such changes.

In Europe, where unemployment has been high throughout the 1990s, steps towards such a new reality have been taken. The new green-social democratic government of Germany has a tripartite alliance seeking the reduction of overtime and similar measures. Italy has new legislation on overtime and proposed legislation or individual contracts reducing work time to between 35 and 40 hours exist in Greece, Spain, Netherlands, France, Germany and elsewhere in Europe. European Green Parties have a positive view of these initiatives and see them as simultaneously as social, economic, and environmental policy. Historically, moving to reductions in work time restores the trend of the first decades of the twentieth century which saw some of productivity advances broadly translated into reductions in work time, rather than universally converted to ever higher economic output and private consumption. Changes in work time can take many forms including shorter workweeks, reduced overtime (or just a universal right to decline overtime), early retirement, or additional holidays.

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Biographical Sketch

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