

ECONOMICS*Sociology*

Adam Plachciak, Sustainable Development in Postmodern Society, *Economics & Sociology*, Vol. 3, No 2, 2010, pp. 86-91.

Adam Plachciak
*University of Economics in
Wrocław
Poland*

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN
POSTMODERN SOCIETY**

Received: June, 2010
1st Revision: September, 2010
Accepted: October, 2010

ABSTRACT. The article presents how the idea of sustainable development might function in the frames of postmodern society. It is obvious that postmodernity refers to the contemporary society where all different changes take place. There is a new understanding of the world. People face a new form of risk. And a new morality rules over the attitudes of people. Generally there is no one common project for the world. On the other hand sustainable development proposes the idea of building global balance in the area of social, economical and ecological orders.

JEL Classification: Q01, Z1

Keywords: sustainable development, postmodernism, postmodern morality, risk society, world order.

Introduction

In this article I try to investigate to how the idea of sustainable development could function against the background of postmodern tendencies in contemporary world. It is obviously problematic if postmodernity is a negation of modernity or if it has been the next phase of modernity and its continuation. Actually it is impossible to discuss about postmodernism without earlier reflection of what it means modernism. It seems that definitions of two notions are indispensable.

Trying to define *modernity* it is necessary to take under consideration two aspects: historical and analytical. First one appeals to the place and time where modernity appeared. Some investigators point at XVI centuries as the beginning of modernity (Immanuel Wallerstein), some locate its origins in XVII centuries (Anthony Giddens), others even later. But they are all agreed that three great revolutions: The Secession War, American Constitutional Revolution and French Revolution – played the fundamental role for political and institutional frames of modernity – and on the other hand the Industrial Revolution in England which created some new economic bases for modern society. Analytical aspect is focused rather on substantial and constitutive characteristics of modernity. One of the first catalog of features describing modernity was created by A. Comte: (1) concentrating work power in the city settings; (2) work organization focused on effectiveness and material profit; (3) practical application of science and technology in the manufacture processes; (4) emerging an open and concealed antagonism between workers and factory owners; (5) growing contrasts and social inequalities; (6) economic system based on an individual enterprise and free competition.

On the other hand postmodernity we treat as a reaction for the crisis of modernity in the context of civilization project. Postmodern thought has not completely broken the connections with the values of modernism. Free choice, diversity, ability of critical expression, has been common for modernity as well as for postmodernity. Though postmodernity stands in obvious opposition towards a typical for modernity ideal of unified and standardized culture having been a product of humankind. In the place of modern tendencies, aiming at building a homogeneous identity, the notion of unreduced differences of interests, beliefs and values appointing interpersonal relations between people is introduced. There is a clear lack of one vision of the world and decomposition of *great narratives* which would have appoint a sense and direction of historical development. The evident characteristic of postmodern conditions is a transfer of values from scarcity to postmaterial ones.

The idea of sustainable development is a global project of solution the most sensitive problems of contemporary civilization which appeared at the end of twenty century as results of rapid waste of natural resources, growth of environmental pollution, increase of human population, fast urbanization, unsatisfied basic needs of people and global destabilization of natural and socio-economical systems. The idea of sustainable development appeals to the unquestionable need of changing contemporary values focused on the ideology of consumption.

The concept of sustainable development

According to the Brundtland Report sustainable development is defined as *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it key concepts:*

- *the concept of needs, in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given,*
- *the idea of limitation imposed by the state of technology and social and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs* (World Commission ... 1987, p. 43).

Although the Report was created by the committee of the World Commission, and it obviously has some inconsistencies and contradictions characteristic to such a process, it was prepared carefully to be flexible to various constitutions. It suggested that it was not a problem of choosing between environmental protection and social progress, but rather a question deciding on patterns of economic and social development agreeable with proper environmental stewardship. The matter was one, which should appeal to the countries of the North as well as to the South – to reflect growing environmental awareness in the former and urgent development concerns of the later (Meadowcroft 2000, p. 371.) .

We may say that the idea of sustainable development plays a key role that helps to create a special surrounding for the growth which is supported by four basic conditions: (1) necessity of taking into account the needs of the present and the future generations; (2) reduction of natural resources exploitation; (3) acceptance of intergenerational justice principle for distributing rights and obligations; (4) acceptance of the integrated attitude towards development and natural environment.

The concept of sustainable development seems to be the most ideal principle ever since leading to a global development. Moreover it is applied in concrete way with meaningful declarations by different countries and international organizations as a strategic statement of their policy. The title of the Report (*Our Common Future*) and some of its major parts (“Common concerns”, “Common Challenges”, “Common Endeavours”) were written with all seriousness, not as some later commentators have treated as a naïve denial of

contradicted concepts and interests; but rather as communicative attempt to overcome all differences, build common understandings and construct reasonable coalition for reform.

It should be noted that what it means sustained in sustainable development deals with the *process* of improvement, rather than any particular institution, practice or environment. Over the time the main understanding of sustainable development has evolved to some extent that it has become common to put the emphasize that economic, social and environmental factors must be assessed together. The idea of participation in environment and development decision-making has been progressively more conscious. The notion of common but differentiated responsibilities of governments and countries of the North as well as the South has been increasingly emphasized. In practical means the Earth Summit agreements such as the Rio Declaration on Environment and development, the Climate Change Convention, the Biodiversity Convention and Agenda 21 have been treated as an international consensus concerning the type of orientation required to make sustainable development something real (Reid 1995).

The attempts of implementation the idea of sustainable development has been still facing some serious difficulties. Disadvantageous phenomena of contemporary civilization, which have been the most grave obstacles to the idea of sustainable development, were not only strained but they seem to be more influential. Against all declarations the world came to the point where all tendencies lead towards unsustainability. It seems that the idea of sustainable development has been losing its popularity in world because axiology of sustainable development often come across the contemporary model of consumption and individuality. It also bravely contests popular habits, expectations and pursuits of modern society. The main reason of losing interest in such ideas as sustainable development should be located in growing consciousness of senseless projects trying to resolve global problems. Undoubtedly the source of such beliefs should be recognized as an erosion of moral ground of neoliberal philosophy on one hand but on the other hand as unstable system of values brought by postmodernity. In this paper just the last aspect is taken under consideration.

Postmodern division of the world

It is generally accepted that postmodern society is not interested in recruitment of industrial mass work power or regular army, but it needs people as consumers (Bauman 1999, p. 353). The way what the members of such society are modeled is subordinated by omnipresent consumption. It is inseparable attached to the style of contemporary man and it describes his specific identity. The world, which turns around consumption, is ordered by different temptations, unlimited desires and unstable wants. There is no median that would measure the values giving the real sense of man's life. The main characteristic of such society is an ability to handle accidental occasions and satisfy unquenchable desires to get new once.

Despite all pretences, consummative society is focused on assimilation particular group of people into certain segments. Postmodernity is often called an *age of neotribalism*. There is a tendency to create new communities or tribes for different ethnic, racial and political groups. Each one of those communities look for an acceptance from of other communities as well as from the side of whole society. A good example such a need of acceptance might be popularity of some consummative groups gathering whole sets of subcultures around a certain style of life, music, model of car, motorbike, yacht etc. In this case consumption becomes indispensable element bounding society. Although typical to postmodernity tolerance does not necessarily leads towards group solidarity, because it easily yields erosion of egocentric actions of wealthy people which makes further division between those who have easy access to socially wanted goods and those who are marginalized.

Social handicap becomes a serious problem for rich countries of the North as well as poor countries of the South. "New England Journal of Medicine" exposes data from 1990 which show that the factor of deaths among people at the age between 35 – 55 is 2,3 times higher for black Americans than white citizens, and only half of the difference can be explained by pure economic determinants (Sen 2000, p. 137). The reason of such differentiation in a grave sense deals with some factors creating social surrounding, for example lack of medical facilities, spreading of violence in big cities, lack of social aid etc. Actually political problems connected with administrating health care might seriously handicap people and cause social inequality even though incomes of those people, comparing with international standards, are not so low.

Postmodern division of the world goes along the line that is set by the level of man's mobility. Unquestionable freedom of mobility is reserved to those people who are able to effort certain stage of consumption which allows them to "expose themselves without any shame". They are always able to live areas being under danger of famine or ill-health care. There are centers of big western cities where its border lines are never passed by their citizens. Experiences of people living on both sides of the border are different to such an extent that probably if they met somewhere one day they would not be able to build normal personal interaction with one another.

Postmodern society is divided into two completely different worlds. Man of the first world is totally mobile, without any problems is able to move everywhere both in a real world and virtually. His world is cosmopolitan, exterritorial and governed by business people and managers of culture. In the second world man is limited by local ties which make him live there without any expectations. This isolation becomes unbearable when medias show that there is a possibility of existence in a rich world through virtual reality. There is a specific element for both worlds. In the first one we find boredom by in the second there is frustration and aggression.

New form of risk

One of the characteristic features of postmodern society it is a "new form of risk". Naturally, phenomenon of risk – in the sense of uncertainty as a result of man's decisions concerning daily activity – has been always common element of social life ever since. The risk we are talking about comes out from negative events which are independent of our decisions (the threats of sickness, accidents, cataclysms etc). In our epoch, which U. Beck names directly "risk society", this phenomena receives a new quality. We are living in the world which accumulates risk that is a cost of contemporary civilization and technology.

Risk situation appears not only as a result of making decisions but it has much wider philosophical and historical context. Now it is clearly evident that the project of man's domination over the nature created at the time of Enlightenment has not been completely possible to be achieved. It was illusionary assessment that due to extraordinary abilities man's rationality in the sphere of science and technology humanity would be able to overwhelm all irrational elements of nature, which might occur dangerous to man's security and welfare. This conviction was leading to the believe that there were some unlimited possibilities in the instrumental reasoning which would enable man to rule over the world (Horkheimer, Adorno 2010). Whenever people wants to dominate over the nature it has always turned against them. The results of such domination are usually unpredictably catastrophic.

In postmodern society – as A. Giddens says – the profile of risk has changed in a meaningful way in an objective sense understood as global expansion of growing risks and in subjective sense comprehended as an increasing perception and consciousness of man in the face of appearing threats (Giddens 2006, p. 150 – 197). Global expansion of risk touches

millions of people living all over the world in spite of ethnic belongingness and the and the results of its consequences are usually shown *post factum*, for example: after the explosion of nuclear reactor Soviet Union, spill of toxic substance from chemical factory in Bhopal, after tragic outcome of AIDS in Africa, after appearance of unchangeable effects of climate changes etc. In this sense risk becomes universal threat for reach as well as poor, politicians and casual citizens, show stars and the homeless. There is no escape it rises over the world as a fatality and touches everyone. Terrifying is the fact that global expanse of risk, and especially its consequences are out of control in local as well as in global dimension.

A conviction of the risk created by postmodernity should lead to a successful reflection concerning the necessity of anticipating, projecting, assessing, controlling and preventing growing dangers and threats which can not be neglected when it we talk an bout the quality of life present as well as future generations. Technique that is one of the main generators of risk can not be a neutral system because not all its effects are to be used with the most noble intentions of any acting subjects.

Postmodern morality

There has been a meaningful discussion in social sciences at least since the sixties of twenty century concerning socio – cultural changes in high developed countries in the West. In the opinion of some scientists the contemporary world is characterized by the following features: (1) the center of man’s life is focused on consumption – people play mainly the role of consumers but basically they do not take any meaningful position in production of material goods; (2) information and possibility of being able to have an access to it takes unquestionable position in a such world; (3) there is a big changeability around jobs and professions – people are treated as modern nomads whose life achievements are depended on their abilities of adjustments to new conditions they have to live in from time to time; (4) there is an incredible influence of mass-media which creates desired artificial reality; (5) there is no place for “meta-narratives” that were shaping global goals helping people to connect daily episodes of life into sensible social existence; (6) there is an ongoing crisis of identity – (social class, local society, church etc).

Philosophical modernity, emphasizing differentiation and plurality of truth, and also inability of achieving generally valid rules, creates a lot of problems for any ethical systems to be seriously treated. This type of thought only permits the truth which is partial and local. Objective values that might play the role of the foundation for moral obligation and duties in fact become barriers for people and their freedom. It rather seems that we have the phenomena of transformation of values into subjective believes and personal choices. In extreme situations some philosophers say about facing of post-deontological epoch (G. Lipovsky) that is free of absolute knowledge. Postmodern deconstruction of objective values and principles of actions is not only part of philosophical or artistic discourse but deeply penetrates lives of regular people accepting unlimited freedom without any objection. In a society where are no obligating rules, where everything is permitted values and norms which were established earlier must be abandoned now.

Typical to postmodernity separation of man’s activity from moral perspective might occur one of the main reason of the threats in economic, social and environmental realms. Challenges that contemporary man is facing could create a new situation for ethical discourse. Postmodern ethics seems to be distinguished not only because the problems of contemporary man are different of those from the times of modernity but because they are differently viewed and interpreted. Postmodernity in axiological area characterizes the following features: (1) apporetive morality; (2) moral principles and norms are axiological relativistic;

(3) moral phenomena are in nature irrational and people being moral subjects are equivocal (Kiepas 1999, p. 197 -198).

In the light of ethical perspective shortly presented above it should be stated that there is a really great need of building solid foundation for a new paradigm of ethics. Contemporary technology lets people to act in so immeasurable space-time reality at the same moment allowing them to face its outcomes, that means that individualistic and traditional frames of ethic are not sufficient. It becomes indispensable to make a new step towards sort of universal ethics and it seems especially very import to notice the role and meaning a principle of responsibility which would be comprehended widely, holistic – promoting values overcoming limits of traditional, individualistic and practically-materialistic anthropocentrism, building at the same time possibilities for implementation of sustainable development.

Conclusions

Upon this shortly presented ethical perspective which arises from postmodern consciousness, it should be stated that the principle of sustainable development loses the right to exist because it is considered as a “great narrative”. Thus it tries to enforce a global order in contemporary society. The concept of sustainable development, because of its statements, refers to a social project typical for the time of Enlightenment. Those mutual characteristics are: humanity as a subject of history, development comprehended as cognitive and moral progress, rationality as the base of man’s thinking and acting, axiological system of values proclaiming pacifism, egalitarianism, freedom, space solidarity, justice, and it obviously reminds the next “great” project enlarged only by ecological dimension. Surely the principle of sustainable development is not an utopian project which refers to an idea of fortunate society without a factual possibility of realizing it in the real world. It does not include the idea of rapid change of the world under the influence of revolutionary consciousness of man but it rather proposes establishing political, legal and economical mechanisms playing sort of foundation for building new standards in relation between nature, society and economy. The concept of sustainable development also does not depend on the knowledge that would not honor a real empirical experience.

References

- Bauman Z., *Nowoczesność i ponowoczesność*, [w:] *Encyklopedia socjologiczna*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 1999, t. II.
- Giddens A., *Nowoczesność i tożsamość. „Ja” i społeczeństwo w epoce późnej nowoczesności*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2006.
- Horkheimer M., Adorno Th., *Dialektyka Oświecenia*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2010.
- Kiepas A., *Ryzyko jako problem ekofilozofii*, [w:] A. Latawiec (red.), *Między filozofia przyrody a ekofilozofii*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu kardynała Wyszyńskiego, Warszawa 1999.
- Meadowcroft J., Sustainable development: a New(ish) idea for a new century, “Political Studies” 2000 vol. 48.
- Reid D., *Sustainable development: an introductory guide*, Earthscan, London 1995.
- Sen A., *Nierówności i dalsze rozważania*, Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy „Znak”, Kraków 2000.
- World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). Our common future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1987.