



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

**Oral speech given by Luc Ferry, *Philosopher*
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If we really want to understand the questions raised by ecology today, they have to be resituated in the moral, intellectual and political context of globalization. Particular debates about particular subjects—eco-taxes, pollution of the oceans, global warming, biodiversity, GMO's etc., etc., have no meaning if they are not taken up in the context of a much broader political problem: namely, that of the power or the actual regulatory abilities our governments have (or rather do not have!) to cope with a world that increasingly exceeds their grasp. This problem arises just as much in connection with economic regulation as with ecological regulation. That is why today I want to offer you some more general thoughts about our real regulatory powers in the context of globalization.

First, I would like to remind you that on the moral level, ecology has introduced two new attitudes that are now extremely characteristic of Western societies. First, the proliferation of fears, reinforced by the growing feeling of public powerlessness, the feeling that our politicians no longer have any real control over what happens in a globalized world.

The second attitude appears to be new on the moral level; it is a deep feeling of distrust with regard to science: on a television program these days, a scientist almost always has trouble getting his message through when faced by a charlatan. Everyone likes to think that "the truth lies elsewhere" and that "official science" conceals it, as in "X-Files." The expert is always more or less suspected of hiding a shameful truth, of being a potential Dr. Strangelove, a mad scientist—whereas forty or fifty years ago he was still an incontestable authority figure.

When I was a child there was a program on French television called "Louis Leprince-Ringuet's Quarter-Hour" whose star was a Nobel Prize winner, to whom we listened reverently because he was a great scientist. Today, this is no longer imaginable, and we have to ask why, to inquire into what has changed to the point of making science a threat and nature a new divinity. In the eighteenth century, it was exactly the other way round: science was the divinity, and nature was the threat.

Why did this inversion of the terms occur, and what does it mean?

LET US EXAMINE FOR A MOMENT THESE TWO POINTS:

First, regarding fear. Since the 1970s and the birth of political ecology and the pacifism that came from Germany, with its famous "lieber rot als tot," "better Red than dead," we have seen all over Europe a genuine proliferation of fears. We are now afraid of everything: sex, tobacco, driving fast, alcohol, global warming, the greenhouse effect, chickens, beef, globalization, Islam, Turkey, the hole in the ozone layer, nanotechnologies, the sun, cell phones, microwaves, GMOs (genetically modified organisms), genetic engineering, and countless other things. Every year, a new fear is added to the others. I have no intention of claiming that all these fears are stupid, irrational, or absurd. Some of them are probably well-founded. But this proliferation is accompanied by a new moral characteristic that might not be noticed but is in reality fundamental.

What is going to mark the end of the twentieth century on the moral level is not only this proliferation of fears as such, but especially the fact that, behind this proliferation, we are witnessing a justification of fear. Let's try to say this simply. When I was a child, this is more or less what our parents and teachers told us: "A big boy (or girl) isn't afraid!" Growing up, becoming a *grande personne*, as St.-Exupéry put it in the *Petit Prince*, that is, becoming an adult, means first and foremost overcoming the infantile, shameful emotion of fear. Becoming an adult means no longer being afraid of the dark, being able to help someone, to help a weak person attacked in a public place, in a train or subway car, etc. With modern ecology fear has become, on the contrary, a positive emotion that is not at all shameful. One of the founding fathers of ecological philosophy, Hans Jonas, has written a book on this theme: for him, fear is no longer a childish, shameful emotion but just the reverse: it is the first step toward wisdom, toward our famous "principle of precaution" and, as it were, the moral foundation of sustainable development. Fear allows us finally to become aware of the dangers and threats that face the world on the levels of both pacifism and ecology. Thus for Jonas we must be guided by fear, and political ecology as a whole constantly uses this weapon in public debate.

Fear is now justified. When I was Minister of Education—and I say this without irony or malice—the first words spoken by every union delegation I met with were: "Mr. Minister, we're very concerned!" As if concern, worry, fear, were the first stage of understanding, the normal starting point for any discussion.

This new attitude is accompanied by an equally radical change in our relationship to science. Today, we are clearly witnessing a genuine historical upheaval (*bouleversement*, revolution). To become even more convinced of this, one has only to compare current thinking to what we know of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Think, for example, of how the best minds of that time, the great scientists and philosophers, reacted to the earthquake that destroyed the city of Lisbon in 1755. In a single day, this earthquake killed between fifty thousand and a hundred thousand people. It was an incredible disaster that had an enormous impact on people's ideas. The reaction was unanimous, or nearly: everyone—and in France, Voltaire first of all—thought that the progress of science and technology would allow us to avoid such a catastrophe in the future. The most enlightened people were firmly convinced that this was so. Geology, mathematics, and physics

would make it possible to predict, and thus to prevent misfortunes that an absurd nature inflicted so cruelly on human beings. Nature alone was blamed—so that, we note in passing, the mayor of the city was not put under investigation, any more than the architects, masons, and engineers who had constructed the buildings—as they would now immediately be.

A change in setting, not to mention a change in paradigm: today, it is science that scares us and nature that seems admirable. We are afraid of cloning, of nuclear power plants, of GMOs, of genetic manipulations, and of "test-tube babies," to the point that research is increasingly supervised by bio-ethics committees. On the other hand, we have a tendency to idealize nature, to make it sacred, as if the AIDS or flu viruses were not completely natural!

This is shown by the mass media's countless references to the myths of Frankenstein and the mad scientist. These references are not innocent or harmless. They point to something very deep, something that is really scary, namely the feeling that the world is escaping our control, the feeling that our political representatives no longer have any real regulatory power. We have to recognize that since time immemorial, these two great philosophical myths have been telling us about dispossession, loss of control. They were originally theological myths of great profundity: they told us the terrifying story of a creature that escapes its creator and threatens to destroy everything in the world. Dr. Frankenstein constructs his monster using cadavers taken from a hospital. He succeeds in bringing him to life, but the creature immediately escapes and threatens to destroy everything in his way. According to the images conveyed by such fables, today it is all the products of scientific activity that are gradually eluding the control of the humans who have nonetheless created them and would thus be dispossessed of what they have engendered.

For example, note how this myth can be used to scare people about GMOs. Ecologists are not stupid: they don't say that GMOs are dangerous, which no one has ever been able to prove. No. What they do say, on the other hand, is that the little kernel of genetically-modified corn cultivated in an open field is going to escape from the control of the scientist who invented it. Pollen blown by the wind for dozens of kilometers will contaminate all the surrounding fields, and nothing can prevent it from doing so. Thus it is here the loss of control that is frightening, not the kernel of corn itself. It is dispossession that is in question, that is, the fact that the world is outside our control, that we are losing control, we are losing the power to regulate.

What I would like to show now is that it is no accident that these myths are so frequently repeated in the media. If the debate has recently been focused mainly on GMOs, that is not an accident, either: it is because GMOs so perfectly illustrate the situation of dispossession in which we all find ourselves under globalization. For deep reasons, which I want to analyze now, the world is escaping our political representatives, probably as never before in the history of humanity, and in any case as never before in modern history since the nineteenth century.

More generally, if we want to understand the fears that motivate ecology, sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly, we have to see that the twentieth century was

characterized by two fundamental traits: the deconstruction of traditions and the emergence of modern globalization. These two traits are frightening, and they lend great power to the ecologists' demand for sustainable development. Here, in short, is why.

Deconstruction

To begin with the first trait (feature ?), we experienced a twentieth century that was entirely devoted to the deconstruction of traditional values and authorities, a century that from this point of view was absolutely unlike any other. We deconstructed tonality in music, representation in painting, the traditional rules of the novel, the various forms of the super-ego or, as we said in 1968, "bourgeois morality." In short, all traditional values were put through the shredder of deconstruction. In simple terms, to take examples from everyday life and not solely from high avant-garde culture, the condition of women may have changed more in fifty years than in the preceding five hundred years. Remember that in Switzerland women got the right to vote only on April 28, 1991! (the date on which the last canton, Appenzell, finally gave women the vote). That would stun my eighteen-year-old daughter. Similarly, the village where I grew up has probably also changed more in fifty years than in the preceding several centuries.

What has caused the moral, intellectual, and cultural landscape to change so much, not only in the domain of high culture, but also in that of everyday life? We have to ask: what was the real motor of this incredible destruction of traditional values we have witnessed over the past few decades, of this unprecedented upheaval in our relationship to traditions? Be forewarned: don't expect me to advocate turning back the clock. I'm not nostalgic. I'm just trying to understand what has happened.

In reality, if my childhood village has changed more in fifty years than in the preceding five hundred years, it is not Picasso, Braque, or Schönberg who are to consider as the authors of this upheaval. It is the movement of global capitalism that is behind this appearance of Bohemian deconstruction. From this point of view, the Bohemians, left-wing young people, artists and sixty-eighters were merely the bourgeoisie's henchmen, not to say the cuckolds of history! In 1968 in France the young students invented a superb slogan: "Under the paving stones, the beach!" To understand this slogan, you have to remember that at the time, young people pried up the paving stones on the great boulevards and used them as weapons against the police. The problem is that there was never a beach under the pavement: there was only free-trade globalization. I'm going to explain this with one sentence to which we could easily devote a year-long seminar: traditional values had to be destroyed or at least deconstructed so that we could enter the age of hyper-consumption in which we are now immersed. Why? Simply because if my daughters had my great-grandmother's traditional values they wouldn't buy three cell phones a year! To put it another way, but still remaining within the family, if my great-

grandmother were to come back and see a big shopping center, I assure you that she would find it oozing with foolishness and obscenity. She would think this new temple devoted to the god of consumption was distracting us from the true values, which are our duties to other people, and also our duties to ourselves.

More than the revolutionaries of 1968, the situationists, the surrealists, or the cubists, the true creator of deconstruction is clearly big capital: I repeat, traditional values had to be deconstructed so that free-trade globalization could flourish. That is why, moreover, the bourgeois now praise the Bohemians that they detested a century ago. The proof? Who buys the Bohemians' works these days? The bourgeois, of course, the great captains of industry and bankers who are fascinated by the logic of innovation at work in modern art. And why are they fascinated? Because this logic has necessarily become their own in business, in a world of tough competition engendered by globalization.

Today, it's the CEOs of large corporations who support contemporary art and create foundations, because they recognize themselves perfectly in a logic of radical innovation that is also their own: in a society dominated by the absolute imperative of benchmarking, anyone who does not constantly innovate simply disappears, so that business leaders like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates have become the Picassos of the computer or of the cell phone. As for my old friends from 1968, almost all of them have gone over to business. In other words, Marx was right: capitalism is permanent revolution and the Bohemians and deconstructors, even though they were often "on the Left," have served it by doing away with all traditions that ultimately slowed the advance of universal consumption...

And Here, I return (go back) to our topic that I only seemed to have left behind. Indeed, deconstruction raises two problems: First, it gives rise to fears and increases the feeling that "everything is disappearing," that there are no longer any stable points of reference. And especially if you understand that it is the result, not of the deconstructors themselves, but of the deepest logic of globalization, it also strengthens the feeling that the world is getting away from us everywhere. And that is the second, central problem: if we want to regulate the economy, if we want to pursue policies of sustainable development, we have to have control over the world, we have to take it in hand. But that is what globalization to a very large extent prevents us from doing. I'm going to tell you why—and don't worry, this is the last idea I'm going to subject you to, but I think it's the deepest and the most enlightening one I have ever encountered for understanding the coming century.

What is globalization in its profoundest essence? There are two crucial moments in the history of Europe, and then of the world—because of course this whole thing began in Europe. Thus there are two globalizations, and you're going to see that the second, the one in which we are currently immersed, is in every respect the opposite of the first one.

The Two Globalizations

Let's put things simply.

The first globalization, or, if you prefer, the first stage in globalization, is simply the gigantic scientific revolution of the Enlightenment, that is, of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The trial of Galileo is a good example. With modern science, what in fact appeared for the first time in the history of humanity was a discourse able to claim, legitimately and credibly, to be valid for humanity as a whole : for the poor and for the rich, for the powerful and for the weak, for aristocrats and commoners, but also for the Chinese, the Germans, the English, or (even for) the French. Earlier, all other discourses—literatures, arts, philosophies, mythologies, religions—were merely local, regional. Only modern science was to become truly universal, valid for everyone.

We have to see clearly that at the time when it took off, this first globalization appeared to be involved in a wonderful project of civilization. It was not only a matter of understanding the universe, of solving the mysteries of nature, of mastering it for the sake of mastering it; it was a matter of nothing less than the construction a new civilization, of building a moral and political world in which people would finally be free-er and happi-er. In other words, the "enlightened" people of the time believed that history had a superior goal : it was a question of providing freedom and happiness, the emancipation of humanity and well-being for the largest possible number of people.

The second globalization, the one in which we are immersed today, is both a consequence of the first and its complete contrary. What characterizes it chiefly is a "fall" - in the Biblical or Platonic sense of the term. The Enlightenment project "falls" into a structure, that of globalized capitalism, that implies a total competition of all against all, a total competition because it now involves the whole world. In this context of permanent benchmarking, innovation has become an absolute imperative for CEOs, just as it was earlier for Bohemian artists. Every year, every month, almost every day, our cell phones and our computers evolve. Their functions multiply, their screens get larger, their connections with the net improve, etc. This movement is so irrepressible that a firm that did not follow it would be committing suicide. This involves an imperative to adapt that firms cannot ignore, whether they want to or not, whether or not it makes any sense. This is not a matter of taste, one choice among others, but an absolute imperative, an unquestionable necessity if the companies want to survive.

But this completely changes the meaning of our relationship to history. Today, the CEO of a firm that makes cell phones or computers, knows one thing for sure, and ultimately only one: if the cell phone that he puts on the market in three months doesn't do more than the one you have in your pocket, if it doesn't have a touch-screen, a faster Internet connection, a more powerful MP3, etc., it is not a question of a project, a world-view or of an ideal, but of survival: he is dead, that's all. In other words, a CEO knows one thing with certainty, and that is that in a universe of globalized competition, the law of benchmarking, that is, the law of permanent comparison/competition, not only with neighboring companies, but now also with those that are far away, has become the absolute rule. Thus he has to innovate,

constantly and rapidly, innovate and innovate again! that is the source of his fascination with the logic of avant-gardism that had already been that of the Bohemians in the domain of art, and the respect, even the admiration, he now feels for these avant-gardes that he totally rejected only a few decades earlier.

This observation may seem banal. Its consequences, however, are less banal.

In this new situation, history moves outside human will. It is no longer drawn out by the representation of final causes, grandiose objectives, but engendered by the automatic, mechanical, anonymous, and blind logic of efficient causes. It might be said that this was always the case. But it is not true, anyway, not entirely true. Because the humanistic and republican promise par excellence resided precisely in the idea that by leaving the Ancien Régime behind us, we were finally going to be able to make our history together, to participate collectively in its elaboration. And this promise inspired the most enlightened minds, from Voltaire to Churchill and de Gaulle, via Disraeli and Jaurès. Today, it is being betrayed as never before.

To use a commonplace but evocative metaphor: just as a bicycle has to move forward to avoid falling, and a gyroscope has to spin constantly to remain on its axis and not fall off the string on which it has been set, we have to "progress" incessantly. But this progress mechanically induced by the struggle for survival, is no longer situated within a larger project. It is no longer part of a great design. It is strictly a matter of necessity—and thus no longer involves a policy of civilization. With the globalization of competition, the meaning of history has radically changed: instead of claiming, even if only in principle, to be inspired by transcendent ideals, the progress, or rather the movement of societies tends to be no more than the mechanical result of free competition among its various components.

The modern economy functions like Darwin's natural selection: each company must constantly innovate to adapt, but the global process that this absolute constraint produces, no longer has a goal. It has neither a predictable direction nor a visible meaning. We are advancing rapidly, but we don't know where we're going or why. The crisis in the idea of progress that is manifested in contemporary ecology has to do with this—not with the idea that we are no longer progressing, but with a much deeper question, with a concern bearing on the question whether progress itself is really progress. Are we absolutely sure that we are freer and happier because we will get a new Iphone or Blackberry in three months? It's not clear...

History has thus become, as Marx predicted, a "process without a subject," a process that no one directs or controls. As a result, politics seems to lack any kind of common ideal apart from that of the adaptation of our old nation-states to the new logic of globalized competition. Once again: who would be stupid enough to imagine that he is really freer or happier because he has bought the latest model of telephone or computer? Nobody, and yet we buy it... That is the world we are now living in.

Conclusions

I hope I have shown you why the number-one- political problem is not essentially a "right/left" problem. The number-one-problem of modern politics, a problem that is emerging under the name of "regulation" in the domains of both, the economy and ecology, is this: how can we regain control over a global development that is escaping us everywhere? How can we restore meaning to what was best in the republican ideal? What can we base ourselves on to give meaning? And at what level can this "regaining of control" be carried out? Certainly not that of the nation. That of Europe? Maybe, but Europe is a political gnome (dwarf), even if it is potentially an economic giant.

I wish I had more time to speak with you about the answers one might give to these questions. But it would already be useful to understand that they constitute the preliminary condition for any reflection on ecology and the economy—at least if one is not a pure free-trader and thinks that politics has to regain control, which is, of course, also debatable.

But if one thinks we have to succeed in this, then that will presuppose a collaboration among nations that cannot be easily counted on if we consider how much nationalisms have marked our history.

That is the whole problem with the G20, which is a good idea, but which is still at the embryonic, not to say fetal, stage. Today, Angela Merkel, Gordon Brown, and Nicolas Sarkozy agree that bonuses for traders have to be supervised and regulated. But we have no reason to think that they will have the power to do so. In any case, this would be only a drop in the ocean of measures that need to be taken to prevent further crises. Once again, nations have to cooperate, which is not a sure thing when we see how much nationalisms put their stamp of the preceding century.

Consider what was written about our differences—I mean the differences that are supposed to separate the Germans, the English, and the French—in a French Catholic periodical of the 1930s and you will see that what I am saying is true. It's a very innocent little joke, but it says a great deal about our nationalist past, for as you will see, it still speaks to us:

"One day a Frenchman, an Englishman, and a German were asked to write an article on the camel.

The Frenchman immediately went to the Jardin des plantes—which is the zoo in Paris. He spent half an hour there, asked the zookeeper a few questions, threw the camel some bread, teased it a bit with the point of his umbrella, and then went home to write an article for his newspaper that was full of piquant and witty remarks.

The Englishman, carrying his tea-basket and comfortable camping equipment, set up his tent in the Orient. He spent two or three years there and brought-back a fat big book full of facts without order or conclusion, but of great documentary value.

As for the German, who was full of scorn (*mépris*) for the frivolity of the Frenchman and the Englishman's lack of general ideas, he locked himself in his room to write a

large work in two volumes entitled: The Idea of the Camel, Deduced from the Concept of the Self."

Well ! Good luck to our presidents and prime-ministers !