

CAN THERE BE A BEST ETHIC OF SUSTAINABILITY?

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By now there must be hundreds of definitions of sustainability or sustainable development, and the author of each one surely believes that his or hers is the best. Not many authors, however, have attempted to survey all the definitions, and then to propose his as the best of the best. But that is exactly what Cesar Cuello Nieto has done (this issue, pp. 41-48).

To come up with his best of all definitions—after summarizing all the rest—Cuello has picked out the best features of the others and combined them into a holistic definition (as a framework for a best course of action to achieve sustainability). Cuello says the best approach is “an integrated, holistic conception of sustainability capable of incorporating within a single vision all of the social relations, the humans-to-nature relationships, and the entire axiological and ideological supra-structure that supports such a vision.” (Cuello’s paper is based on his booklength doctoral thesis, 1997)

Cuello recognizes that, “A holistic vision implies fundamental changes at all levels of social, economic, political, and cultural structures; that is, it requires a fundamental restructuring of present-day society.”

Cuello further lays out a set of basic principles that he thinks will support a holistic vision. (He does warn us not to take them as absolutes.)

For sustainable development to take place, Cuello says, there must be: (1) interaction and coordination among all of the agents in a locality, region, or country; (2) a redistribution of wealth; (3) a redefinition of the relationship between human beings and nature; (4) intergenerational equity; (5) a redistribution of global wealth and opportunities; (6) nature’s capacity for regeneration must be respected; (7) communities must be self-sufficient; and (8) there must be a dialectical uniting of theory and practice.

Cuello finds his source of inspiration in the writings of Hans Jonas (1984), for whom “the monopoly of humans on ethical regard is breached precisely with their acquiring a near-monopolistic power over the rest of life.” This leads Jonas to claim that, “Responsibility has become the fundamental imperative in modern civilization, and it should be an unavoidable criterion to assess and evaluate human actions, including, in a special way, development activities.”

In general, I am leery of any and all foundationalist approaches to ethics, but for purposes of this paper I am willing to defend this thesis: *There is a way to interpret “best sustainability ethic” that can provide a general formula for an optimum sustainability strategy* (though only if we recognize that each real-world implementation will be radically different, unalterably localized).

REINTERPRETING “BEST SUSTAINABILITY ETHIC”

My formula begins with a guideline similar to Cuello’s first principle: namely, to involve all the major groups with an interest in a particular development project (*any* interest, including total opposition to it) and attempt to get them to work together, first, to settle disagreements and then to support, modify, or block (as the case may be) the development in question. Since consensus can almost never be reached on such issues, a corollary guideline is to seek to please as many interest groups as possible and to have a concrete plan for dealing fairly with those who end up with views different from the majority. (Broadly interpreting William James, this is what he proposes in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” 1897.)

The formula would *not* begin with Cuello’s overarching principle of responsibility. It is probably good to hope that all the actors will act responsibly—at least as the members of each interest group see things. But at least some parties to any real-life dispute over a particular development project are almost certain to act irresponsibly, and that likelihood should always play a part in considerations of democratic control of a particular development project. Nor should we let Cuello’s other overarching principle—his definition of holistic sustainability as incorporating *all* aspects and all actors in a situation—get in the way of particular efforts to achieve sustainability. Every development project with which I am familiar has had some parties to the dispute—often major

parties--who simply refuse to play the game of democratic negotiation. Like minorities who end up losing out in consensus-building efforts, these renegade groups must be dealt with, and fairly. Waiting for all parties to be satisfied is a sure plan for failure.

Beyond the basic guideline of including as many interest groups as possible in democratic decisions--and fair treatment of those who lose out in consensus building, as well as those who refuse to play fair--most of Cuello's other principles can be turned into useful guidelines (though never absolute principles or duties). Any particular development project, if it is to be sustainable, should:

- include poor people (especially poor workers and their families) within the democratic process *on an equal footing* (even if a major redistribution of wealth is not possible in the short run);
- include consideration for future generations--specifically, the offspring and heirs of those directly involved, but also others (and other things) directly or indirectly impacted within the foreseeable future;
- define the relationship between humans and non-human nature in a way that allows due consideration for natural phenomena in every case;
- heed scientific evidence about natural capacities for regeneration in the ecological niche involved;
- consider the relationship(s) between the particular development project and others elsewhere: in the region or nation, in international compacts or alliances, in the global economy (without ignoring the possibility of not choosing to be a part of that) and including within this issues of unjust disparities between rich and poor parts of the international community;
- encourage self-sufficiency of communities; and
- always link theory to practice and practice to theory.

In every case, guidelines should be viewed not as categorical imperatives but as useful lessons learned from prior experience with development initiatives that have (at least up until now) been perceived as sustainable.

This sort of transformation of general ethical principles into guidelines that may prove helpful in concrete (and local) efforts at social problem solving is in line with the general orientation of the ethics of American Pragmatism. (See

John Dewey, 1948, 1929, and 1935; as well as George Herbert Mead, 1964.) And it depends, not on abstract theorizing, but on prior successful ventures. (One example in the USA would be the *de facto* moratorium on nuclear power plants, which has been at least partly the result of the efforts of a great many anti-nuclear activists. Cuello is hard at work in Costa Rica trying to help that country's admirable forest conservation efforts to become more sustainable.)

ISSUES AND ANSWERS

It is probably the case that as many objections can be raised against my guidelines as against Cuello's principles. I will here address four issues (or complaints) and attempt to respond to each in turn.

First objection:

The *tolerance of all viewpoints* that is at the core of my guidelines (and of Cuello's principles) is a recipe for disaster, opening the door for the most powerful interests to thwart sustainability efforts at every turn.

This is surely an issue to be reckoned with, and, for philosophers, relativism remains a perennial issue. (See Krausz, 1989) The particular version of anti-relativism that is relevant here is the "critique of pure tolerance" lament heard from radical critics of liberalism in recent decades. (See Wolff, Moore, and Marcuse, 1965.)

A late colleague of mine, David Norton (1995), has made one of the strongest cases for this critique in the recent past. Norton's argument is complex and difficult to summarize, but his basic assumption would probably be shared by a great many people today. In the contemporary world, the main problems that threaten humankind—war and terrorism, as in Bosnia or the Middle East; famine in parts of Africa; depletion of natural resources and the threats to the natural environment that have called forth a rhetoric of sustainability—all of these problems have global impacts and require for their solutions (if any are possible) collaboration at the international level. And (Norton says) "merely diplomatic" recognition and tolerance of differences—even if supplemented by a call for collaborative action—is not enough.

What Norton offers as a remedy for ineffective tolerance is his “virtue of liberality”—the cultivation, from childhood on, of the habit of seeing issues from other people’s perspective. Norton believes that this is not inconsistent with taking strong stands, with the sort of commitment that could lead to overriding the objections of others even after one has seen their point of view and from their perspective.

I believe this is good advice, but I am afraid that it could be too idealistic; it will surely take a long time, in any case, for educational systems to begin to encourage the virtue of liberality. In the short run, and in local conflicts over whether a particular development project is truly sustainable, Dewey’s (1935) approach, of local progressive politicking, is more likely to work. As Norton recognizes, Dewey was also an advocate of the right kind of progressive education, but in the interim, before it can be implemented, he advocated democratic political action (including the political action needed to reform the education system).

So my answer to the first objection to my modified version of Cuello’s approach is that tolerance of diverse views need not lead to inaction—or, worse, to ceding the field to the overwhelming power of international pro-development forces. People can, generally, habituate themselves to see things from others’ points of view. Total recalcitrants in a conflict can be brought into line, to some degree, if enough other parties can bring themselves to brand the recalcitrants as neglectful of local workers or of the local environment—in some cases even branding them as imperialist exploiters or environmental outlaws.

Second objection:

Even if local consensus is possible, however, and even if it can lead to the isolation of some major bad actors, there are *structural* features of the international economy that guarantee the victory of the big developers—and not just in the long run. The power of international capital can lead to the developers’ victory over sustainability efforts even in the short run. This is the neo-Marxist sustainability critique of Michael Redclift (1987). (The same sort of critique of the American Pragmatists’ ventures into social action has been made in Feffer, 1993.) And, like any Marxist approach with which I am familiar, this critique assumes that no true local success is possible as long as the worldwide power of

international capital is not thwarted.

When I have faced this objection elsewhere (see my *Social Responsibility in Science, Technology, and Medicine*, 1992), I have conceded that the structural problem exists. One does not need to accept the entire Marxist theoretical apparatus—of inevitable struggle between the exploiting owner class and the exploited working classes, of the economic substructure determining the social, cultural, and political superstructure—to recognize that big capitalist developers almost always manage to win out over local resistance to development. Nonetheless, it is possible, at the local level and with concerted democratic action, to deflect the economic power of international capital. If I were involved in a local development dispute, I would try to involve as many local activists on *other causes* as I could: activists worried enough about ecological catastrophe, or biotechnology meddling with nature, or the increase of police power, to mount activist campaigns against these evils. Working with such activist groups strengthens their commitment to democracy and distracts the big developers and their local governmental collaborators from an exclusive profit-making focus.

If democratic activism succeeds in other areas, it might eventually lead to a direct confrontation with raw economic power. But in my opinion no one today should any longer dream of worldwide Marxist revolution. All we can hope for is local social-democratic victories that can limit the power of—can sometimes even squeeze out—agents of international capitalist development.

A third set of objections: If we can assume that it is possible for local democratic forces to promote sustainability—by distracting, isolating, branding as outlaws, etc., the giant global economic powers that would thwart it—it nevertheless remains the case that even allegedly sustainable development (a) might *continue to threaten the environment* (for example, there might simply be too many people who are too destitute to avoid using the resources needed for sustainability), and (b) it will almost certainly be *inimical toward traditional cultures*, no matter what, because of their devotion to ancestral ways.

These are the objections of people Cuello labels “biocentrists” (including “deep ecology” advocates, but others as well) and “anti-development” radical critics. (For the former, see Drenghson and Inoue, 1995; for the latter, see Wolfgang Sachs, 1992, especially articles by Sachs himself and Gustavo Esteva.)

I will attempt to answer these third and fourth objections separately.

Third answer (to the continued-threat-to-the-environment objection): I would say that it is definitely *possible* that a particular development project that meets other criteria of sustainability might nonetheless still damage the local ecosystem involved—especially if earlier development efforts had left the local population under extreme stress, including the stress of overpopulation and/or malnutrition. However, it is not *necessary* that this be so, and if local democratic procedures have been established—including policies that give an *equal* voice to previously downtrodden workers and their families—such democracies are likely to be open to readjustment when and as new problems emerge.

(I am not aware of any studies that would support this optimistic assessment, and that weakens my argument; however, it is an article of faith of the American Pragmatists' [anti-]creed that when ordinary citizens are unburdened from the yoke of traditionally repressive ideologies, they will learn rapidly to act democratically *and* altruistically. What I would hope is that their altruism would extend to the protection of the ecological niche where they live.)

Fourth answer (to radical anti-sustainability critics): Here I would begin by conceding the main thrust of the objection. Development—any kind of development—depends upon an ideology of progress that is at odds with the conservative attitudes of many, if not most, pre-modern cultures (where “modernity” refers to attitude toward development rather than time period). This is the usual defining characteristic of pre-modern cultures (see Berger and colleagues, 1973 and 1974).

However, this need not mean that every local development project in an area that contains groups of indigenous peoples must inevitably run into opposition from them. And this for two reasons.

First, indigenous groups can be involved in the democratic process; indeed, some people have argued that the special kind of democracy found in some tribal cultures makes them easily adaptable to the processes of modern democratic systems. (As one example, they cite Nelson Mandela, once a tribal chief and now the elected head of state in South Africa.) And where indigenous cultures are to some degree incorporated within a larger democratic society of the

Western sort (examples might include Native Americans in some Canadian territories and in the Pacific Northwest in the USA), they have learned to make concessions for a common good *that gives them a fair shake*.

Second, there seems to be some evidence in historical anthropology that tribal cultures throughout history have been successful in borrowing new tools from surrounding cultures, without seeing this as hostile to their traditional cultural myths and rituals. Admittedly, over time, this has often led to complete assimilation within broader cultures, and to eventual loss of traditional myths or religions. And this clearly could happen in an area where sustainable development is tried out. But if the indigenous people involved carry out their borrowings, and become assimilated, within a democratic process—especially one in which they received their fair share of the proceeds of sustainable development—we ought not to deny them that opportunity in the name of the sanctity of indigenous culture. To do so, it seems to me, would be to doom indigenous cultures, reducing them to romantically revered museum show pieces.

Summarizing my answers, here is what I would conclude: (1) Agreement among parties to local sustainable development projects is certainly not out of the question—even agreement on labeling some parties as outlaws or criminals. (2) Economic imperialists hiding behind a growth-is-good-for-all slogan can be isolated, made to fight on other fronts that distract them from unchecked rapaciousness. (3) Local democracies have the *potential*—but no guarantee beyond that—to deal with environmental problems when and if they arise in the wake of sustainable development projects. And (4) indigenous cultures ought not to be automatically relegated to the status of obstacles to local sustainable development projects.

CONCLUSION

Having said all of this, I want to make sure I am not misunderstood about my critique of Cesar Cuello's work (or, indirectly, my critique of those others he accuses of having only partial views). I remain skeptical about foundationalist approaches to ethics of any sort—including foundationalist approaches to the ethics of sustainability in general as well as Cuello's holistic model. However, in his case and in the case of others, a definition of sustainability is not everything; many advocates of sustainable development have done excellent work in

attempting to promote sustainability in particular cases.

Cuello is no exception to this rule. In the booklength thesis in which he proposes his holistic definition, he also discusses in detail the particular case of the Osa Peninsula in Costa Rica, where a number of factors undercut efforts aimed at sustainable management of magnificent rainforests, as well as other features of the local ecosystem. Cuello ticks them off one by one: persistent goldmining in the rivers; continued insistence on traditional development initiatives by both government agencies and non-governmental organizations that have traditionally favored development; factional and turf differences among these agencies; technician or expertocratic attitudes on their part, especially a general disdain for the beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge of the local campesinos; continued intrusions of foreign capital, not only aimed at expanding lumber or pulp production, but more recently supporting an ecotourism that benefits foreign investors more than local communities; foreign-based agricultural development based on chemical fertilizers and pesticides; and so on.

After summarizing these and other anti-sustainable forces, Cuello lays out a specific strategy for dealing with each of them. He does refer back, at almost every point, to his holistic definitions; but the real focus, in each case, is on practical, down-to-earth solutions for the problems *at the local level*. In practice, then, Cuello is much more pragmatic than his holistic definition might lead us to expect.

And it is this pragmatism that I would like to foster—with respect to Cuello's proposals but also more generally. This is in line with my American Pragmatist, Dewey-based *progressivism associated with local activism*. (As I understand European politics today, this is similar to at least some social-democratic movements—at least those that focus on local issues rather than new national or regional parties.)

If this were not being addressed to a philosophy audience, I could probably stop here. But since I started with a thesis supporting a *general framework* of ethical *guidelines* (not principles) for sustainability, I will return to that now as my conclusion. However, I would also call to mind once again what I added immediately. The guidelines and framework are likely to be useful *only* if we recognize that each real-world implementation is going to be radically

different, peculiar to its own region. In principle, there may be a general framework for ethical sustainability, but in practice there are only local democratic attempts to bring about some approximation of it.

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