

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND POSTMODERNISM

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What I try to do in this brief presentation is examine some of the tenets of early postmodernism. I realize that there are many postmodernisms; and the late work of Foucault, for example, reflects a different emphasis on the self than does his early work. There is also a very rich movement in the last decade or more, where pragmatism, feminism, and postmodernism meet, in which the extremes of some aspects of early postmodernism are avoided and the best of the postmodernist movement is preserved. (To defend this would require an entire paper, but I wanted to make clear which postmodernism I am referring to.) I am also convinced that Giles Deleuze, especially in his book on Spinoza, is trying to do something very interesting. (This, too, is a topic for another time.)

My paper is also deeply influenced by working in the developing world and listening to how people from very different cultures position themselves. I am and have been trying to hear and discern the kinds of relationships that they are seeking with individuals from other cultures which are often thought to be very different from their own. I am trying to draw on postcolonial thinkers and their reaction to postmodernism, and I am, with their help, trying to avoid a Eurocentric view of multiculturalism. I am also, in the most cursory fashion, responding to how some postmodernists—Foucault and Derrida—are influenced by Nietzsche and use Nietzsche. There is no doubt in my mind that they have both read deeply in Nietzsche, but I think they are taking at least some aspects of his thought in directions that he did not intend.

I attempt to bring this very complex agenda to bear on issues of human rights and sustainable development.

Among the many themes in postmodernism are the fragmentation of culture, the dissolution of the self, the relativity of human values, and the role of power relations. Many of these ideas are derived from a superficial reading of Nietzsche, whose thought experiments and critiques of culture have been turned into dogmatic ideology.

Nietzsche did indeed describe the self as a recent creation that we may need to go beyond, and he tentatively promoted an ethics of self-transcendence. He also consistently argued for the need to subvert the most precious concepts and illusions concerning who we are, and the need to be skeptical of our most fundamental values. He passionately discussed and described the urgent necessity for transforming all values, and he advocated attending to the fragmentation of culture.

Nietzsche was also skeptical concerning philosophizing about the whole or wanting to reduce everything to a rational system. He saw his own philosophy as transitory, as a critique, a prophetic pointing to very difficult times for culture and human values. He saw a desert of nihilism as the future of European culture, and he predicted tragic consequences of emergent nationalism. Prophetically he stated, "The Reich, the Reich, the Reich. Someday the German people will commit unpardonable sins in the name of the Reich." (See Kaufmann, 1982, pp. 32-50.) He foresaw the horrific consequences of chauvinistic nationalism and mass movements in which individuals, seething with envy and resentment, celebrated demagoguery and barbarism.

What does this have to do with human rights and development? It is of utmost importance to development activities to study and understand the devastating and cursed consequences of colonialism, which was a result of European cultural and economic chauvinism. Many so-called developing countries were economically far more self-sufficient, in essential areas such as food production, before the colonial era. Cultures and economies were destroyed. People were enslaved and placed in weakened states of subjugated personhood, and all of this was directly tied to European imperialistic and financial demands.

Bengal, for example, was self-sufficient in food production before it was subjugated by European powers. Instead of retaining a rich agricultural diversity, its land base was structured around hemp production. Hemp was much needed for rope in the shipping industry—and thus for the further extension of European power. The Sudan, once the bread basket of Africa, became a prominent source of high quality cotton. Kenya, in great part, was turned into a coffee plantation. These economic dynamics had everything to do with power relations and attendant cultural genocide with its racist, patronizing rituals.

Europe, like Ancient Rome, saw its culture, its economic successes and its languages as great gifts to the human recipients who were conquered. European colonialism acted out the rituals of sexist men. European nationals and trading organizations forced themselves on others, told them how wonderful it would be, and promised to take care of them—provided, of course, the relationship remained meaningful on European terms.

Postmodernism can make a substantial contribution to interpreting and understanding the importance of Eurocentric economic ideologies and related patterns of self-formation. Postmodernism and social constructionism (or central concepts of these intellectual movements) also have much to offer on issues concerning sustainable development and human rights. Power relations often shape values. The good is frequently articulated by and enforced by the powerful. Nietzsche attended to this dynamic with great sophistication in his theory of the *Wille zur Macht* [will to power].

Self-formation does indeed occur in cultural contexts. Humankind assumes a myriad of forms in richly different cultures and epochs—varieties of languages, value systems, etc. Diversity and respect for difference is of utmost importance in understanding gender relations and cultural strengths. If one does not draw on cultural values and communal ideals which are indigenous to cultures, development will not occur; or, if it does for a time, it will not be sustainable. The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization found this to be the case when it reviewed many of its failed agricultural initiatives in Africa some two decades ago. The FAO had tried to implement agricultural improvement through male power structures in contexts where women had the real knowledge base and where they indeed did 90% of the work. The UN had also tried to foster successful individualistic models in cultures in which persons did not pride themselves on their personal success more than on their communities.

FAO procedures and practices were transformed by listening to and working with women. In many countries, development personnel realized that most women were interested in change only if the entire community of which they were a part would benefit. This is similar to Ghandi's test: he says that one should not provide development assistance to a village unless the poorest members of the community will benefit. Development aid can often serve merely to reinforce

existent power structures. Working through local leadership is a positive and important concept or value in planning, but it requires that the local leadership in question is interested in its own people.

There are, however, limits to the postmodernist and social constructionist perspectives. To say that cultures are different and that they are undergoing continuing fragmentation is not necessarily to conclude that the members of humankind cannot have anything in common. We share a dependence on earth, air, fire, and water. We have relatively similar bodies. The deforestation and reforestation in which we engage have dramatic effects beyond all of our borders. The burning of high sulfur fuels affects everyone. The decreasing supply of fresh, potable water is now affecting and will increasingly affect all humankind. Furthermore, universal human rights are not only possible to articulate, but they are necessary to the human condition. We should have the right to personhood regardless of gender or culture. All humankind have the right to the fruits of their labors. We also have the right to due process in legal matters. In addition, individuals should have the right to marry or not to marry. They should be able to leave their country of origin or return to it. (I grant that in many countries or contexts this is only something that world citizens hope for in the future.)

My argument is a simple one. Unless we understand and work with cultural differences and the best of indigenous values, economic and social development is not sustainable. However, we must infuse this process with the values and ideals of universal human rights for which all of us are responsible. Without creating or protecting fundamental human rights for our fellow world citizens, sustainable development will not occur. The fruits and benefits of improvement or the development of economic strengths will go to the wealthy and the powerful.

Unless the rights and lives of the poorest of the poor in India and Nepal are attended to and protected, systematic deforestation will continue to occur at a traumatic rate in that region. Unless the water subsidies and privileges of agribusiness in California are carefully scrutinized, challenged, and changed in order to take into account all the citizens of the Western part of North America, access to potable water and to an environment even relatively safe from harmful chemicals will continue to be compromised. The

economies of Russia and the many former Communist states may continue to grow, but a strong shared base of economic development will not occur unless and until Russia and its surrounding neighbors become societies based on just laws.

Marxism has much to say about self-formation and a sense of common humanity. However, one reason why Marxist regimes failed is that they tried—even while retaining class and economic privilege for many party members—to change and improve material conditions in their societies while neither believing in nor genuinely implementing constitutions that respected personhood, cultural diversity, due process, or the right to leave the country of origin. One can create economic growth through cowboy capitalism and by means of economies of extortion. But without laws and respect for persons, economic development that is broad-based and sustainable will not occur.

Human rights are tied to global responsibilities. We can, for example, discuss the rights of children, but it is imperative to have moral courage. When children are being enslaved or when they are "parts-out" or used for organ sales which are in turn sold on the black market, to take refuge in differing views of humanity and cultural values is to retreat from our responsibilities. Cultural difference needs to be understood; however, if tolerance is to be real it must have limits. No government or people, for example, should do or be allowed to do what European Americans have done to the people and cultures of the American Indians. Conquest is not a right, and no rights follow from conquest.

Quite simply, much (though perhaps not all) of postmodernism ends in hopeless relativism and moral impotence. If we conclude and/or accept that all relations are purely power relations and that all values are historical, relative, and accidental, then today we could just as well be planning or implementing conquest and slavery rather than trying to extend human understanding or to contribute to the unending struggle against cruelty and barbarism. As Kwame Anthony Appiah says in an excellent essay entitled, "The Post-Colonial and the Postmodern" (1995), postmodernism suffers from the same exclusivity of vision it rejects and pretends to abhor. Although allegedly nothing can be said about all cultures, because all cultures are only fragments of difference and meanings, the claim is made for *all* cultures. Absolute cultural relativism legitimates genocide, sexism, and abusive power relations. Ethical universalism need not be tied to European world views or imperial domination. Appiah is looking for a humanism fully

cognizant of human suffering; one which is historically contingent, anti-essentialist, and yet powerfully demanding. He bases his ethics in a concern for human suffering and asserts that obligations or responsibilities transcend cultural differences and national identity.

To maintain that we live only in our cultural fragments is to inhabit what Kumkum Sangari (1995) calls "present locales of undecidability" and to live lives void of moral action. Sangari, in "The Politics of the Possible," offers an argument parallel to that of Appiah. She contends (1995, p. 143) that postmodern epistemology "universalizes the self-conscious dissolution of the bourgeois subject." Again, the same contradictory claims. There are allegedly no universal values or modes of knowledge, yet the truth of this assertion is made for *all* cultures. Sangari regards one of the most important weaknesses of postmodernism to be that it "valorizes indeterminacy as a cognitive mode, [and] also deflates social contradiction into forms of ambiguity or deferral, instates arbitrary juxtaposition or collage as historical 'method,' preempts change by fragmenting the ground of praxis" (Sangari, 1995, p. 147).

Postmodernism universalizes cultures into insularity. It generalizes its own skepticism which is its dogmatic epistemological preoccupation. It instantiates the imperialism of relativism. It gives no philosophical or social place to political responsibility or ethical values. In this mode of discourse and inaction, we can only engage in involuted descriptions or in the articulating of ephemeral world pictures which are lost in themselves or at best captured in paralyzed discourses. Action in this mode is as valuable or as hopelessly tragic as inaction. Without the possibility and actuality of moral action, I would argue that we are at best what Dostoevsky referred to as "neurotic bipeds."

#### REFERENCES

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