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Sustainable Development and Humanities

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1.

The project of Sustainable Development (SD) is not only about the renewable energy resources and innovative technologies; it has social and cultural dimensions as well. The technological aspect of the SD implies the relevant social mentality and cultural mindset. Moreover, **SD needs to reconsider the essence of technology as such and come up with the holistic vision of the entire venture -- comprehending biology, esthetics, ethics and technology. For putting together such a holistic vision, the Humanities (philosophy, anthropology, arts, literature, education, etc.) can provide some pertinent ideas and practices.**

SD promotes new technologies – renewable and innovative, however such a technological stance can be misleading without a due consideration of the ontological essence of technology as such. The substantial critique of technology cannot be conducted from within the technological sciences, as we need to look at it from the outside -- to come up with an adequate picture. Humanities have already attempted such an approach, according to the particular tools which they dispose; writers like Herbert Wells, Aldus Huxley, or Arthur Clark have *thematized* the nature of technology and technological progress in their stories; the same can be said of XX century artists, anthropologists, etc.

It was a philosopher, who came up with the most radical question concerning technology – Martin Heidegger, in his well-known lecture to the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts in 1953. This is one of the best examples of how Humanities work for laying the foundation for SD.

Heidegger focuses on the very essence of technology by reinterpreting the ancient Greek and Latin, as well as German terms and forges the concept of **Enframing (Gestell)** to open up and clarify what modern technology is. Here are some quotes from the lecture: **“The essence of technology lies in Enframing. Enframing is the gathering together that belongs to that setting-upon which sets upon man and puts him in position to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve.”** (p. 24). To put it in a more readable language: **technology positions (sets) man open up what is there as the real, the reality, but solely by producing this reality as an object to be utilized and consumed;** in other words, this is a subject-object relationship. **Enframing sets man to turn the Environment into the object of consumption – “standing-reserve.”**

In contrast to this, Heidegger revives and reconstructs the ancient Greek notion of **techne, which is also opening up of what is there as real, of reality; however, in this case the reality is not for mere utilization and consumption, but for participation in its being, for letting it come to pass, for letting it be.** The Greek word for Truth is *aletheia* – opening up of what is, un-concealment of

what is. This can be specified not as a subject-object relation, but as a reciprocal (dialogical) relationship between humans and their reality or environment.

Heidegger brings in another ancient Greek term – *poiesis* – **which also refers to the opening up of the Truth as the Beauty and thus suggest the essence of the Arts. *Poiesis* used to be the same as *techne*.** This is what Heidegger states: **“There was a time when it was not technology alone that bore the name *techne*. Once that revealing that brings forth truth into the splendor of radiant appearing also was called *techne*. Once there was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called *techne*. And the *poiesis* of the fine arts also was called *techne*.”** (p.34)

With the advent of technology and Enframing, *techne* and *poiesis* got marginalized: “Enframing blocks the shining-forth and holding-sway of truth. ... Enframing, in a way characteristic of destining, blocks *poiesis*.” (p.30)

The challenge for SD is to rethink the idea of modern technology in order to deconstruct the Enframing and retrieve technology as *techne* and *poiesis*. On the face of it, the technology of renewable energy is not Enframing, it does not utilize the environment as an object for consumption, but rather – it is more like *techne*: participation in the being of the environment, a kind of reciprocity, an exchange and the dialogue with it. **But as soon as the renewable energy is regarded as the only bases of SD, it may turn into the Enframing again: a mere technological tool of opening up the truth, the un-concealment of what really is, and thus block the “shining-forth and holding-sway of truth.”** To avoid this, **we should regard renewable energy technologies as just one of the constituents of a larger fusion, which provides a wider picture of what is; this larger fusion is made up of technology, biology, ethics and esthetics.** This will bring us closer to the holistic picture of the world, analogous to that of the ancient Greek, where *techne* (*poiesis*) was not a separate function of the society, but a unifying force that brought religious, political and social life together; humanity had the sense of connectedness with the All of Being. **Keeping renewable energy and innovative technologies within this larger fusion and broader picture of the world is the destination of the Humanities within the context of the SD.**

2.

SD is not only about the energy in terms of electricity, heating, etc. It’s also about “social energy” – the energy that moves a society, a community. What can be regarded as one of the major sources of social energy? It has been obvious, that the economic drive is the major source of social energy, but here I would like to focus on the source of different kind -- the so-called **National Narratives and Collective Memory (a.k. a. Cultural Memory).**

Man is a story-telling animal. He needs stories to interpret the world around him and to forge his individual and/or group identity. **National Narratives are cognitive instruments that grasp together information into a coherent whole; they organize texts, episodes of the past, symbols, and practices, which make up Collective Memory, into a story. Collective Memory (as a combination of texts, episodes of the past, symbols, and practices) differs from analytic History as an objective discipline. Historical analysis aspires to objectivity and seeks to justify its account by appeal to evidence, whereas Memory is a tool for defining who we are, the result being that it is often subjective, if not “ethnocentric and narcissistic.”** History demonstrates a

willingness to change a Narrative in the light of evidence, whereas Memory demonstrates a tendency to change the evidence in light of a Narrative. (Bellagio Whitepaper, 2005)¹

National or Group Narratives are sometimes referred to as “Cultural DNA” – an underlying code involved in cultural interpretations of the world. This codes are so-called Narrative Templates (Wertsch, 2002) -- deep structures that transform and realign the historical facts into the story through which a group or a nation realizes its identity and its picture of the world. One can identify major templates in the narratives of the nations like Georgians, Armenians, Lithuanians, etc.: **Origins, Golden Age, Chosenness, and Victimization.** Through these templates some nations organize and vision their past, present and future – they claim, they have the most ancient origins, they lived in the Golden Age of their country’s strength and prosperity, they were chosen by the God to carry a certain historic mission, and they were victimized for this.

Thus, **“Social energy” comes from the Collective (Cultural) Memory channeled (“shaped”) through the National (Group) Narrative Templates.** There is a strong emotional attachment to the Collective Memory as to the source of the Group Identity. Identity is an imaginative construct, based on other constructs – Collective Memory and National Narratives. **As such, Memory and Narratives contain and carry social cognitive and behavioral, semiotic and psychological “energy”, because we act and think according to our Identity – individual or group.**

In terms of the SD, Narratives and Memory are like a double-edged sword -- they can be both disruptive and constructive. **There are intolerant and aggressive Narratives, and flexible Narratives as well; xenophobic narratives and multicultural narratives, etc.** It is obvious, that aggressive, intolerant and xenophobic narratives are irrelevant for the SD. **A SD community is supposed to be self-sufficient and self-enclosed in terms of energy, but, on the other hand, it’s supposed to be open and flexible culturally: open towards the Environment, and towards the cultural Other and the Otherness.** Earlier I touched upon the participation in the being of the Environment and the dialogue with the Environment. The same **dialogicality (Mikhail Bakhtin’s term) is essential for the social and cultural aspects of the SD.**

The task is to promote and encourage the flexible and dialogical Narratives within the community for the purposes of SD. This implies a certain reshaping and modification of Collective Identity/Narrative/Memory, and this can be done primarily through Education -- the History and Native Literature instruction.

The educational aspects of SD imply rereading of History and Native Literature, drafting the new textbooks in which the values and narratives of tolerance, openness to the Other (Otherness), and flexibility are foregrounded. Let’s take the example of Georgia: in very broad terms, there are two Narratives competing today – the first one is: Georgia survived because we have always been Orthodox-Christians and that’s how we managed to maintain our identity; this Narrative belongs to the traditionalist majority. Contrary to this goes the other Narrative: Georgia has always been the crossroads of civilizations, enjoying and endorsing cultural diversity, at the same time adding unique Georgian touch to such diversity, and this is how we survived and

¹ White Paper Report Prepared for the Georgian Ministry of Education; Based on the Working Meeting “Negotiating a New National Narrative in Georgia;” Rockefeller Foundation, Bellagio, Italy, 2005

maintained our identity -- this narrative is promoted by the liberal minority of Georgians. Obviously this latter narrative is more adequate for the SD and its educational priorities.

The practical goal is to teach people to live with a "polyphony of narratives," to set the conditions for Otherness to be perceived and processed in a constructive and productive way. This is crucial today, given the challenges posed by the Globalization.

Promotion of ethno-cultural diversity is another precondition for SD. There is an interaction between individual and group identities. Individual Identity/Narrative/Memory to some extent is modified by the Group Identity/Narrative/Memory, while at the same time there can be discrepancy between the two: individuals don't see themselves in the group. The task is to make them able to connect their autobiographical "little narratives" with the "big narrative of the group (nation)" (Holquist, Bellagio White Paper, 2005).

Students in the classroom should be introduced to historical and cultural Rich Points: complex cases which are difficult to be read from one perspective only, and require a broader and more flexible interpretation. By reading such Rich Points the students acquire a specific set of skills to come up with wider picture of the world. The extreme example of such a skill of translating the Rich Points and endorsing the "polyphony of narratives" is suggested by **F.S. Fitzgerald's famous statement: "...the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function."** Sure, I'm not trying to set such extreme goals to the SD education, but **certain educational activities are needed to shape a flexible mindset in the students -- a Protean mindset, a mindset of a "cultural translator," "cultural interpreter," who is able to translate the Other (Otherness) into his/her own language and, vice versa, translate himself/herself into the language of the Other (Otherness).** Shaping such a mindset through history and literature instruction is essential for both environmental and cultural sustainability.

3.

SD is not only about the renewable energy resource. **It is also about the Renovation of Traditional Values and Practices. Most of the cultures carry certain elements of sustainability; otherwise they would have never survived the challenges posed by the History.** We know that those who exhausted those elements of sustainability because of their anti-environmental practices got extinct (e.g.: the Vikings in Greenland, etc.).

Different ethnic cultures contain various domestic, agricultural, construction-design, and social practices that were relevant for the SD of those communities. Such practices are based on frugality, safekeeping of and belonging to the Environment, and moderation. A couple of examples from the **traditional Georgian culture** – 1) a tool for fishing in the river, which was designed in such way, that only large fish would be caught, while the baby-fishes would pass through; 2) **Folk Georgian architecture: a pyramidal cupola-shaped, stepped vault (gvirgvini) – made of hewn logs and beams – on pillars, with a central opening at the top which serves as both a window and smoke flue -- a very reasonable and very simple insolation and airing system.** As for the **traditional Georgian social practices** – e.g. the **conflict resolution** in Georgian highlands would be delegated to women and to the elderly. Even the **vendetta** had its social sustainability elements: the orphans left after the bloody conflict would be adopted by the hostile clan. Unfortunately, the 70 years of the communist rule, soviet-style industrialization of economy and collectivization of peasants, nearly

wiped out those practices, turning Georgians into a very “anti-ecologic” nation, polluting the environment, destroying fish in the rivers and, especially after the post-soviet energy hardships, destroying the forestry.

We need to apply Humanities and implement relevant cultural studies to uncover and foreground what I would call here the Traditional Sustainability Templates implicit in this or that culture, and to encourage, activate and modernize these Templates. SD is based on the double-coding of tradition and modernity, traditionalism and innovation: a fusion of certain traditional cultural codes with the state-of-the-art innovative approaches.

4.

What is the use of Art for SD?

Along with other cultural tools, Art has had evolutionary function for the humankind. The humans needed Art to get them adapted to the Environment, through reading and interpreting this Environment via symbols, images, metaphors, texts, etc. Art had to play important cognitive and psychological role – Art carried knowledge and incited strong emotions. Art was a flexible and relevant tool for the dialogue with the Environment rather than its mere consumption; Art (*poiesis*) brought humans closer to *fusys* – the acts of Nature, while technological stance, the Enframing, blocked it. Art had its social function: such collective forms of Art, as frescos and sculptures in the temples, theatre, and carnivals encouraged the sense of participation.

Art suggested freedom to the human mind, because Art is based on the free play of intellect and intuition. It destroys ideological clichés and stereotypes (in some cases it also creates and strengthens them for sure). **Development cannot be Sustainable, without the promotion of Liberal and Democratic values. In terms of Democratic education, art-forms and esthetic forms are very important tools.** European Democracy and Liberalism did not originate in the writings of philosophers and political thinkers solely; primarily it came from the writings of the great ancient Greek dramatists and poets, and then – in the masterworks of the makers of the Renaissance visual arts and literature.

SD will depend upon the availability of Knowledge, without the access to Knowledge there is no sustainability for a collective, an ethnic group or a nation. **However, Knowledge is not only about the amount of information one receives, but it is mainly about the processing of this information. Given its concise and suggestive language, Art is a very flexible tool for such processing.**

In the future the Art will take up new forms, but **today the art-forms which carry the most suggestive message of the sustainability are that of Fusion** – e.g. the so called Ethno fusion in music, mixing ethnic music with that of jazz and rock. In general, this is what one may call a **“healthy postmodernism,” based on the rapprochement of ancient and modern, merger of traditional and academic art forms, which we see in contemporary literature, visual arts,** etc. (Consider the comeback of “throat singing,” which today has become almost like a new form of the avant-garde). The same sort of fusion of traditional and modern forms has become one of the major trends in **contemporary design, the most essential element of the sustainability of human Habitat. Moreover, Design is the modern realm where Technology and poiesis meet again**

(and become *Techné*), in as much as Design can be interpreted as the Beauty applied to human Habitat through technological means.

5.

Human action is a Mediated Action. Man has no immediate access to Reality; unlike other biological beings, humans interact with the Reality only through cultural tools. This is what Ernst Cassirer called “the curse of mediacy.” Another distinguished thinker -- Lev Semionovich Vigotsky wrote a lot about this: most of human experience is mediated.

The cultural tools used by man for mediation (technology, language, narratives, art, etc.) modify the Reality, turning the means into the end itself. Some tools distance us further from reality (Technology as Enframing), some may bring us closer to it – help us be more adequate (Technology as *techné* and *poiesis*). The latter type of tools provide more flexible mediation as they are holistic in essence, based on the synergy of different kind of tools, and give us an access to a wider and more diverse picture of the world. **The fusion of renewable energy and innovative technologies with the arts and humanities can provide such synergy, which will lay foundation for the SD.**

Such a synergy, rather than merely modifying and deforming the Reality, can modify human mindset and open it up to the values of SD. Let me end up this presentation by giving you an example of such a mindset, an example coming from the Humanities. Matsuo Basho was a 17th century Japanese poet. One day he was walking through the field accompanied by one of his apprentices. They were composing haiku poems. Spotting a dragonfly on a blade of the grass, the apprentice suggested such an image: “If you pull off the wings from the dragonfly, you’ll see the red paprika pepper.” And Matsuo Basho replied to this: “No, this is a bad poem! It is bad, because you’ve killed the dragonfly. You should have said instead – if you adjust the wings to a red pepper, you will see the dragonfly!”

So, let us enrich the state-of-the-art technologies with the “technology” carried by the Humanities and the Art: the vivifying “technology,” which can transform a red paprika pepper into a dragonfly.

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