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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, EQUITY AND VIOLENCE

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Introduction

In Paris the recent terrorist killings and the planned Climate Summit at the end of the month, one of horror the other of hope, signify the two principal global challenges of our time: violent extremism and the environmental crisis. The former threatens the fabric of society while the latter endangers the physical life support systems of the planet. It can be argued that each of these phenomena is rooted, although in different ways, in the exclusion of humanness in the systems of power and forms of production and distribution that have characterized Capitalism over the last three centuries.

Within the capitalist mode of production there is a systematic tendency for an increase in the volume and range of commodities². The structural imperative for continuous expansion of production is associated with the development of a ‘consumerist’ culture in which the individual is driven by an insatiable desire to increase the acquisition of commodities. It is not surprising that for a long time within the Capitalist forms of production and social life, nature was seen as an ‘exploitable resource’: The impact on the ecosystem was not adequately taken into account in the process of technological change and economic growth.

¹ Parts of this paper are drawn from the latest publication of the author: Akmal Hussain, *The Planet in Peril and A Civilization in Crisis: Reviving a Sense of the Sacred*, Chapter 1, in Christian W. Troll and Liam O’Callaghan (eds.), *The Sacredness of Creation*, Multimedia Affairs, Lahore, 2015.

² See: (i) Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1971, Chapters 23, 24 and 25.
(ii) Paul M. Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, Monthly Review Press, 1968, Chapter-5.
(iii) Robert Heilbroner, *21st Century Capitalism*, Norton Paperback, New York, NY, 1994, Chapters 3 and 5.
(iv) Akmal Hussain: *Imperialism*, paper in the *Encyclopaedia of Capitalism*, Golson Books, Ltd. New York, June 2004.

The evidence shows that the process of economic growth within this framework has involved an increase in economic inequality at the inter personal as well as inter country levels³. This has resulted in the exclusion of a large proportion of the population in a globalized economy from the fruits of economic growth. For example, while the richest 1 percent of the world's population lives in luxury, the bottom 39 percent live in poverty defined in terms of an income of USD 2 per person per day. Economic deprivation is accompanied by political exclusion of large sections of society from the systems of power and governance which shape their social, cultural and environmental conditions.

The rise of terrorism indicates that some strata of the deprived and excluded communities have embraced ideologies of hate and violence. Propounded in the garb of religion these ideologies drain out the spirituality of love and reduce religion to an empty form that is used as an instrument of monstrous brutality for the pursuit of power. Thus the ideology of terrorism is the antithesis of religion. The path to God in all religions involves a journey to the heart. As Martin Lings⁴ and Professor Hossein Nasr⁵ have argued, the heart in both Western and Eastern traditions is not the organ by that name but the centre of consciousness: it is the instrument of experiencing the transcendent. We can know God through love.

In this article, I will first indicate that the latest scientific evidence suggests that life on earth is threatened as a consequence of human intervention since the industrial revolution, into the ecosystem. Therefore the countries of the world need to undertake an urgent reduction in carbon emissions to mitigate that threat. I will then argue on the basis of social science and an ancient though vitally relevant knowledge tradition, that the current environmental crisis is the result of a particular *inhuman* relationship between humans, commodities and nature. Therefore the crisis of the environment is not merely a technological problem but is essentially a crisis of human civilisation.

³ For a more detailed discussion see:
(i) Akmal Hussain, *Imperialism*, op.cit.
(ii) Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty First Century*, Translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 2014.
(iii) Anthony B. Atkinson, *Inequality, What Can Be Done?* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 2015.

⁴ Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?*, The Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge, 2010, Page 48.

⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Environmental Crisis*, chapter 5, in Steven C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder (eds.), *Spirit and Nature, Why the Environment Is a Religious Issue*, Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 1992, Page 88.

I. The Challenge of Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Since the industrial revolution the stress on the world's ecosystem has been building up and may now have reached a critical point. At each stage in the process of production, extraction of raw materials from the earth, fabrication of these raw materials to produce products, the consumption of products and the disposal of waste involves in most cases the generation of heat through fossil fuels. Consequently greenhouse gases are emitted into the atmosphere such as, carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide. This has resulted in the phenomenon of global warming. The UN Report of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2013 reiterates the findings of the earlier 2007 IPCC Report⁶ that global warming is indeed occurring. It can be argued that this has been caused by the impact of the forms and levels of production and consumption on the planet's eco system: The Inter Governmental Panel's Climatic Change (IPCC) Report 2013 warns that "Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed..."⁷

Climate change associated with global warming has caused an increase in the intensity and frequency of extreme climatic events such as droughts, floods, hurricanes and extreme cold in some places and extreme heat in others. These phenomena have caused large scale destruction with loss of life and livelihood and associated human suffering. Not only human beings but other living creatures and plants will also be adversely affected by climate change over the next four decades. If average temperatures exceed 1.5 degrees centigrade then approximately 20 to 30 percent of plant and animal species are likely to become extinct⁸.

The current consensus amongst scientists is that if the increase in average temperatures goes beyond 2 degrees centigrade by the end of this century, we will enter uncharted territory and the consequences for the life support systems of the planet could be catastrophic. In view of

⁶ IPCC, 2007: Summary for Policymakers in, Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, Contribution of Working Group-II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, M.L. Parry, O.F. Canziani, J.P. Palutikof, P.J. van der Linden and C.E. Hanson, Eds., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, Page 11.

⁷ Climate Change 2013, The Physical Science Basis, Summary for Policy Makers, Working Group-I Contribution to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, [Stocker, T.F., D. Qin, G.K. Plattner, M. Tignor, S.K. Allen, J. Boschung, A. Nauels, Y. Xia, V. Bex and P.M. Midgley (eds.)], Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA, Page 2.

⁸ IPCC Report 2007, op.cit.

this, the Paris Climate Summit (COP 21) will have to address the fact that under current global emissions trends of 2.2% increase per year, the rise in average global temperatures is projected to reach between 3.7 degrees to 4.8 degrees centigrade by the year 2100. Accordingly to avoid a catastrophe and keep the end of the century temperature increase below 2 degrees centigrade, the world community will need to agree to achieve a 40 to 70% reduction in global greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 compared to 2010 levels.

II. **Humans, Commodities and Nature**

Beyond the mitigation measures the long term effort to restore the life support systems of the planet (fresh air, adequate fresh water, fertile soils), can only be undertaken through a change in consciousness. This will involve developing forms of economic organisation and political decision making that are based on the human sensibility of empathy and compassion towards others and towards nature.

The consciousness that emerged from the social and economic life under Capitalism is characterized by a particular relationship between humans, commodities and nature. Individuals and economic organizations within the market system are pitted in aggressive competition in the pursuit of the accumulation of profits and commodities. Interaction with the ‘other’ is seen not as a mode of enhancing the self but rather as a means to achieving material ends.

The individual is driven by an insatiable desire to acquire more and more commodities, which are seen as the emblem of one’s worth. The production system through its sales efforts has engendered a consumerist culture whereby commodities are perceived not merely in terms of their functions as objects of convenience but as the receptacles of the qualities of attractiveness, efficacy and power⁹. Thus qualities which are inherent to human beings are alienated from them and transposed into commodities. We are then invited by the advertisement industry to not simply acquire commodities but essentially to repossess ourselves¹⁰.

Capitalism has engendered a culture and constructed a psyche which impels the individual to strive to acquire more and more products. It is not surprising therefore that the historically

⁹ Akmal Hussain, *Commodities and the Displacement of Desire*, Daily Times, Lahore, 28 November 2002.

¹⁰ Akmal Hussain, *A Planet in Peril and a Civilization in Crisis: Reviving a Sense of the Sacred*, op.cit.

unprecedented increase in the volume and range of commodities may now be approaching the maximum loading capacity of the eco system. Nor is it surprising that within such a mode of production and forms of consciousness, nature is regarded as an “exploitable resource”. There is a tendency therefore to objectify nature as if it were divorced from the spiritual experience of knowing ourselves as human beings connected to God and His creation.

The contemporary preeminence given to commodities can be counterposed by the Classical Greek tradition. Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* in 4th century BC, when analyzing the concept of value, suggests that goods cannot be of value since they are merely useful. What is of value is the functioning of human beings according to the principles of virtue. He argues: “If ... we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity ... of the soul implying a rational principle ... human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with virtue ...”¹¹

Amartya Sen 2,400 years later, in taking up Aristotle’s insight on human functioning while ignoring his emphasis on a life of virtue, has presented a new perspective on Development as Freedom¹². Dr. Mahbub ul Haq had earlier pioneered the concept of Human Development which broadened the concern of development from merely per capita incomes to two additional vital aspects of human well being: health and education. He made a lasting impact on public policy across the world by quantifying these three elements (per capita income, health and education) into a Human Development Index. Amartya Sen takes the idea of development further by suggesting that not only is it necessary to provide the material requirements of human functioning such as health, education, income, but at the same time a whole range of entitlements related with freedoms that human beings consider to be of value¹³.

III. A Perspective on Sustainable Development

The idea of Sustainable Development which is now exercising the minds of public policy makers in view of the environmental crisis was originally propounded by Mrs. Brundtland and her team that produced the Report of the World Commission on Environment and

¹¹ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Section 5, W.D. Ross (ed), Oxford University Press, 1980, PDF Version, Page 7. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.1.i.html>

¹² Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999.

¹³ Ibid.

Development (WCED) in the mid 1980s¹⁴. It may be helpful to revisit the concept as it was originally formulated in order to take up some of the implications that have now acquired a crucial importance. Sustainable Development was defined in the WCED as "... development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."¹⁵ This definition has two conceptual underpinnings which have profound implications for economics and economic policy:

First, Sustainable Development so defined involves a sense of responsibility for future generations in terms of so pursuing the individual and collective welfare of the present generation that the life support systems of the planet (fresh water, fresh air, fertile soils) are maintained for future generations to fulfill their needs. This implies a shift away from the central proposition of conventional Neo Classical Economics that the optimum outcome of the market mechanism requires that the life time income of the individual be maximized¹⁶. The above definition of Sustainable Development suggests that the individual must act today out of a sense of responsibility towards future generations. There is therefore recognition that the individual is part of a community that lives in history from generation to generation.

Second, it can be argued that since the concept of Sustainable Development involves a sense of responsibility towards future generations yet unborn, it surely implies responsibility towards other members of the human community living in the present generation, who may be deprived of the ability to fulfill their needs. This again goes against the grain of Neo Classical Economics which propounds the pursuit of individual welfare maximization regardless of inter personal considerations. Thus it can be suggested that contrary to conventional economic theory but inherent to the idea of Sustainable Development is a concern for equity. Therefore if Sustainable Development is to be meaningful, equality of opportunity for all members of society must be built into the process of development. I have presented elsewhere a framework for such an inclusive development in Pakistan¹⁷.

¹⁴ Brundtland, *Our Common Future*, Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1987.

¹⁵ Brundtland, *Our Common Future*, Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, op.cit. Page 43.

¹⁶ Francis M. Bator, *The Simple Analytics of Welfare Maximization*, *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Mar., 1957), pp. 22-59.

¹⁷ Akmal Hussain, *Strengthening Democracy through Inclusive Growth*, chapter in, Akmal Hussain and Muchkund Dubey (ed.), *Democracy, Sustainable Development and Peace: New Perspectives on South Asia*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2014.

Furthermore I have argued that inclusive development is not only necessary for human development but in so far as it creates a broad base for savings, investment and innovation it leads to higher long term growth. Inclusive development would also contribute to greater social cohesion and thereby help control violence in society.

One can suggest that an important dimension of human functioning which has not yet been recognized in the development literature is that of developing our sense of beauty and experiencing our humanness through a relationship of care and compassion with each other and with Nature. It means experiencing the other as a means of knowing oneself. It also involves a re-awareness that the mountains, the rivers, the trees, the soil and all living creatures on earth are part of a sacred unity that sustains our physical and spiritual life. This consciousness is common to many of the wisdom traditions of the world particularly South Asia¹⁸.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues that, “according to the Islamic perspective God Himself *is* the ultimate environment which surrounds and encompasses humanity”. Nasr further suggests that according to the Quran, God is said to be All-Encompassing (*Muhit*), and points out that the word *Muhit* also means the environment¹⁹. In this context, Nasr quotes the following lines of the Quran:

“But to God belong all things in the heavens and on the earth: And He it is who encompasseth (*muhit*) all things.”

The Holy Quran, Sura IV : 126

Religion (from the Latin, Religio) means re-establishment of the ligament with God. The Quran invites us to re-establish that ligament whereby in prayer or in beholding God’s creation we become aware of His presence as loving mercy (Rehmah):

“...whithersoever
Ye turn, there is Allah’s countenance.”

The Holy Quran, Sura 2, Verse 115.

One can argue that the loving mercy of God is manifest in His creation both in the sense that nature enables the sustenance of physical life on earth and also in the sense that the beauty of

¹⁸ For a more detailed discussion of this point, see: Kapila Vatsyayan, Pluralism and Diversity in South Asia, chapter in, Akmal Hussain and Muchkund Dubey (ed.), Democracy, Sustainable Development and Peace: New Perspectives on South Asia, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2014.

¹⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, op.cit., Page 89.

nature nurtures our own spiritual being. Nature thus provides an opportunity for us to live on earth and yet experience the transcendent. We simultaneously inhabit the ephemeral and the eternal²⁰.

Conclusion

Essential to the Paris Summit, must be the recognition that protecting the life support systems of the planet is rooted in a rediscovery of the experience of being human: loving care towards all creatures and the physical environment. This means conducting the process of development such that it is marked by equity, justice and is in harmony with nature. This is the narrative that can become the basis of a new trajectory of Sustainable Development. Such a humane narrative could also effectively counter the narrative of the terrorists which is alienated from the sense of being human.

²⁰ Akmal Hussain, *The Eternal in the Ephemeral, Photographs and Poems*, Topical Printers, Lahore, 2014.

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