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Think globally, act locally and basta?

Why more is needed to make Europe both social and green

Keynote lecture at the European Conference

“Social Fairness in Sustainable development. A Green and Social Europe”

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Viewed from one angle, I should not be surprised to have been invited to open this impressive conference. Viewed from another, I should be amazed.

I should not be entirely surprised because as early as eighteen years ago I published two books, a monograph on *What is a Just Society?* and a collective volume on *Ecological Thought*.¹ For over two decades, I have been actively interested in both social justice and ecological issues and can therefore reasonably be presumed to have given some thought to their relationship with one another. Hardly amazing, you might conclude, to find me here.

And yet amazing it is. For what use can such a respectable institution as the European Commission have of a philosopher, that is, of someone who is of necessity a professional non-expert, frequently depicted by serious people as dangerously prone to idle speculation? And yet here I am. Perhaps because some of the highly cultured members of this institution both remembered the Marquis de Condorcet’s famous pronouncement that “any society not enlightened by philosophers will be misled by charlatans” and suspected that what applied to a European nation of the 18th century might apply even more to the European Union of the 21st. Or perhaps simply because someone perceived the need to zoom out from time to time, to look up once in a while, to take a broader view.

Fine, I shall try to do that, in my own rather special way. For I am one of those philosophers who believe it is important for us not only to look up and far ahead, but also to check where we put our feet. If we do not, we run the risk of tripping, and may even end up with our noses in the mud. This is one reason why I attended with the greatest interest and

¹ Ph. Van Parijs, *Qu’est-ce qu’une société juste? Introduction à la pratique de la philosophie politique* (Paris, Le Seuil, 1991; Spanish: Barcelona, Ariel, 1993 ; Italian: Firenze, Ponte alle Grazie, 1995 ; Portuguese: São Paulo, Atica, 1997); and F. De Roose & Ph. Van Parijs eds., *La Pensée écologique. Bref inventaire à l’usage de ceux qui la pratiquent et de ceux qui la craignent*, Brussels: De Boeck Université, 1991).

attention most of yesterday's experts meeting. Whether explicitly or not, I shall frequently refer to what I heard there in what I shall have to say today.

After this preamble, let me now proceed. I shall ask myself two simple questions: 1. What is the problem? 2. What is the solution? In reply to the first question, I shall offer some reflections on the two expressions that feature in the title of this conference and on the irrelationship with one another: "social fairness" and "sustainable development". By way of reply to the second question, I shall offer some reflections on the most classic among the slogans of the ecological movement: *Think globally, act locally*.

1. The problem

Is there a contradiction, a conflict or at least a tension between "social Europe" and "green Europe", between "social fairness" and "sustainable development"? And if there is one, is it a necessary feature of the relationship between the two objectives, or a contingent feature of the specific ways in which either or both objectives are currently being pursued? Or is there on the contrary a natural alliance, a pre-established harmony between green Europe and social Europe? And then again, if there is one, is it for intrinsic or for contingent reasons? Opinions on this issue seemed to diverge widely at the experts meeting. Who is right? Who is wrong? To answer this question, some conceptual tidying up is required on both sides of the putative tension.

A sustainably generalizable way of living

Take "sustainable development" first. Is sustainable development really what we want? I am sure I am not the only person in this room to find this expression a sloppy, indeed seriously misleading way of capturing our environmental concerns. "Sustainable development" is no doubt better than "development" *tout court*, and "development" is better than "growth". But can our objective really be characterized as an expansion that can be sustained forever? Sustainability, I submit, is essential, but development is not. What we are really after is *a way of living that is sustainably generalizable*.

By "generalizable", I mean that this way of living could be adopted across the globe. By "sustainably" I mean that this generalization could be perpetuated across generations. As to the "way of living", it must be characterized in comprehensive yet flexible terms. It is not just a standard of living, i.e. a level of real income. It is a way of producing, of consuming, of commuting, of building, of cohabiting, of holidaying, of procreating, and so on. This comprehensive characterization must also be flexible. It should not entail everyone ending up with the same consumption bundle or the same type of apartment at the same distance from the same type of work performed for the same number of hours for the same number of years, let alone with the same number of children and the same sort of partner. Yet the condition of sustainable generalizability will impose significant constraints on the range within which our way of living can permissibly vary.

Global justice as real freedom for all

Let us next turn to the second term of the putative tension, “social fairness”. Is some conceptual straightening needed here too? Certainly. The key point, either emphasized or taken for granted by several participants in the experts meeting, is that today, when talking about justice or fairness, we cannot talk exclusively or even primarily about social solidarity at the level of each of our societies. We must face straight away the issue of global justice. The challenge of climate change, the worldwide pressure of migration, the rapid and massive global impact of the US financial crisis, the unprecedented communicational interconnectedness generated by the worldwide web, all make it necessary, indeed increasingly self-evident, to frame the problem of justice at the global level.

This does not mean that the nation-states and in particular the national welfare states have no role left to play, but it does mean that we need to reverse the traditional way of thinking about justice. We no longer need to consider first justice within a nation and next justice between nations, but we must first ask what justice requires between all members of mankind and next ask on this background at what level the various policy instruments must be located, from the municipal to the global, without overlooking the increasingly important intermediate level of *sui generis* polities such as the European Union.

What must then be the content of global justice? Let me here just state, very dogmatically, my own conviction that the demands of global justice are simply a worldwide blow-up of the conception that plausibly captures justice at the level of particular societies. Hence, a just institutional arrangement is one that gives those who fare least well under it better life chances, better possibilities over the course of their lives than those sustainably enjoyed by the worst off under any other feasible arrangement. To put it more compactly, distributive justice, whether domestic or global, is a matter of sustainably maximizing the minimum level of real freedom.²

A win-no-loss rule

With these two clarifications in mind, how should we conceive of the relationship between sustainability and social fairness, between green Europe and social Europe, between a green world and a just world? Very simple at first sight: one is the condition of the other. Sustainable generalizability is a necessary condition for global justice. We cannot possibly achieve the justice objective without achieving the environmental objective, because if our way of living is not sustainably generalizable then we are bound either to be unjust to some parts of world population because that way of living cannot be generalized or to be unjust to future generations because it cannot be sustained.

² See Ph. Van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All. What (if Anything) Can Justify Capitalism ?* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1995), broadly in the line of the liberal-egalitarian approach to justice inaugurated by John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press, 1971).

Does it follow that there is no tension, no conflict, no trade off between making Europe greener and making Europe more social? By no means. Firstly, there are measures that would improve significantly the generalized sustainability of our way of living at the cost of deepening unjust inequalities. Think of the sacking of miners without compensation in highly polluting mining industries, or of sharp and sudden increases in the cost of heating homes not accompanied by subsidies for house insulation. Secondly and conversely, there are also measures that could reduce unjust inequalities while increasing the unsustainability of our way of living. Think of subsidies allocated to charter flights for poor households or of a reduction of involuntary unemployment resulting from the development of massive new road infrastructures.

Hence, however nice it would be if it could, it simply cannot be said that whatever we do to improve sustainability makes our world more just, nor that whatever we do to reduce injustice makes our way of living more sustainable. Consequently, trade offs and tensions are present. Indeed, they are all over the place. We cannot ignore them, nor can we ignore that it is generally tricky to say how much of one objective is worth sacrificing for the sake of some progress towards the other. But this should not paralyze us.

What should then guide us? A useful rule of thumb, I suggest, and an important safeguard against wrong-headed and eventually disastrous reactions to the current economic crisis is a *win-no-loss* guiding principle. Let us go for measures that reduce unjust inequalities but do not worsen sustainability whether directly or through the incentives and expectations they create. And let us go for measures that improve sustainability but are accompanied by compensatory measures that avoid aggravating unjust inequalities. In other words, do not ignore or negate the trade off between greenness and justice but circumvent it.

2. The solution

This is, in a way, already my answer to the second question I said I would handle: “What is the solution?”. But I realize this is very vague and general, and I would now like to supplement it, albeit only illustratively, by highlighting a number of specific implications, some of them surprising I hope, that may be of special relevance to the European Union. I shall do so in the form of a critical commentary on a famous slogan closely associated with the green movement practically since its emergence in the 1970’s: *Think globally, act locally*.

Think globally? Yes, but across domains no less than across countries.

Do we need to think globally? Yes definitely. If any doubt was still lingering after four decades of ecological analysis and advocacy, all the media fuss around global warming will have killed it. But watch out: “Think globally” must not only mean “think across the borders of all nations”, but also “think across the borders of all domains of life”. Let me just give one example

At several points at yesterday's experts meeting and again today in the introductory speech, the expression "environmental justice" was used, suggesting that in order to think about justice and the environment at the same time one needs to erect a new field of study called "environmental justice". This is undoubtedly well intentioned but it is profoundly wrong. Why? It is of course of crucial importance to realize that distributive justice is not only a matter of distribution of monetary income or purchasing power, that it is no less a matter of distribution of work quality, education, health, life expectancy or quality of the environment. Thinking globally requires us to take account of these various inter-related (and often positively correlated) dimensions. But it would be wrong to chop up the issues of justice that arise along these dimensions into as many distinct "spheres of justice": fiscal justice, workplace justice, educational justice, health justice, environmental justice, etc., thereby suggesting that they can or even must each be treated separately.

Social Justice must rather be conceived as consisting in distributing real options among the members of the relevant society in fair way, i.e. in such a way that the options of those with least options are maximized, and it is then for individuals and communities to make their own trade offs in the light of what they value. Some individuals may go for crowded and polluted city centres as the price to pay for a vibrant urban life, or they may go for cheaper housing near an airport thereby keeping more of their resources for exotic holidays. Or, to use an example put forward by a Hungarian participant, entire communities may go "PIMBY" ("Please In My Back Yard") because they much prefer putting up with polluting industry than having to emigrate *en masse* and to accept the dislocation of their *Lebenswelt*. Environmental inequalities must not be isolated and conceptualized as environmental injustice, governed by distinct ethical principles. They must instead be approached "globally", as one among many components of potentially unjust inequalities in life chances.

Act locally? Yes, but think locally too.

Next, must we act locally? Definitely too, and starting with ourselves as individuals, as organisations or as local communities, especially if we allow ourselves to tell others what to do if we are to achieve — all of us together — a sustainably generalizable way of living. We cannot tell the Chinese, the Indians or the Congolese to go for bicycles rather than cars if we do not go resolutely for bicycles ourselves.

So far so good. But please watch out: the slogan "Think globally, act locally!" does not only say that there are two things we must do. It also says, or at least suggests, that there are two more things that we should not do or at least that do not have the same importance. One of them is: "think locally". A tiny bit of reflection should convince you, however, that thinking locally is no less important than acting locally. Just consider the following hyper-local example.

Those of you who work or live here may have noticed that the last five years saw a remarkable expansion of the use of bicycles in this neighbourhood of Brussels. Why? One major explanatory factor is the placing of two cycle tracks on either side of the rue de la Loi.

On the day of the inauguration, in September 2003, I met Neil Kinnock, then Vice-President of the European Commission, with two of his grandsons. He could not see the point of suppressing one of the five one-way car lanes on the rue de la Loi for this purpose when a parallel street already had a cycle track. But one thing escaped him: the rue de la Loi forms a bridge, whereas all parallel streets go through the bottom of a valley.

The difference between a valley and a bridge may hardly be noticed by a fit grandfather and his grandsons cycling for fun on a sunny Sunday afternoon. But it does affect the amount of sweat you take into a room after rushing on your bike from one meeting to another. It should therefore also affect how keen you will be to develop the habit of cycling into work if you are a distinguished employee of the European Commission. So, by all means, act locally. But if you want your acts, initiatives or policies to make a difference, if you want them to substitute virtuous circles for vicious circles, then taking the time to think locally (and with the locals) is of equal importance.

This example of local acting was about decision making at the level of some local public authority, more precisely the mobility policy of the Brussels Capital Region. However, the need to act locally in order to make Europe greener is no less relevant to the functioning or behaviour of particular organizations, including the institutions of the European Union. One extreme counterexample often mentioned — and one of the Eurosceptics' chief delights — is the ecologically wasteful commuting of the European Parliament between Brussels and Strasbourg. How can you pretend to preach sustainability to Europe and the world if you perpetuate this useless back-and-forth that generates, according to an estimate made in April 2007 by a York University team, 20.000 tons of CO₂ per year.

Symbols must not be dismissed lightly, and Strasbourg can plausibly serve as the Franco-German symbol of an impressively intelligent and courageous initiative taken in difficult circumstances by some exceptional French and German personalities. Without them, arguably, European integration would never have got off the ground, and we would not be here today. But there are less absurd ways, both financially and ecologically, of honouring this symbol than the so-called “travelling circus”. It would seem more than sufficient, for example, to let all the major acts of the European Parliament happen in Strasbourg, such as the final ratification of treaties or the admission of new member states, while relegating all the more routine work to Brussels.

The madness of the travelling circus does not only illustrate the special importance of acting locally when local action, as is the case for the behaviour of EU institutions, is also a potentially powerful way of preaching by example. It will also serve us shortly to illustrate the other combination omitted from the ecological slogan: “Act Globally”.

Act globally? Definitely, and urgently create the conditions for effective global action.

Where the classic ecological slogan got it most profoundly wrong, I believe, is by suggesting that the ability to act globally was unimportant. We urgently need global action and hence global institutions to deal with global challenges. In this respect, the European

Union is essential, both because we need it to handle problems that can only or that can best be handled “globally” at EU level and because it foreshadows in experimental fashion the sort of institutions we need at the really global level too, for the sake of both ecological sustainability and social justice

At EU level like at national levels, appropriate environmental and social policies will not drop ready-made from the desk of a bureaucrat, let alone from the brain of a philosopher. They will be the outcome of many struggles against inertia and vested interests. Those who defend the interests of the weakest and most vulnerable members of our societies and of the weakest and most vulnerable of all human beings — the generations yet unborn — cannot exactly be expected to be among the strongest lobbies. To make appropriate “global” action at EU level more likely to happen, one needs to strengthen the lobbies of the weakest.

For reasons that should be obvious enough in the circles to which many of you belong, there are at least two factors that will structurally enhance the power, and effectiveness of the pan-European lobbies of the weakest, by facilitating and cheapening their ability to coordinate and mobilize. One is convergence to a single political capital. Far more important than the environmental squandering involved, the handicap created for the lobbies of the weakest is the fundamental reason why the European Parliament’s crazy commuting between Brussels and Strasbourg must stop.

The second and main factor I want to mention briefly is the adoption of a single lingua franca. Progress towards sustainability and social justice does not require any more that it excludes that we should nurture or treasure linguistic diversity, as a superficial analogy with biodiversity may suggest. It demands that we should resolutely democratize the lingua franca across the EU, not at all, needless to say, in order to enable everyone to enjoy British culture, but rather in order to empower trans-nationally the organizations and associations that will speak and fight for the weakest.

To conclude : Acting globally too is of great importance for both environmental and social objectives. For most of us here today, this will mean, in the first place, acting at the level of the European Union. Effective action in the right direction will be greatly helped, I suggested, by convergence towards a single political capital and towards a single lingua franca as two ways of structurally strengthening the groups most likely to push in both of the directions at the focus of today’s conference. Hence, the classic ecological slogan was wrong in de-emphasizing the importance of *acting* globally. But the very fact that even linguistic policy turned out to be relevant, in a strangely indirect way, to the task of achieving sustainability further illustrates how right the slogan was in emphasizing that we should at least *think* globally.