

FROM A "SOCIALISTIC" TO A CONSUMER SOCIETY

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The name of our B.I.O. organisation stresses the word "biopolitics" to show the importance of the political approach to saving bios, life. Also, according to our anthropo-ecological approach,¹ one of the most important prerequisites for solving the environmental problem and for the building of a biocentric millennium society is the willingness of politicians to introduce the proper legal and economic conditions, namely tools for the proper management of the environment. These tools are well known, and indeed it is hardly possible to find something brand new; they are taxes of any kind, payments, fees, penalties, subsidies and other measures. Many economists have prescribed different combinations during the last few years.²

The introduction of such conditions is of course very unpopular to the management of industries and services, to municipalities in reference to their economic activities, and also to inhabitants. They are prepared to pay more for environmentally-friendly technologies, goods and services and for the protection of nature, but they will also be in some way limited in their behaviour as producers or as consumers, and that is, of course, what they do not like. Let us not forget that they are not only inhabitants, but also voters. For the politicians, it is this particular function that is most important. This explains why they do not like doing anything unpopular. They must be forced by public opinion to accept any decision.

In the Czech Republic, during the communist regime with its planned economy, there was a constant lack of different goods and services. That was why the black market flourished so much. But the average level of consumption was relatively low. The possibilities of buying western goods of any kind was limited to the so-called TUZEX, where it was only possible to pay by foreign western currency – which was also the sole coinage of the black market. These goods were of questionable preservation and superiority. The common people had few chances of obtaining such special goods. We can call the society of that time just short of insufficient.

On the other hand, specialised industry was not very kind to the environment during the last forty years. It used very old, high material-and-energy-consuming technologies, and no cleaning equipment. The state owned every factory and shop, and had little respect for the needs of nature and people. The result was high pollution of the environment, and the devastation of nature and of peoples' health. The information on this situation was secret, and when the environmental disaster was publicised in 1989, it came as a complete shock to the inhabitants. In the first public opinion inquiry in 1990, about 80% of those questioned declared that solving the environmental problem should be given top priority.

When Bedrich Moldan and Josef Vavrousek became Ministers for the Environment, the most important of the illegally-prepared basic environmental laws and economic tools were rapidly passed through Parliament. That was why we all hoped that our country could find a new way to obtain sustainable development, and that society would henceforth produce and consume only those goods which were absolutely necessary, in line with higher ethical values. We hoped that we would succeed in changing our modest consumption of "socialistic" time into a modest market economy type of consumption and lifestyle.

But the November 1989 "Velvet Revolution" also opened new horizons for the inhabitants. Liberty enabled the visitors from neighbouring countries to come and see shop-windows full of goods – even if they were still very expensive for our people. This was our first contact with western lifestyle, with consumer society. The people were fascinated by it.

During the last eight years, society has changed very much. Some people have become rich, some remain poor and some are something in-between. But all of them are under pressure from advertisements and bill-boards, which show them how to be happy by consuming anything, ranging from McDonald's hamburgers to Procter and Gamble shampoo and the latest Mercedes model. The desire of most people is to have more of everything, more than their neighbour does.

The typical example is a motorcar. During the previous regime, buying a car was always difficult, and sales were limited. On the other hand, public transportation was highly developed and every village was connected with the surrounding area by buses or by train. From 1990 onwards, the number of cars in the Czech Republic increased from 233 per 1000 inhabitants to 344 – an increase of 147%. In Prague, it went up from 276 to 502 – up by 236% – and now we have more cars per 1000 inhabitants in our capital than Vienna does. This means fewer travelling persons in public transportation, increasing prices and losses, which is in turn translated into cutbacks in lines and connections.

This one example, among many, shows that our hope to convince the Czech people of the existence of a way to achieve healthy and sustainable development other than through increasing the consumption of goods collapsed. This is also why later governments respected environmental needs less and less. We have now undoubtedly improved on environmental pollution, but our lifestyle is on the trajectory of western consumption practices.

This raises the question of whether it is necessary for societies in transition from a communist regime to democracy to go from a society of shortages to one of waste. Must the satisfaction of all needs lead to surplus and squander? What will happen to human society and to the biosphere if the example of countries in transition in Central Europe is followed by

Russia, let alone China and India and other developing countries? Is there no other way? How can we convince the common people of the need for sustainable development, so that they will force their politicians to prepare good social and economic conditions for its realisation?

Nevertheless, I hope and pray that more and more people will do their best, and that Coca Cola will not vanquish the koala in the next millennium.

References

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Dr. Jaroslav Stoklasa, member of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Honorary Advisor to the Czech Minister of Environment and member of the Steering Committee of the Society for Sustainable Living, has also held the post of Vice-Director for Economy and Management at the Czech Institute for Biology and Genetics and was involved in research at the Institute for Architecture, Human Environment and Landscape Ecology. During his tenure at the latter institute, he developed the principle of "anthropoecology" and later became head of the Department of Anthropoecology. Dr. Stoklasa has been very active in non-governmental environmental movements, prior to the velvet revolution, and published classified information on the state of the environment. A working member of the ECO Group at the Vienna Centre, he has also co-operated with the IIASA in Laxenberg, Austria, and served as Advisor to the Minister of Environment and Member of the Czech Commission for Co-operation with the IIASA. Author of over 150 papers and articles and guest lecturer of many European Universities, Dr. Stoklasa is currently retired and works as a private environmental consultant.