

BIOPOLITICS: A NEW APPROACH TO THE POLITICS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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A new approach to politics was introduced internationally in Athens, Greece in June 1985, by the Biopolitics International Organisation and its Founding President, Dr. Agni Vlavianos-Arvanitis. It envisages a life-centred, biocentric, approach to politics, and it is appropriately termed Biopolitics. The goal of the organisation is to work towards the creation of a synthesis of new values out of differing theses and antitheses, thus formulating a new value system leading to the harmonious society of the future. Biopolitics sees present society as an unbalanced, inverted pyramid, in which technological progress is not matched by a humanising societal value system, capable of changing the present inverted position to a balanced one. The projected stable society is one based on respect for Bios and the Bio-environment. The Biopolitics International Organisation seeks to "encourage a world-wide Bio-assessment of technology where technological progress may be viewed under the spectrum, Bios in the Next Millennium, so as to retain the positive aspects of technology that contribute to the maintenance of the Bio-environment." What follows is an introduction to Biopolitics, based partly on the presentations made by expert presenters at the inaugural and two subsequent conferences of the organisation, but, essentially, on the principle that the formation and directions of individual and social behaviour is not so much the result of the synthesis of opposites, as a value-based self-identification of contradictions, as will be explained later on in this presentation.

Roots of Conflict

The management and control of animate and inanimate nature has been the main preoccupation of the human species since the dawn of consciousness. Simple and rudimentary methods of control, beginning from primitive tribal forms have, in the course of time, developed into highly complex governmental and administrative structures that present a mosaic of systems, each competing for recognition and acceptance as the ultimate political system.

Throughout the history of political thought and practice the focal point has been the dominance of humanity. This dominance has taken two forms - the supremacy of one group of human beings over others of its own kind and the exploitation of other life forms and the physical environment. But since there is no agreement as to the manner in which the fruits and the benefits of exploitation should be apportioned, humanity finds itself in conflict and strife. The result has been the development, over time, of different modalities for the management and control of the bio-environment by humankind.

Humankind has come to accept the phenomenal world as comprising the duality of subject and object - itself as the subject and the world outside as the object. This dualistic view runs like a thread throughout human history and is responsible for most of the problems that confront us in the contemporary world. Humankind cannot set itself apart from the phenomenal world, since it constitutes an inseparable unit with the universe. The separation is the work of the senses and the intellect, which humans mistakenly believe holds the key to understanding the infinite universe.

The universe manifests itself in diverse forms that are reflected in the mind through the medium of the senses. But we cannot, by the intellect alone, ever grasp the reality behind what the senses and the mind reveal. It is the attempt to explain the unexplainable from dogmatic positions, which has generated the ideological, religious and political disputes that have continued to bedevil the world.

Life-Centred Politics

The highest form in which the universe manifests itself is life, the culminating point of which is the mind and spirit of humanity. Life encompasses in one sweep the most rudimentary plant and bacterial forms and the highly complex organism, the human being. Humans cannot with impunity arrogate to themselves the right to control life which, together with non-life, constitutes a unity. Hence the separation of the phenomenal world into distinct categories (namely, humans, life other than human, and inorganic matter) is a distortion of reality. Unity and non-distinction is the nature of the universe. Distinction and division is the work of the senses and the intellect. The way out of the impasse, we as human beings find ourselves in, is to wean ourselves from the dualism of human and not-human, life and non-life, subject and object. Only then will the pieces begin to fall into place.

Politics, as we have understood and practised it until now, places humans in the central position. But however benevolent human beings become, as long as they view themselves and their intellect as something apart and above, they cannot get anywhere near the solution of the problems that confront them. As the first step, it is necessary to shift the emphasis from humankind as such, to life in which life and non-life constitutes a unity. What we need is life-centred politics in which humans, as the highest form of life, are the custodians. With the breathtaking advances in technology, the life-centred approach placed on the shoulders of humanity a tremendous responsibility for the management and control of the bio-environment. Biopolitics is therefore a political theory that places life and the sustaining of life at the very centre of the picture. Hence humankind's task is to preserve life and the environment that sustains it.

The Concept of Self Identity

All political systems have a time-frame for the implementation of their objectives. In Biopolitics the time-frame extends to all future generations. But for the purposes of future planning it is reasonable to assign a time-frame of a millennium, or a thousand years. It is only in the context of such a long-term view that the very concept of sustainable development can be maintained. Otherwise it becomes a mere cliché, devoid of meaning. Such a long-term perspective needs the formulation of a radically different value system, incorporating, and going beyond, a mere synthesis of prevailing values.

A synthesis of everything positive in existing ideological positions can be the first step. But as the renowned Japanese Buddhist thinker, Dr. Daisetz T. Suzuki puts it, in life as we live it, day in day out, we do not, as a rule, unify antithetical positions to create a new synthetic position. What happens in practice is the self-identity of contradictions to produce a change, motivated by the perception of what is proper or improper conduct. The senses and the intellect can opt for a reaction at a lower or higher moral plane. It is the choice that makes the difference between good and bad.

To take an example from fiction; when the Bishop in *Les Misérables* saves the galley-slave-turned-thief from the arms of the law, his action was the self-identification of a contradiction at a very high ethical level, an action that resulted in the total transformation of the life of an individual. When the Roman slave-owner gave a position of privilege in the household to a slave, contrary to accepted social practice, he was doing likewise. Ancient, medieval and contemporary life is full of such examples.

This shows that social structures at the macro-level and their influences, however strong, can be modified at micro-level and pave the way for social transformation, in co-operation with other social and political forces. Hence the correctness of the position that life as we live it is to a large extent the self-identification of contradictions. The new societal value-system should be based largely on such a self-identity.

The Spatial Dimension and Constituency

Like politics as we understand it, Biopolitics has a spatial dimension, enveloping the planet earth, the solar system, the galaxy and the whole universe. The current search for extra-terrestrial life belongs rightly to the sphere of Biopolitics. Therefore the study of astronomy, and its practical application for the welfare of the species, figures prominently in the content of Biopolitics.

Biopolitics likewise has a constituency. It is visualised as being of two kinds. A short-term covering the present, the next and third generation from now, and a long-term, extending to forty generations, over a millennium. The short-term objectives concern our immediate descendants, up to the third generation. But as we move further and further into the future, self-interest as a motivating factor will have to give way to other sentiments, to the exclusion of self-interest. This is the stage at which the spiritual element takes over. The religious and secular ideologies that are futuristic in scope can play a significant role in motivating people to save and conserve, for the sake of descendants forty generations removed from the present.

At this point I wish to quote H.G. Wells extensively. This is how he graphically demolishes the fallacy and futility of racism in his book *First and Last Things*: "We, you and I, are not only parts in a thought process, but parts of one flow of blood and life. Let us put that in a way that may be new to some readers. Let me remind you of what is sometimes told in jest, the fact that the number of one's ancestors increases as we look back in time. Disregarding the chances of inter-marriage, each one of us has two parent, four grandparents, eight great grandparents and so on, backward, until very soon in less than fifty generations we find, that but for the qualification introduced, we should have all the earth's inhabitants of that time as our progenitors. For a hundred generations it must hold absolutely true that every one of that time who has issue living now is ancestral to all of us. That brings the thing within the historical period. There is not a western European Palaeolithic or Neolithic relic of the human race that is not a family relic for every soul alive. The blood in our veins has handled it. And there is something more. We are going to mingle our blood again. we cannot keep ourselves apart; the worst enemies will one day come to the peace of Verona. All Montagues and Capulets are doomed to intermarry. A time will come in less than fifty generations when all the population of the world will have my blood, and I and my worst enemy will not be able to say which child is his or mine."

Getting the Message Across

Motivating the present generation to save for the sake of future generations will not be an insurmountable problem, if the message is put across in simple language, from the platform and the pulpit. To many people the prognosis and scenario as explained above may appear far-fetched and Utopian. The challenge is to incorporate this line of thinking into the decision-making process in the fields of education, politics and international relations. The destructive forces that are at work in the contemporary world have clouded the vision of our decision-makers, who are adept only at making ad hoc decisions and short-term plans. What the world needs is a radical reorientation of our perception of reality. Dogmatically-held conflicting perceptions lie at the root of almost all contemporary conflicts. It is not too late for all who are genuinely concerned about the bio-environment to initiate a dialogue at political, religious and ideological levels, to work out a modus vivendi for the next millennium.

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