

HUMANKIND IN NATURE AND THE LIMITS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

[Sanjin Dragojevic](#)

Ministry of Culture
Republic of Croatia

The two sides of nature and the natural

Very possibly, one of the most well known Bible stories, the one about the fall from paradise, still holds the key to passing smoothly into the next millennium. Which perception of nature is stored in the mentioned tale? It is very interesting to note that nature in this story is regarded in a controversial manner. Two opposing sides of nature are embodied by the snake and the apple.

The first metaphor obviously symbolises the dynamic, physical and controversial side. The side of temptation and activism, that can be potentially destructive, but also creative and full of unknown effects and consequences. On the contrary, the apple, grown on the tree of wisdom, suggests nature as a gift, as a sense of lust and as the deepest source of life and overall sense of the universe. A universe full of stability and eternal harmony, both material and spiritual.

Humankind - embodied by Adam and Eve - from the moment of exile, is exposed to both sides, but what is more important, and almost always neglected, is that the two sides of nature become integrated and interconnected, by crucial forces of identity and development. The moment of exile truly marks the beginning of human nature.

At the same time, it is important to note that nature, in both of the above mentioned concepts and metaphors, cannot be reduced to its mechanical or formal components, nor to the environmental frame of human behaviour. Both sides of nature have voices and languages. The first one is loud, the second one silent. The first one oriented toward processes, the second one related to sum and substance. Both of them are always full of significance and notion, the first one directed toward potential and the second one rooted in origin, just like the language of human beings.

What messages, from this ancient Biblical tale, could possibly be applicable to our age and to the concrete developmental challenges faced by the Danube countries? Could the concept of sustainable development be an adequate answer to such an urgent need for the simultaneous synthesis of the two sides of human and natural existence? Maybe the answer can be found in the dominant paradigms of development, recently applied by "countries in transition."

Development theory and countries in transition

Let us briefly pause on the key concepts of development theory, especially transition and transformation, and consider their applicability in the unique cases of countries in transition, and, particularly, in reference to the group of Danube countries. Three basic schemes could be laid down in this context.

The first is methodological. The concepts of transition and transformation have been in use for a long time, and have been encumbered by previous usage and associated with a lack of effort to create a special system of categories, designed to diagnose the specific developmental state of affairs of countries in transition.

The second is analytical. A broad and comprehensive application of these concepts, without distinction among individual countries, additionally blurs analytical efforts to an extent, which a priori, renders any consideration of specificity impossible. In other words, these concepts are formal and abstract and vary extensively from country to country, with local meanings often being contradictory.

Finally, the third scheme combines the previous two, but reverses and justifies them, by arguing - with the integrated and well-known cynicism of modernist theorists - the following: The fact that development trends in the countries of the region are labelled according to "modernist" categories is not accidental, after all. All these countries are faced with typical modern challenges, so that transition and, to a much lesser extent, transformation, lay bare and define the very nature of future changes.

Modernisation, as a process, is the core of the modernist paradigm of development and ultimately amounts to the attainment of a set of desirable developmental parameters (economic, political and cultural), which, in principle, have either already been attained, or are eventually attainable, irrespective of the starting position, identity and resources of the entity involved. Therefore, such a process unfolds as a transition from an existing state of affairs to another, in principle both definable and desirable. What modernisation almost always implies is a model to be followed. In this case, the model is provided by the countries of the advanced world. Although most of the standards countries in transition

need to reach are exemplified by the recent achievements of the societies which have already stepped into the post-industrial or post-modern stage of development, this does not affect the essence and nature of these changes. It is only an indication that the said transition will proceed in an arduous, delicate, unpredictable way, with success being quite uncertain.

That such insistence on terminology is not merely external or formal and that the classical modernisation paradigm has also come to prevail in theoretical and practical aspects, regarding countries in transition, is confirmed by some dominant analytical patterns being applied in explanations about their developmental situation and their capacity to change it, in the near or more distant future. While it is beyond doubt that the span of time since the beginning of the so-called transitional changes is too short for any sweeping generalisations about the theoretical approaches to the development of such a heterogeneous area to be made, one can already trace three dominant interconnected approaches at this stage.

The first is an integrationalist approach, based on condensed, fixed, almost eternal cultural, historical, political and economic features. It is also based on the theoretical existence of central, peripheral and semi-peripheral relationships among European countries.

The second approach is mainly sociological, in that it derives the anticipation of successful or unsuccessful outcomes, for individual countries of the region, from their tendency to encourage homogeneous or heterogeneous communities.

The third approach is primarily economic and derives the anticipated outcome of transitional changes in individual countries, from various indicators of their apparent potential, or lack thereof, to successfully cope with the process of modernisation, prescribed as a domestic version or replica of the developmental tendencies, parameters and trends of developed countries.

The first approach seems to be best suited to explain the developmental situation of the countries in the Danube region, as it incorporates virtually all of the practical developmental consequences of the second and third approach. That is why the dilemmas faced by these countries can be generally described as "challenges of the third modernisation," which is synonymous with the need for a new alignment of Europe and the transition from homogeneous to heterogeneous communities. The pseudo-intergalactic character of the theory of co-relationships among the European centre, semi-periphery and periphery, stems from four basic components of this approach:

1. Development potentials, just as the limitations of each country, are viewed as a result of a long lasting and uneven accumulation of capital, knowledge and skills. However, discontinuity rather than continuity has been its more marked feature. The analysed span largely covers the period from the middle of the last century to the present time.
2. The real potential developmental identity of each country is derived from its cultural, educational, scientific, administrative and economic determinants. It is stressed that they are not completely intelligible, unless provision is made for a dynamic analysis of the influences exerted by transnational, i.e. regional political, economic and cultural conglomerates and spheres of interest, to which these countries belonged or belong or wanted or want to belong .
3. Since this area is on the cross-roads of mostly dominant European cultural pivots and matrices, these countries are "condemned" to be "countries-communicators," a role for which they are mostly not capable of, or which they do not want to play or of which, although inevitable, they are not fully aware. That is why their frequent "development collapses" cannot be clarified without an analysis of "communication blockades." In an area like this, there are exceptionally destructive cultural, ethnic, religious, political and economic effects which, in turn, manifest themselves in unpredictable ways.
4. Finally, the main feature of this approach is expressly all-European, but full of division within. The geopolitical and the economic position of any Euro-pean country cannot be understood without understanding Europe as a whole. Even if this whole does not function as a whole - which has mostly been the case - such non-functioning cannot be explained - however far-fetched it may sound - without an integral approach to the European non-integrity.

It is such ambitiously defined methodological guidelines that harbour the basic flaws and vulnerability of this approach. Namely, it is simply impossible to systematise and select all, virtually innumerable facts and factors that must be taken into account within such a many-faceted and demanding approach, unless the reasoning involved is backed by a clear-cut, but more or less a priori analytical scheme. The theoretical scheme, about the co-relationship of the European centre, semi-periphery and periphery, undoubtedly makes this possible, but devalues the objectivity of one's own approach, by imposing a rigid evaluating division into relevant and irrelevant facts and factors, on the selection and systematisation process. Hence two tendencies, "hard" and "soft," can be detected in this theory. The former highlights the prevalence of economic and political elements, and the latter, which questions, but never utterly disputes the first approach, insists on those broadly conceived cultural facts and factors.

If the dilemmas involved in such theorising are simplified and reduced to a minimum, the bulk of the present and future development schedule of transitional countries will be seen as more or less negative, only from their (im)possibility to become full EU-members over a relatively short period of time, a prospect which would mean a shift of the European centre to the east.

The role of the sustainable development paradigm

The above examples demonstrate that the development of the Danube countries, despite all their differences, is seen in a very schematic way. The main role of the paradigm of sustainable development, as applies to these countries, is to make this schematic approach more flexible. The

theory of sustainable development - mainly being associated with environmental science - cannot reach the core of modernisation processes, which currently treats the interconnected world of bios as an important, but, none the less, residual or derived feature. The core is modernisation and bios is just a convenient background.

Where is the failure? Or, more appropriately, where are the limits to such a view? Obviously, it should be turned around: the central aim of our world civilisation should be to place bios at the very heart of our considerations and actions, and to develop all our activities according to this inspiring notion.

The Danube should be regarded as one of the main sources and regulator of overall life in the region, which, additionally, provides one of the cheapest means of transportation in Europe. To view the Danube simply as an important waterway, the life-support role of which needs to be preserved, is to overlook the essence of the issue. This approach, currently supported by the theory of sustainable development, undermines the value of life sources, regarding them as secondary or derived, instead of as most important and essential. In this respect, incorporating the paradigm of sustainable development within the corrective framework of the previously mentioned developmental aims - achieving the standards of developed European countries within the shortest possible time-frame - would be, potentially, very dangerous.

Conclusion

The end of our millennium may teach us that nature, as well as overall life, cannot be regarded solely as an apple or solely as a snake. Moreover, even our own internal "snake" characteristics are combined with "apple" characteristics. The most important thing is to realise that the distinction between the "nature of nature" and the "nature of man" is not good or evil, right or wrong. What is wrong is our inability to creatively synthesise the two concepts, in a consistent manner, according to the values of life, as a primary parameter of all our activities. In other words, neither the snake nor the apple destroyed Adam and Eve. Their unique combination rendered them human beings, able to understand themselves as well as the world around them.

References

1. Berend, I.T. and Ranki, Gy. (1974) *Economic development in East-Central Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*. Columbia University Press, New York
2. Shils, E. (1975) *Center and periphery - essays in macrosociology*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago
3. Volaten, P. (ed.) (1992) *Bound to change - consolidating democracy in East and Central Europe*. Westview Press, Boulder
4. Turner, K.R. (1993) *Sustainable environmental economics and management*. Belhaven Press, London

Sanjin Dragojevic was born and educated in Zagreb, Croatia. His post-graduate studies were on Information Systems and Contemporary Philosophy. Since 1987 he has been working at the Institute for Development and International Relations, Zagreb, participating in the coordination of two world networks, CultureLink and the Network for Scientific Development Research Institutions in Developing Countries. He contributes frequently to scientific journals and conferences, receiving the Pergamon Press Prize in European studies in 1992. He is also co-editor of the first version of a set of publications entitled *Guide to Current State and Trends in Cultural Policy and Life in UNESCO Member States*, sponsored by UNESCO, and co-ordinator of the project "The Structuring of the Cultural Information Systems in the Central and Eastern European Countries," financed by the Central European University, Prague. Mr. Dragojevic is permanent guest-lecturer on two post-graduate study courses in cultural management in Austria: the Institute of Cultural Management, Vienna, and the Institute for Cultural Research, Krems.