

15:25-15:50

Equality in Diversity: Conditions for a Sustainable Humanosphere

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The human life-order is sustained by the logic of division and connection in the symbolic system of language and practice. Symbols can be applied beyond the immediate here-and-now of living subjects, endowing the human life-order with the sense of duration. And because the symbolic system is reproduced in conjunction with the structure of hegemony, we tend to fall into various forms of systematized self-centrism, where the “self” represents those who occupy hegemonic positions within the symbolic structure—i.e. males, adults, citizens, dominant ethnic groups, humans, etc.—who utilize those defined as “others” —i.e. women, children, the aged, labourers, barbarians, animals, nature, etc. —as instruments or obstacles to their prosperity.

As our life is sustained and reproduced in mutual exchange and interaction with other humans and non-human beings, negation and suppression of their existence would not only diminish the quality of the humanosphere but also impoverish our life process itself. In order for our humanosphere to be sustainable, it is vital to maintain diversity and the equality of all beings in the network of life. But what does it mean for beings to simultaneously be “Multiple through diversity” and “One through equality”? It is my contention that human beings have the ability, based on symbolic capacity, to place themselves in the position of and to sympathize with other beings and to recognize both “similarities” (with themselves) and “differences” in their positions.

In this presentation, I will reconsider the ideas of “human rights” and “human development” by pointing out their liberalist premises where human individuals are treated as independent subjects. There is no denying the historical and political importance of such a liberalist idea, which has functioned to promote the universal applicability of rights and development to those previously excluded and suppressed based on class, race and gender. However, I would like to also point out that that such liberalist ideas are based on the modern institution of secular and rational public from which the spheres of religion, nature and family are excluded. The fiction of the “social contract,” upon which the present legal and political institutions are based, speaks only of groups of individuals and the state, ignoring the cosmological, ecological and biological basis on which our lives as citizens depend. In other words, the “freedom” of individuals in such liberalism is based on their alienation from god, nature and community. The hegemonic principle of positivist and scientific

rationality has led the public sphere to pursue maximization of efficiency and utility through management and control of the human and non-human. Here, nature and the human body as “resources” become the object of development.

What we must do, at this historical juncture when the present life-order itself is under question, is to reconsider the entirety of human life. The essence of life consists in the maintenance and reproduction of “form of life”, which means how and in what ways the self appears to and interacts with others in the world. The key to understanding and evaluating life and the humansphere lies not in the degree of freedom of living subjects but the quality of their relationships with others in the living environment.

Human beings have the developed sense of “self” as well as the capacity to “sympathize” with others. The human self can choose to pursue or to restrain desire in consideration of others. What characterizes human behavior is not the efficient pursuit of objects of desire but the ability to prioritize immediate desires and to construct social relationships with others through the “sharing” and “exchange” of desired objects. In this sense, distribution of food and exchange of women (or men) as wives (or husbands) lie at the basis of human society.

Why do human beings care about others and, as a consequence, restrain their desires? It is because to do so evokes joy. Human beings have the freedom to choose what to do an object of desire. They can either consume it by themselves or share/exchange it with others in order to fulfill a higher-order social desire. In doing so, an individual obtains the joy of constructing relationships with others and acquiring recognition of self by/through others.

Human beings can feel such joy through interaction not only with other humans but also with other non-human beings. Interaction with the socio-ecological environment at large underlies all human life and human joy. In this sense, the pursuit of joy by humans potentially includes the care for others as a source of their own joy. Even the sense of self, which is the basis of individuality so valued in the modern era, has developed in human beings precisely because we are socio-ecological beings. It is the form of interaction and relationships with others that constitutes form of life and thus the form of self. In this way, human beings have the potential to reconstruct the life-order of the humansphere by treating others not as instruments (or means) for attaining ends but as the very source of joy for the self. Herein lies the key to a sustainable humansphere in the context of the “global conviviality” of all beings, based not on individual rights and utility of objects but interactive sympathy and care among diverse forms of life.

What is the difference between “sustainable humansphere” and “sustainable development”? In the “sustainable development” framework, nature is seen in terms of scarce resource that must be

managed. This is based on the hitherto persistent view of the life order in which nature is perceived as an object of control and is a part of what we call “the temperate paradigm.” In this framework, what must be sustained is production to satisfy human desires.

However, in the framework of a “sustainable humanosphere,” what must be sustained is not production but the basis of existence. While some tend to think that actualization of human desires will only result in wanton exploitation and destruction of the natural environment and, therefore, that desire must be restrained for the environment to be sustainable, we believe that humans have the capacity and potentiality not only to enhance joy of life but also to enrich the humanosphere in interaction with diverse beings in the environment. How can we do this? We should utilize nature by following nature’s logic, instead of the logic of efficiency and production. This means to recognize and understand the agency of diverse beings in nature in their terms. That is to say, instead of attempting to control nature as an object, thereby ignoring its agency to suit the purposes of production, we should understand nature’s logic and agency and try to benefit from nature’s potential by creating a human-environment relationship in which we can appreciate and benefit from nature as source of enrichment and joy.

Nature in the tropics is often unpredictable and extreme. For example, in many tropical regions, the timing of rain is uncertain. There are frequent floods, droughts, epidemics. In the “tropical paradigm” that we suggest here, humans adjust to the dynamism of nature and try to utilize the power inherent in its dynamism. Here, diverse agents in nature (or natures as agents) interact with humans in the process of production and reproduction. I will take up historical and ethnographical studies from India to illustrate the point. Case in point is what I call “the system of entitlements” in pre-colonial India, whereby there were diverse endogamous groups (belonging to different “castes”) living together and receiving their prescribed shares of local products or means of production. Many of the households had certain non-agricultural specialization— soldiers, priests (Brahmin and non-Brahmin), artisans, barbers, gardeners, domestic helpers, etc. —and also engaged in agriculture in certain seasons. Retaining such a large surplus of labour in the local community was a way to adapt to nature’s dynamism. This allowed most of the community to engage in agriculture when the rains arrived, while enriching community life during the non-agricultural season by ensuring a diversity of products and services. This was a way, albeit containing aspects of discrimination and suppression that would be unacceptable in modern times, to maintain diverse livelihoods while cooperating as community and adjusting to the nature’s logic.

Whereas the temperate paradigm tries to control the present for the planned future, the tropical paradigm opens up multiple possibilities for the future as it continuously adjusts to the present. We

can re-evaluate the history of Indian society from this point of view. What is required in today's world is not only the establishment of "equality of rights" but "equality of care" that respects differences in manifestation while recognizing ontological equality. This recognition of and respect for "equality in diversity" is the key to a sustainable humanosphere.