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but not the paradigm of sustainability

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Rio+20 will soon be forgotten – but not the paradigm of sustainability

Bonn, 2 July 2012. The Rio+20 Earth Summit was an anti-climax. While the “Earth Conference” of 1992 will go down as a milestone – a moment when, for the very first time, world politics seriously addressed humanity’s natural resources – the results of “Rio+20” will only be found in the footnotes of the “History of Sustainability”. Yet the transformation to sustainable development is no event that went awry in Rio, no battle that was lost there: it is a process. Compared with the history of the Enlightenment – “in spite of everything” (as in the well-known song by Ferdinand Freiligrath about the 1848 Revolution) – the transformation to sustainable development is an astonishing success story, albeit one with no guaranteed happy ending.

The concept of a sustainable society – a global economy within the boundaries of the earth system, a circular economy in which development is decoupled from consumption – can change humanity. It breaks with industrialisation’s logic of endless expansion that shaped progressive thinking for 250 years and enabled enormous welfare gains in many countries. The concept of sustainability was radicalized through Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen’s observations that we find ourselves in a new geological epoch, the ‘Anthropocene’. The current Anthropocene discourse is the third phase of the sustainability discussion, following the debates on the “limits to growth” and the depletable of resources in the 1970s and the Brundtland Report of 1987 that emphasised the interconnectedness of ecological, social and economic sustainable development. The Anthropocene discussion concerns the relationship of global society and the earth system. Anthropocene theorists argue that humanity is now the greatest geological force in the earth system – in the position to steer the earth system to a new path of development in the next decades, with unforeseeable consequences for the natural resources of some nine billion people.

When the Industrial Revolution got underway more than 200 years ago, the planet’s one billion inhabitants only marginally influenced the earth system – in limited local spaces. In contrast, at the

dawn of the 21st century, people are not just inhabitants, but rather major shapers, drivers, and – whether they like it or not – architects, of the earth system. The global economy’s entrenched pattern of growth has effectively put humanity in charge of running an earth-system-engineering programme. Last year, the Royal Society of London dedicated a special issue of its “Philosophical Transactions” journal to this finding, pointing out that the questions raised by the Anthropocene epoch probably pose the greatest challenges to science and global societies for the coming decades.

If the Anthropocene diagnosis is correct, then humankind must urgently learn to accept complete responsibility for the stability of the earth system, the resources belonging to the global community and future generations. Future ‘development’ will only be able to occur within shrinking planetary boundaries. In any case, new local, national and global regulatory policies, patterns of production and consumption, and lifestyles – as well as a philosophy and practice of taking responsibility for the world – will have to be invented.

The ‘discovery’ of the concept of sustainability is comparable to the emergence of Enlightenment ideas since the 17th century: both call for the total reorganisation of the societies in which they developed. In 1689, John Locke published one of his most important works, “Two Treatises of Government”, which emphasised natural rights and developed a social contract that calls on governments to exercise legitimate rule by serving human needs and being responsible to their citizens. In the 1740s, David Hume developed a moral philosophy and a notion of humans as independent, critical creatures. Human reason is central to Hume’s social philosophy. Building on these preliminary works, Immanuel Kant published his “Critique of Practical Reason” in 1788 and in 1795, “Perpetual Peace”. Kant described the Enlightenment as essentially an “alteration in [humanity’s] way of thinking”, a new era for humanity, in which the normative principles of human coexistence were revolutionised and people judged them-

selves and their societies from a fundamentally different position. The transformation to sustainability requires similar radical changes of position.

The comparison between the development of the Enlightenment idea and the concept of sustainable development is instructive for other reasons, too. For many decades, only a few countries adopted the principles of the Enlightenment and of human rights. In 1689, the English "Bill of Rights" was proclaimed, in 1776, the American Declaration of Independence and in 1789, the French "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen". Not until 1918, after the First World War, were the basic concepts of the Enlightenment incorporated into the Constitution of Germany's Weimar Republic. In 1948, 150 years after Immanuel Kant's "Critique of Practical Reason" and over 250 years after John Locke's "Two Treatises of Government", the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" was passed by the General Assembly of the United Nations. The ideas of the Enlightenment did not spread like wildfire. Progress was made at a snail's pace.

The history of the Enlightenment also shows something else. Although many enlighteners were extraordinary future thinkers and visionaries, they were children of their time. One of their major inconsistencies was slavery: 'Mankind' – whose inalienable rights were described by the great drafters of the U.S. Declaration of Independence – did not include slaves. The American Constitution of 1787 begins with the famous phrase, "We, the people", yet slavery remained an integral part of U.S. society for another eight decades – although it finally led to the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865. The way from a well thought-out philosophy to social reality is long and stony, and

passes through many obstacles. World history knows no linear progress.

From this perspective, the career of the sustainability paradigm is absolutely breathtaking. Only four decades have passed since the 1972 study, "Limits to Growth", by Donella and Dennis Meadows, was commissioned by the Club of Rome. Before the Rio+20 Earth Summit, all the relevant international organisations, from the World Bank, through the OECD, down to the regional development banks, presented concepts for green development and welfare models that go far beyond the usual orthodoxies about growth. One needs a magnifying glass to find serious actors who maintain that it is possible to "just keep on" as before. The technological bases for green transformations have also made great progress. Many governments, businesses, cities and scientists are experimenting with strategies for sustainability. The foundational elements for changing to economies that are compatible with the earth have been developed. The concept of sustainability has spread four to six times faster than the ideas of the Enlightenment.

Whether this speed is fast enough to sidestep the boundaries and tipping point of the earth system remains open. The Rio+20 Earth Summit showed that the multilateral cooperation so crucial for increasing the rate of change is currently blocked. More importantly, it remains to be seen if Kant's "change of some of [humanity's] ideas" can shift to comprehending the earth system's fragility and humankind's responsibility for the future of the planet, as well as the meaning of fair and creative local and global solutions to grow prosperity in the Anthropocene age.