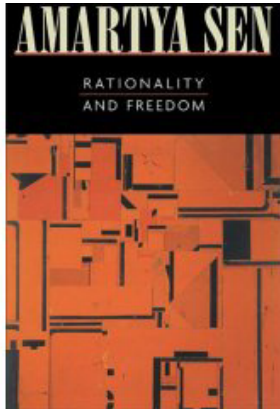


Why We Should Preserve the Spotted Owl

NON SOLO BISOGNI

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We all recognise, these days, that our environment is easily ravaged. We routinely damage the ozone layer, heat up the globe, foul up the air and the rivers, destroy the forests, deplete mineral resources, drive many species to extinction, and impose other devastations. The current interest in 'sustainability' springs from this understanding. The need for concerted action was powerfully outlined in 1987 in the pioneering manifesto *Our Common Future*, prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development, led by Gro Brundtland. The Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as meeting *'the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'*.

Sustainable development has become the guiding theme in much environmental literature. It has also inspired significant protocols for concerted action, for example to reduce harmful emissions and other sources of planetary pollution. The signing of the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer in 1987, now ratified by 186 countries, can be seen, Lester Brown has suggested, as 'one of the finest hours of the United Nations'.¹ The idea of sustainable development has inspired many large international gatherings - from the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg ten years later. These meetings focused on different topics, but they shared a common concern.

The world has good reason to be grateful for the new prominence of this idea, yet it must be asked whether the conception of human beings implicit in it is sufficiently capacious. Certainly, people have 'needs', but they also have values, and, in particular, they cherish their ability to reason, appraise, act and participate. Seeing people in terms only of their needs may give us a rather meagre view of humanity.

To use a medieval distinction, we are not only *patients*, whose needs demand attention, but also *agents*, whose freedom to decide what to value and how to pursue it can extend far beyond the fulfilment of our needs. The question can thus be asked whether environmental priorities should be seen in terms also of sustaining our freedoms. Should we not be concerned with preserving - and when possible expanding - the substantive freedoms of people today 'without compromising the ability of future generations' to have similar, or more, freedoms? Focusing on 'sustainable freedoms' may not only be conceptually important (as a part of a general approach of 'development as freedom'), it can also have tangible implications of immediate relevance.

The focus of discussion in environmental policy has often been on developing appropriate national and international institutions. The rationale for this is clear enough. As pointed out in the cogently argued report *Ecosystems and Human Wellbeing*, produced by a global team for the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in 2003, 'achieving sustainable use requires effective and efficient institutions that can provide the mechanisms through which concepts of freedom, justice, fairness, basic capabilities and equity govern the access to and use of ecosystem services.' But along with this, interest has been growing in exploring the role of citizenship in achieving sustainable development. Just as institutions are needed to establish enforceable regulations and provide financial incentives, a stronger commitment to the responsibilities of citizenship may help to enhance environmental care.

Andrew Dobson's *Citizenship and the Environment* not only discusses the role of responsibilities associated with citizenship, but even outlines the case for the concept of the 'ecological citizen',

who would give priority to environmental considerations.² I will not ask whether dividing up an integrated citizenship into function-specific roles is the best way to proceed, but Dobson is surely right to emphasise the reach of civic responsibilities in dealing with environmental challenges. He is especially concerned with investigating and highlighting what citizens can do when they are moved by social understanding and reasoned reflection, rather than only by financial incentives (acting merely as 'self-interested rational actors'): 'One by one, then, the signposts to sustainability are being erected; and I regard ecological citizenship as a key addition to the collection.'

This sense of ecological responsibility is part of a new trend which straddles theory and practice. In late 2000, for example, there was criticism of the British Government's policies when it backed away, in response to picketing and protests, from a proposed increase in taxes on petrol, without making any serious attempt to bring the environmental case into public discussion. As Barry Holden puts it, in *Democracy and Global Warming*: 'This is not to say that the environmental case would necessarily have won the day,' but 'it is to suggest that it may have done so, had it been put.'³ There is increasing disappointment not only with the feebleness - or total absence - of positive initiatives to involve citizens in environmental policies, but also with the evident scepticism of public authorities that it can be fruitful to appeal to a sense of social responsibility.

That frustration is easy to understand. But as well as looking for an expansion of the domain of civic activism, we have to ask how the notion of sustainability should be broadened in the light of our conception of suitably responsible citizenship. We have to examine whether citizenship is purely instrumental (just a matter of ways and means of conserving the environment), or whether it is more than that; and in particular whether effective citizenship is part and parcel of what we should try to sustain.

Brundtland's concept of sustainability has been further refined and elegantly extended by one of the foremost economists of our time, Robert Solow, in his monograph *An Almost Practical Step toward Sustainability*, published a little over a decade ago. Solow sees sustainability as the requirement that the next generation must be left with: 'whatever it takes to achieve a standard of living at least as good as our own and to look after their next generation similarly.' That formulation has several attractive features. First, by focusing on sustaining living standards (seen as providing the motivation for environmental preservation), Solow gives greater concreteness to Brundtland's concentration on the fulfilment of needs. Second, in Solow's neatly recursive formulation, the interests of all future generations receive attention through the provisions to be made by each one for its successor.

But does Solow's reformulation incorporate an adequately broad view of humanity? While his concentration on maintaining living standards has clear merits (there is something deeply appealing about trying to make sure that future generations can 'achieve a standard of living at least as good as our own'), it can still be asked whether the concept of living standards is adequately inclusive. Sustaining living standards is not the same thing as sustaining people's freedom to have - or safeguard - what they value and to which they have reason to attach importance. Our reason for valuing particular opportunities need not always lie in their contribution to our living standards.

To illustrate, consider our sense of responsibility towards the future of other species, not merely because - nor only to the extent that - their presence enhances our own living standards. For example, a person may judge that we ought to do what we can to ensure the preservation of some threatened animal species, say, spotted owls. There would be no contradiction if that person were to say: 'Our living standards are largely - or completely - unaffected by the presence or absence of spotted owls, but I strongly believe that we should not let them become extinct, for reasons that have nothing much to do with human living standards.'

Gautama Buddha makes a similar point, arguing in *Sutta Nipata* that since we are enormously more powerful than other species, we have some responsibility towards them that is linked with this asymmetry. Buddha goes on to illustrate the point by analogy with the responsibility of the mother towards her child, not because she has given birth to it (a connection not invoked in this particular argument), but because she can do things to influence the child's life, positively or negatively, that the child itself cannot do. The reason for looking after children, by this line of reasoning, is not to do with our standard of living (even though that will almost certainly be

affected), but with the responsibility associated with our power. We can have many reasons for our conservational efforts - not all of which are parasitic on our own living standards and some of which turn precisely on our sense of values and of fiduciary responsibility.

What role, then, should citizenship play in environmental policy? First, it must involve the ability to think, value and act, and this requires that we think of human beings as agents, rather than merely as patients. This has relevance for many critically important environmental discussions. Consider, for example, the Royal Society's notable report *Towards Sustainable Consumption*, published in 2000. The report shows, among other things, that present trends in consumption are unsustainable, and that there is a need for restraint and reduction, beginning in the rich countries. In his foreword, Aaron Klug stresses the urgent need for 'major changes in the lifestyles of the most developed countries - something that none of us will find easy'. This is certainly a hard task, but if people are indeed reasoning agents (rather than just needy patients), then a possible approach might lie in public discussion and the emergence and sustenance of environment-friendly priorities, along with a broadening of understanding of our environmental predicament. This, too, must take us towards acknowledging the ability of human beings to think and judge for themselves - an ability that we value now and a freedom that we would like to preserve for the future.

Second, among the opportunities that we have reason to value is the freedom to participate. If participatory deliberations were to be hindered or weakened, something of value would be lost. For example, the recent dilution in the United States of environmental regulations and requirements, which has occurred with very little opportunity for public discussion, not only threatens the future, but also diminishes American citizens by depriving them of the opportunity for participation. As it happens, when, early in 2001, President Bush abruptly abandoned the environmental agreement arrived at in Kyoto (the so-called Kyoto Protocol), a CNN/*Time* opinion poll indicated that a large majority of the American public took a very different view from the President. Yet there was hardly any serious attempt by the US Government to take note of public opinion in the making of policy, or to draw citizens into discussion.

Rather than broadening the reach of public discussion, the United States has seen a remarkable retreat from it in the last few years. To take another example, Vice-President Cheney's famously secretive 'energy task force', which is meant to be examining industrial guidelines, has shown little interest in public communication. Indeed, Cheney has been reluctant even to reveal who the members of the task force are. These and other cases of distancing and concealment illustrate how comprehensive has been the withdrawal from seeking public participation. Critics fear, rightly, that all this could be very bad for the future, but we must recognise, too, that blocking opportunities for informed participation is itself a significant loss of freedom, and that this is already occurring. Something has failed to be sustained - right now.

Third, if environmental objectives are pursued by means of procedures that intrude into people's private lives, the consequent loss of freedom must count as an immediate loss. For example, even if it were to turn out that restricting reproductive freedom through coercive family planning (as with the one-child policy in China) helps to sustain living standards, it must also be acknowledged that something of importance is sacrificed - rather than sustained - through these policies.

As it happens, there are, empirically, good grounds for doubting that coercion can contribute much to reducing fertility. Even the Chinese achievement is in line with what would be expected, because of the influence of other social factors that tend to lead to a spontaneous reduction in birth frequency (such as an expansion in female education and gainful employment). In fact, other societies (such as Kerala in India) which have made similar social progress, without coercion, have had comparable - or larger - reductions in fertility. But even if it were to be shown that a non-participatory approach can materially reduce fertility, that would have to be balanced against the loss of freedom that occurs immediately through the coercion itself.

Fourth, the conventional focus on overall living standards is too aggregative to pay adequate attention to the importance of specific freedoms. There can be a loss of freedoms (and of corresponding human rights) even when there is no diminution in the overall standard of living. The point of this general ethical distinction, which has a very broad relevance to social choice, can be illustrated by a simple example. If it is accepted that a person has the moral right not to have

smoke blown in her face by indiscriminate smokers, that right is not ethically overruled if the person thus affected happens to be very rich and blessed with a high standard of living.

In the ecological context, consider a deteriorating environment in which future generations are denied the opportunity to breathe fresh air (because of especially nasty emissions), but where those future generations are so very rich and so well served by other amenities that their overall standard of living may well be sustained. An approach to sustainable development on the Brundtland-Solow model may refuse to see any merit in protests against those emissions on the ground that the future generation will nevertheless have a standard of living at least as high as the present one. But that overlooks the need for anti-emission policies that could help future generations to have the freedom to enjoy the fresh air that earlier generations enjoyed.

The relevance of citizenship and of social participation is not just instrumental. They are integral parts of what we have reason to preserve. We have to combine the basic notion of sustainability rightly championed by Brundtland, Solow and others, with a broader view of human beings - one that sees them as agents whose freedoms matter, not just as patients who are no more than their living standards.

Footnotes

¹ Lester R. Brown; *"Eco-economy: Building an Economy for the Earth"* (Earthscan, 240 pp., £14.99, June 2003, 1 85383 904 3).

² Oxford, 238 pp., £18.99, November 2003, 0 19 925844 9.

³ Continuum, 208 pp., £25, August 2002, 0 8264 5070 9.