



Jurgen Oestereich (*TRIALOG, Germany*)

"From Communal Use of Natural Resources to the Local Agenda 21. Some remarks on basic concepts and new perspectives"

Natural resources from early times to the latest sentence of the European Court on environmental matters are of concern to the community. The perception of "environment" and the technics of dealing with it, is a result of Western culture. But a look into the history, especially that of the underlying concepts, as well as the universal acceptance of the recent Agenda 21 reveals that both reflect fundamental anthropological dispositions.

1. Communal Control of Natural Resources

The idea of synergy, of the whole as being more than its parts, or of the multitude of elements of an aeroplane of which none can fly except when they are put together in a "non-natural", this idea has stimulated human problem-solving efforts from early times on., Such "non-natural" inventions, the knife, the row, the lever, the cultivation of plants, the husbandry of animals, writing, handling electricity and energy etc., often accumulated cross-culturally, have increased the span and the quality of human life considerably. However, cultures arrive at each new stage through an evolutionary trial and error process. If they deplete the resources or the absorption capacity of a given ecosystem, they collapse. Of some cultures no traces, of others rather enigmatic ones remain, like those of the Easter Islands. The ruins of the Hettite or the Maya cultures currently brought to light tell the story of an overuse of the environment. Other examples such as the pre- or proto-historic Sahel towns wait for being explored. It cannot be excluded that the human factor has played an important role in the expansion of the Sahara from very early times on and that some ecological impoverishment of Australia dates back to the coming of the aborigines (1).

Wherever human settlement patterns, towns and villages are lasting and in harmony with the ecosystem, they appear to us as being "sound". Although a purely aethetical judgement at first sight, it may be more. Aesthetical sensibility represents the capability to grasp a set of rules that work, be it the liking of a pattern of textile, the enchantment by birdsongs, the satisfaction from a perfect wine, the meditation over a piece of art, the joyful participation in a game. The impression of "soundness" with respect to a human habitat may simply indicate that its resource management is in keeping with ecological rules and thus, sustainable. The concomitant aesthetical satisfaction may bring the population to respect the rules more than anything else. In an urban setting they become straightforward perscriptions for using given resources, such as the building regulations in Roman, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Arabic towns and those of most other cultures, often still handed down with religious connotations and allusions to a cosmic order which the entire society believes to be part of, the ultimate *raison d'être* of these rules is, however, their appropriateness in a given social and ecological setting for which the entire community is responsible. Otherwise, the rules would not pertain, but tear, with their failure, the culture erected upon them, into the abyss (2).

The European urban tradition started in the early middle ages with the Lombardic and Flemish city states. It combined more explicitly and efficiently than any other known urban culture, two sets of rules: private command of individual property in land and community control of the life resources, regarded as common. In the beginning middle ages, individual property could only survive through protection of a larger urban community. In exchange, the proprietors accepted certain conditions and duties imposed on them by the community. This created a specific

mode of identification; the rich felt proud to be citizens of a particular town. They used a considerable part of their means for urban improvement and embellishment. In doing so, they instrumentalized aesthetics and thus achieved to fuse short-term related private interests with the long-term perspective of common resource management. This process is well documented and brilliantly described by Wolfgang Braunfels especially for Florence, Pisa and Bologna, and David Waley for Siena. The same communal long-term thinking has been found in many other European towns (3).

We owe the beauty of medieval towns to a process of collective formation of built structure - the result of a process of putting pieces together in a higher order like those of an aeroplane. The process itself seems not always well understood. Amateurs of architecture, architects and town planners from Camillo Sitte onwards tend to admire the results and look for the secret in the intricacies of form and appearance. Few critics - Braunfels is one of the few exceptions - have explored the mechanism which guided the collective creation of these communal works of art and makes them non-replicable as such. This is so, because the inherent logic is not teleological, aiming at some preconceived end-product, but evolutionary, open-ended. And, it is a process of circular causation, of which each subsequent step is propelled and determined by what already exists. To be more precise, two circular processes are superimposed: the material one of using the physical resources and building, and the social one of communal self-reflection and identity-building. Both work for themselves and in interaction circularly in the sense, that what has been achieved in one respect is the starting point for decisions in another respect. Moreover, innovative ideas even from strangers were welcomed. The result was not "corporate identity", which a company gives itself in response to a market, but "community identity", which reflects the entire constellation of human attitudes and the resources in a given habitat.

2. Towards Territorial Resource Management

As opposed to most non-European cultures, where legitimacy flows from "eternal" rules, legitimacy in these medieval towns resulted from a public debate ending in common agreement by the citizenry concerned - and approved by them for practical or aethetical reasons. The rules were understood by everybody as being manmade and thus open to revision when need arose. The privileged families, being aware that they could harvest the fruits of their individual property only, if social peace and economic wellbeing of the community at large pertained, supported and often guided this self-reflexive process - of course not to their own disadvantage, but always with a view at the community at large. In this pattern of urban self-government, issues of natural resources, of land and of urban planning were only one part of the issues under debate, but were treated particularly successful, because they were concrete, visible and thus easier communicatable and comprehensible. Often the agreement was obtained through appealing to the citizens' sense for beauty. Yet, in fields such as economics and public order, health, education and religion no such yardsticks were available. Conflicts and strife could not be brought to an end. Proper technics or neutral procedures for handling public affairs were not known. The fall of the mighty Hanse-Ligue of North-Eastern Europe shows that the prevailing notion of administration, deduced from commercial practices resting on individual initiative and personal trust, was utterly inadequate for public offices. In fact, the history of the important European towns in the 13th to 16th century could also be read as one of constant failure of self-government (4).

Parallel to the multicentral pattern of medieval urban culture, the traditional feudal structures in the various European countries consolidated. Their rulers established a variety of patterns of territorial dominance. Some of the more enlightened kings of France and England and princes in Germany and Italy experimented with various models of territorial administration, installing caretakers and a rudimentary civil service. Their task in view of an ongoing competition between the political entities was to put the given human and physical resources to a better use. The political philosophy of the time concentrated on the relation State - individual and tried to come to terms with the dynastic antagonisms connected with the territorial claims and the religious pretences resulting in a state of continuous warfare. The communes continued to fulfill certain functions. Most big and hitherto independent cities like Paris, Milano and Cologne became part of princely territories and a few others, such as Florence, Venice, Gene, Hamburg, became equivalents to princely territories themselves. The Dutch towns were famous for their long and significant war of independence against the most important central power in Europe, Spain, which they won as a kind of federation. They even constituted a threat for the United Kingdom. Yet, towns as an intermediate political level between the State and the individual were not reflected at all in the contemporary political philosophy (5).

The European territorial states established, each on its own course, a pattern of government run by specialists and, later, professionals and thus finally caught up with China, India, Persia and other states in history. But Europe made leeway in the particular European style, i.e. pluralistic, competitive and not legitimized by some divine order but by the promise of the entire society's better material performance, of "progress". The school of "mercantilists" developed the model of a State organized as an economic enterprise. They encouraged industries based on local resources and run (in default of privat investors) by civil servants, the circulation of goods along new canal and road networks, and the protection of internal production through customs barriers. Each king or prince could feel like an entrepreneur either by being the boss himself or by employing hopefully able executive agents of which the Minister of Finance was often the most important. As caretaker of "his" country responsible for economic performance and social continuity he demanded command over the entirety of the country's natural and human resources. Thus the feudal two-tiers concept of real property was revived, now explicitly extended to the natural resources (6).

This model of running a State depended thus heavily on competent authorities, i.e. adequately staffed bureaucracies. Since the lower gentry was often uninterested in these matters and small in number, the personal had to be recruited from the bourgeoisie and consecutively trained in particular institutions. Thus, schools and universities multiplied and turned into centres of intellectual competition, of ambition and, in due course, of sagacity. On the other hand, the two-tiers concept of command over property which the State followed, whenever it seemed to serve the common weal, and as an expression of its overlordship or "sovereignty", interfered with its subjects' claims of command over matter for economic reasons, their functional property rights. Thus the absolutist, autocratic State of the "Ancien Régime" contained already the conditions of its own transgression by offering - despite all the efforts of censure - the climate for the deployment of the great political ideas of the enlighteners: the separation of power and their balance (Montesquieu), the circuit of the national economy (Turgot: "La formation et distribution des richesses"), the general military service, the universal suffrage, the compulsory education etc., and, above all, the idea of the nation as a community of equal and souverain individuals being ultimately responsible for the physical world and its resources. The various absolutist States converted into Nation States, but maintained and reinforced these concepts (7). In fact, they persist until today. They even became universal. This is not so, because of European imperialism. On the contrary, the Europeans became to dominate the world, because they knew to employ those political inventions successfully. Cultures, which refuse to get down with them are bound to fail.

3. Concepts of Central Resource Management

There seems to be a widespread consensus that national sovereignty comprises necessarily the ultimate command over the totality of the natural and human resources of a country. The French revolution had abolished the king's overlordship over land by declaring the individual property "*inviolable et sacré*". But the concept of central control came back with the national governments stepwise reclaiming of ultimate responsibility over the totality of natural resources connected with land such as groundwater, air etc. Not only the respective European jurisdictions, but also the Anglo-Saxon "Common Law" system codified step by step environmental control in the name of the public. Since many environmental effects cannot be limited to boundaries of any sort, national governments are called to hand over their sovereignty to higher levels. This is the rationale behind the European Union's increasing authority for regulating the emissions and other environmental effects of economic activities (8). Supranational levels, be it UNEP or ad hoc international conferences are mandated to draft international conventions on climate change, on biodiversity, on the protection of the ozone layer, of maritime resources etc., or to produce documents such as the Agenda 21.

Most hierarchical patterns and certainly that of political government is top-down directed, restrictive, negative. Its legitimacy is based on its performance, which is sought in professionalism. Professional excellence tends to concentrate and compete at centres. Competition here forces professionalism to become abstract and thus detached from complex reality. Consequently, professional solutions to local problems tend to be technocratically, i.e. limited in their social and time dimensions, superior to traditional local ways of doing it. But they may not take into account any hidden positive and negative potential and neglect the creativity of the local people. A bias for short-term effectiveness may compromise local institutions which maintain local identity or food security such as the commons. In the long run and in principle, top-down development in agriculture for example produces fertilizer overloads and socio-economic discrepancies, in industry it leaves behind obsolete concrete structures and zones of urban blight. Further friction losses in hierarchies occur from a centre's inclination to monopolize knowledge and power by keeping the lower tier incompetent and creating gatekeeper positions at any level. Professional

administration, even with the best intention, ends up in self-defeat.

As a panacea for such (sometimes forgotten) deficits, decentralisation is propagated. Most literature on decentralisation turns around the dilemma between passing down competence and assuring central coherence as well as between local bias or enthusiasm and high-level economies of scale. Whatever balance is proposed, the very fact, that decentralization is conceived at the top, compromises its acceptance at the bottom. Another strategy aimed at making use of the local problem capacity - favoured by the World Bank and other donors - calls the government to go into grass root work and popular mobilization itself (9). But this approach is very expensive, because it requires highly specialized complementary personnel and takes an unforeseeably time to mobilize the people, even if the policy is not infected with vested interests of the centre. Alternative organisation patterns like federations or networks, for which the State could provide favourable preconditions, have their own laws of growth and rhythms making any co-operation difficult.

Hierarchies like political authorities assume legitimacy, because they offer accountability, standardisation, reliability. Efficiency comes only second. In contrast, the economy as a general concept is built around the idea of efficiency and deduces legitimacy from it. It promises the most efficient use of the given scarce resources as a result of the laws of the market, which assure the best factor allocation through tailor-made individual decisions on the one hand and the exploitation of the economies of scale on the other. These principles, which F.A. Hayek fervently defends as being appropriate also for urban planning and local resource allocation, run into contradictions when tackling the time dimension. Where Hayek hints at aspects of history or future in planning, he calls for those public institutions which he elsewhere denies any regulatory power in principle (10). Furthermore, the economy cannot do without institutions and, consequently, suffers under the corresponding friction losses: Efficiency-mindedness, for example, leads to professionalisation, too, hence to central concentration and hierarchies, gate-keeper positions and all the rest. Markets form a hierarchy, too, with the global market at the top. Critics of globalisation like Viviane Forrester feel, in addition, that the defenders of globalisation veil vested interests or hide their desire for favourable gate-keeper positions (11).

Economists who acknowledge the unavoidability and even necessity of public institutions, try to cope with them by employing the concept of property rights. This allows to isolate and treat individually any claim on resources as a part of a "bundle of rights" connected with a piece of land or territory (12). With respect to the management of natural resources they propose hybrid forms which marry economy and administration. One form are certificates which would be issued by the public authorities for exploiting rare resources or for utilising the limited absorption capacity of ecosystems. Another proposal relates to a partnership of public and private entities. Public services for example, which conventionally were run by public institutions, are handed over to market-driven private enterprises under some sort of public supervision (13). In both cases the general question for using the common resources is: Who commands? The economy, which promises the most efficient use, but to what end and for which time horizon? Or the authorities which feel to be legitimized but cannot guarantee efficiency, especially not in the long run?

4. Resource Management at Local Government Level

Administration and economy as concepts are abstractions, which have to be related to a world of biological reproduction and human socializing, that is the growing and fading of distinct components of specific sizes and their ever-changing constellation. Human socializing means also something like a "natural human desire" to form locally distinct communities. This may have to do with evolution. Only those cultures have survived which provide for individual attachment to a specific place and a community which takes care, with a view to the future, for its habitat. The notion of "habitat" here refers not only to ecology, but also to the social, political and cultural aspects which evolve, as has been shown for the medieval towns, in a circular process. The current mainstream political discourse (and scientific disciplines such as sociology, too) tends to neglect local communities especially in their relevance to the habitat and the use of resources. Fortunately, ethnology and social history offer examples of habitat-directed problem-solving capacity in abundance. Benjamin Barber's study of the Swiss Federation and Anthony Sutcliffe's important work on the Paris city council in the sequel of the Haussmann era are just particularly convincing examples of relevance for today in this respect (14).

The 19th century German history of municipal self-government seems exemplary. The Prussian Gemeinde-

ordnung (local government regulations) of 1808 fused revolutionary ideas of self-determination with those of medieval municipal self-government. Towns received autonomy in certain respects. The ruling conservative gentry could put up with this, because it broke the revolutionary claim for individual freedom and could be kept under control, since the means to exercise autonomy could be effectively withheld. In fact, the local leaders saw their role outside of politics and helped themselves with the little means they were left with. However, the idea of self-determination lingered. There was much reasoning and experimenting about tackling the burning problems of the time: urban poverty, inadequate housing, ineffective public facilities, poor education and health risks. These problems were left to the municipalities. The central state, being aware that its instruments, centralized as they were, had proved inadequate, and being short of finance, because individuals and companies, although prospering from the industrial development refused nevertheless to be duely taxed, simply refused to tackle them. One line of arguments in favour of urban autonomy was about defending private property against the state - while at the same time, the same individuals and companies committed themselves substantially at local level. Finally, in 1893, the Prussian Finance Minister, Johannes Miquel, a former Francfort mayor, initiated a law which offered the municipalities the financial autonomy necessary for them to act freely in what was agreed as local. After a long preliminary debate accompanied by experiments and the corresponding learning process many towns installed, then in an astonishingly short time, instruments to deal with the problems: by-laws on street lines, master plans, municipal enterprises to plan, finance and implement public infrastructure, non-profit housing companies etc. (15).

The results were, at least in the eyes of contemporary observers, remarkable. In his study about this process, Alan Ladd quotes some of them: "[The visitor of German towns] finds everything clean and well ordered; the streets are paved with the best of material and are kept in splendid repair (...) There is no smoke or dirt. A uniform building line indicates the existence of municipal by-laws for the control of buildings (and) monumental buildings adorn the city.(...) Even the almost disenfranchised workingmen have a city sense. Certainly the businessmen (...) are very proud of their big cities. They are interested in the big things the city is doing - in the schools and hospitals, in the parks and (...) its beauty. To the promotion of these things men contribute of their wealth". (16) "The attitude of the citizen is largely traceable to the attitude of the city toward the citizen. The city is the most important thing in his life." (17) And Alan Ladd concludes, that in 1914 "... city planning was becoming recognized as a discipline (...) and Germany had emerged as its centre". This is supported by Anthony Sutcliffe and proved by the references in the works of E.Howard, P.Geddes, Le Corbusier etc. (18).

In this context it would lead too far, to go into the details of the subsequent history of local autonomy. It relates more to the instrumental, technical and aethetic innovations, and was disturbed by two world wars. Yet the current debate on the "local state" or the municipal competences in India, Brazil and Southafrica - to name just these, modifies European ideas of local autonomy. In India, for example, the statutes of Chandigarh, Bhubaneswar and Auroville, all initiated by Western planners, is vividly discussed. So are the decision-making procedures in mainstream city corporations such as (New) Bombay/Mumbai, New Delhi and Ahmedabad. Brazil is another outstanding example of experiences in municipal self-government with Curitiba as the show-piece of resource-minded local development-planning. The German technical development co-operation has, in recent years, emphasized the aspect of local self-determination centred on environmental management. In this respect it distinguishes itself from the more technical approach of other donors, especially the World Bank (19). French and other observers tend to mistake ventures of squatter legalizing such as Dalifort, Dakar, as exercise of cadastral regularization, what is but a means of empowering the local community.

5. Perspectives: The Local Agenda 21

From what has been said, it should be clear that the "natural human desire" of living in a community habitat, finds its limits not only in the characteristics of the natural conditions, but also in the capacity of each community to come to terms with itself. This capacity is related to the available technics of (self-)government and the attribution of competences and power in relation to the entire set of communities at various levels which constitute a "culture". Genetically man is programmed, as biologists use to say, to manage a horde, maybe a village. Indeed, until today the performance of whatever council at whatever level is not far away from that of a village council. Legitimacy, the fuel of (self-)government, is still best handled in small units, while big units have difficulties to obtain it. The innovation for managing bigger units consists in establishing hierarchies and the formal procedures which go with them. Most societal organisations today can be described as some kind of hierarchy, a unit in relation and competition with other units around.

The common type of societal organisations is the top-down hierarchy, but it exists also a bottom-up type, the "federation". The top-down type rests on the premise of a (ideally scientifically approved) general whole from which any action can be deduced from. The bottom-up hierarchy tries to materialize the principle of subsidiarity which passes personal legitimacy the ladder up. While the third type, the market, may be left apart here, the fourth type, the "network", deserves attention. This type is not completely new, but has passed, hitherto, rather unrecognised. The spreading of the culture of medieval towns and that of the 19th century cities' partial autonomy follows this pattern. A network of great importance is the scientific community. Since networks are (self-) organized around the exchange of informations and ideas, they proliferate more than ever with the recent emergence of the new media. Today's "New Social Movements" capitalize on this. Their motto, "neither prince, nor merchant: citizen!", expresses their aversion against gate-keeper ambitions in power-seeking administrative or profit-seeking economic hierarchies. Instead they work with platforms, round tables, clearance points at various levels etc. Their deficiencies cannot be discussed here, but it has to be noted that the becoming aware of the self-organising power of communities which appeared first in medieval towns (or maybe in Ancient Greek poleis) now becomes global (20).

The movement of the environmentalists and ecologists is part and parcel of all this. Their approach differs from the administrative treatment of resources by their encouraging attitude and their trust into community identity and solidarity. Ignacy Sachs (eco-development leads to local autonomy), Murray Bookchin (local autonomy leads to eco-development), and others hold that the vision of an invigoration of local ecosystems can motivate local communities with long-term perspective - can stimulate them to a competitive global exchange to reverse the conventional resource-depleting life-style which leads to climate change and the impoverishment of ecosystems (21). Who, if not the local people and their descendents are the legitimate usufructuaries of a given habitat? Who but these people should put up with the challenge of sustainable resource management? And since a sustainable life-style will mean a reduction in consumption, why not let them - each unit for itself - decide, how that can be achieved? Why not give them the competences for building up visions for continuity and the means to work for them? Networking, free and unrestricted, can help to bring all this about.

All these ideas, the "environment/ecology" topic of recently, the concept of local autonomy of 100 years ago, and the ideal of personal inviolability and sovereignty of the subsequent political revolutions seem to be Western ideas. Yet, how could considerable numbers of people in many cultures of the world engage in the pursuit of these ideas, if they were not universally aspired and became formulated in Europe only accidentally? Many UN-documents are based on them, also the "Agenda 21", issued by the UN-Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, and of which chapter 28 about local responsibility is the most vigorous (although the shortest) section of it. Its key sentences are: "LOCAL AUTHORITIES construct, operate and maintain economic, social and environmental infrastructure, oversee planning processes, ESTABLISH LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES and regulations (...) Through consultation and CONSENSUS-BUILDING, local authorities would LEARN FROM CITIZENS ..." (22 - emphasis J.Oe).

The Local Agenda 21 follow-up concerning the Local Agenda-policy in various countries, undertaken by the International Council for Local Environment Initiatives, ICLEI, shows a kind of global LA 21-movement, which expands cross-culturally, strongly capitalizing on networking. Certainly, local mobilization varies, especially in response to the prevailing political culture and the local structures already in existence, which may be, if authoritarian-minded, particularly hindering. The ICLEI-Report reveals also differences in orientation. Many Southern initiatives emphasize economic, others socio-political aspects like the need for top-down accountability (23). The ecological dimension is reinforced through networking with the environmentalists and by benefiting from the emerging resource-minded property rights approach of the environment jurisdiction. This opens up a long-term perspective of local identities built around invigorated eco-systems, leading to specific local aesthetics and, in circular causation, to a multitude of new, complex community identities with its elements put together in a new, possibly non-natural order.

Conclusions

A resource-minded environmental policy, especially if aiming at an ecological invigoration, will only succeed if based on a workable degree of the local units' autonomy. These units must have a size appropriate for self-government. This "granularity" which seems to be an anthropological disposition, has to relate to the historically evolved organisational pattern of the entire society consisting of hierarchical authorities, federations, markets and

networks. How local communities relate to this pattern, remains to be explored; - and also whether this pattern it is mouldable at all. If not, our civilization may head irresistably at its disappearance, too.

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e-mail: esf_pvs@brezza.iuav.unive.it