

Regarding the question whether our current world affairs are sustainable, a resounding “no” appears to be the only appropriate, yet generally unrecognized, or despite-better-knowledge ignored, answer. It is an honest answer, but in reality our planet might “fall apart piece by piece in the face of persistent and pathological denial” (Gelbspan).

Most people worldwide observe our dismally deteriorating world with indifference, but not only people are to blame. It is not the customer's choice for unsustainable products. As a majority of us does not know what it does not know, disastrous leadership disproportionately causes common indifference. If George W. Bush wholeheartedly rejects the United Nations Kyoto Protocol, insufficient, but symbolic, as it might be, and states that such a deal would wreck the US economy and is thus not in its best interests, common people on the street start to question whether everything is really as bad as green activists paint it to be. It is not as if there were no voices of reason around – there are. Instead, it is the constant and never-ending denial from those in power, hiding behind statements going no further than admitting that human actions may be blameable, albeit only to some extent, for climate change, that confuse the public, which is understandably often preoccupied with its own struggle for survival or prosperity.

Our times are dominated by neo-liberal politics and the inherently endless quest for economic growth. The fact that economic en-masse growth appears desirable and that industrialism appears to require perpetual expansion is obvious. The fact that a finite planet cannot support six billion happy consumers is the same. Both we know, but while the quest for “more” is socially accepted and highly desirable, a blind eye is turned towards the better knowledge that it just won't work. It is a dead end. No discussion needed. Let's take care of it another day. Today's people are overwhelmingly the centres of their own lives, interested in their own worlds, thus individuated individuals. People are generally detached from nature and do not identify with “all that is”, as most that is can be regarded as a resource – just as long as enough is left to spend the vacations there, thus a resource for tourism. Nothing else ought to be expected from anthropocentrism and industrialism. Ever since the birth of industrialism, nature has been transformed from “something to be altered” to “something to be dominated” by capitalism and socialism alike. A mere “more equal” distribution of wealth and consumer goods does not solve the problem of their en-masse production in the first place. It is “no goods, no glory” for both.

Environmentalism, as it exists in the mainstream, is purely reactive. Insufficiently reactive. Highly acclaimed achievements such as the Kyoto protocol would fail to bring along any lasting change, even if ratified. They could send an important first message, though. Humanity appears to wait until the “shit hits the fan”, and then calculates the costs and benefits of thoroughly cleaning up or not, constantly affirming that there is absolutely nothing that can be done about all the filth. Obviously, a rigorous job of cleaning up would be too expensive, so no cultural change takes place. As I am writing this paper, toxic waters are rapidly being pumped out of New Orleans, destined to kill all remaining life in the target water bodies, as a thoroughly job of cleaning would be cost prohibitive and delay the city's (questionable) reconstruction for months to come. It is a dilemma, the New York Times reports concerning New Orleans, but what can you do?

A lot could be done to prevent the next Katrina, or similar disasters in less prosperous parts of the world. It would even be in the economic interests of those for whom any sort of agreement regarding even a tiny, legal reduction in dangerous emissions, is officially not. Higher levees cannot be the answer, but most often they are. Following the same lines of thoughts, the possession of nuclear weapons increases national security. Rationally observed, it is idiocy at its best.

Our whole modern development project surrounding industrialism ought to be questioned, as its en-masse realization, as far as it might be achievable via the neo-liberal myth of global prosperity, is inherently unsustainable. Without clean water, an ozone-layer, a stable climate, fertile soils and vegetable, genetic diversity, humanity impoverishes. It could be argued that industrialism alone is enough to impoverish us all, and as it is one of the foundation stones our current lifestyles are built upon, we are in trouble. Perilous trouble. The higher we walk, the deeper we will fall. It might be great to hear that living standards in China and India are rising, but the consequences at the gas-pump are obvious and the atmospheric consequences of globalized definitions of living standard along the lines of “a car in four” are dire at best. Our only hope is peak oil. Will those protestors waving their “no blood for oil”-signs one day shed their own blood for water?

The persistent hope that science and technology will save the day can hardly convince, even though miraculous inventions cannot be ruled out. Whether their en-masse availability and affordability, upon discovery, will suffice, remains questionable. Many environmentalists claim that there is no time to wait and see, no time to wait for more and more evidence to trickle in that human activities might indeed endanger its own species. All types of consequences of non-action are known, yet those in power do not communicate them. The best attitude towards enormous problems is blind ignorance. Instead, as Gerhard Schröder did after the latest series of flooding in southern Germany, politicians call upon the general population to live more conservatively, even though the rhetoric hardly connects during the current economic mini-crisis where desperate acts of penny-pinching fill the shopping carts and eternal growth is prayed for. In times of economic prosperity, the same holds truth, as few shop smarter, but most shop more. Analysts predict as many as 210 million people displaced by environmental changes by 2010 (Myers and Kent), the desertification of large parts of Africa and much more. Recent trends of desertification in southern European nations such as Spain are far from hidden, Katrina killed more US Americans than Osama bin Laden could ever dream of, yet the “war on nature's terror” has not been called out. Where is the coalition of the willing when it is desperately needed? Theoretically, increased disastrous activity by nature's forces has the potential to wreck capitalism, if re-insurers are not capable to provide financial relief in the case of increased mass-claims, but even this is widely ignored. In comparison to quarterly reports, even the blind have eternal vision.

Marx and Engels noted that the cheap prices of the industrial system “are the heavy artillery with which it batters down the Chinese walls...it compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production...it creates a world after its own image”. In addition, it destroys this world, which Marx and Engels could not foresee. Game over.

In conclusion, we could all start humming REM's “Its the end of the world as we know it”, as sooner or later, these world affairs will prove unsustainable. It is up for history to decide whether we will slowly approach the stop sign, or race headfirst over the cliff. Theoretically, it could be both. First, the cliff for the world's poor, then the gradual stop, taking some more Katrina-alike dramatic bumps on the road into account, for the rich. Not everybody can live as the commonly defined “rich” of the North, and even the act of trying to do so by the South, combined with the morbid desire of the North to do so even more, will eventually be enough to show that nobody can. Infinite material desires by a rapidly increasing world population – two to four extra billion until 2050 (UN Millennium Report), cannot be met by a finite planet. The problem of agency appears unsolvable as long as economic interests are driven by quarterly figures and politicians, those in power who should know and could act, follow a path of ill-advised growth in order to appease their subjects, who often do not know what they do not know. Cultural changes are needed, for example along the lines of deep ecologist Arne Naess' Ecosophy T, proclaiming pleasure, happiness and perfection as ultimate norms. As long as en-masse self-realization solely focuses on the self, payback is sure to come. If self-realization would include “everything that is”, chances would be better for everything to stay.