

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

Oral speech given by Luc Ferry, *Philosopher*  
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“Particular debates about particular subjects—eco-taxes, pollution of the oceans, global warming, biodiversity, GMO’s etc., etc., have no meaning if they are not taken up in the context of a much broader political problem: namely, that of **the power or the actual regulatory abilities our governments have (or rather do not have!) to cope with a world that increasingly exceeds their grasp**. This problem arises just as much in connection with economic regulation as with ecological regulation.

First, I would like to remind you that on the moral level, **ecology has introduced two new attitudes that are now extremely characteristic of Western societies**. First, **the proliferation of fears, reinforced by the growing feeling of public powerlessness**, the feeling that our politicians no longer have any real control over what happens in a globalized world.

The second attitude appears to be new on the moral level; it is **a deep feeling of distrust with regard to science**: on a television program these days, a scientist almost always has trouble getting his message through when faced by a charlatan. Everyone likes to think that "the truth lies elsewhere" and that "official science" conceals it, as in "X-Files." The expert is always more or less suspected of hiding a shameful truth, of being a potential Dr. Strangelove, a mad scientist—whereas forty or fifty years ago he was still an incontestable authority figure... **In the eighteenth century, it was exactly the other way round: science was the divinity, and nature was the threat**. (p. 1)

“...First, **regarding fear. Since the 1970s and the birth of political ecology and the pacifism that came from Germany, with its famous "lieber rot als tot," "better Red than dead," we have seen all over Europe a genuine proliferation of fears**. We are now afraid of everything: sex, tobacco, driving fast, alcohol, global warming, the greenhouse effect, chickens, beef, globalization, Islam, Turkey, the hole in the ozone layer, nanotechnologies, the sun, cell phones, microwaves, GMOs (genetically modified organisms), genetic

engineering, and countless other things. **Every year, a new fear is added to the others.**

... What is going to mark **the end of the twentieth century** on the moral level is not only this proliferation of fears as such, but especially the fact that, **behind this proliferation, we are witnessing a justification of fear**... With modern ecology fear has become, on the contrary, a positive emotion that is not at all shameful. One of the founding fathers of ecological philosophy, **Hans Jonas**, has written a book on this theme: for him, **fear is no longer a childish, shameful emotion but just the reverse: it is the first step toward wisdom, toward our famous "principle of precaution" and, as it were, the moral foundation of sustainable development.** Fear allows us finally to become aware of the dangers and threats that face the world on the levels of both pacifism and ecology. Thus **for Jonas we must be guided by fear, and political ecology as a whole constantly uses this weapon in public debate.**" (p. 2)

... ***This new attitude is accompanied by an equally radical change in our relationship to science.*** Today, we are clearly witnessing a genuine historical upheaval (bouleversement, revolution). **To become even more convinced of this, one has only to compare current thinking to what we know of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.** Think, for example, of how the best minds of that time, the great scientists and philosophers, reacted to the earthquake that destroyed the city of Lisbon in 1755. In a single day, this **earthquake** killed between fifty thousand and a hundred thousand people. It was an incredible disaster that had an enormous impact on people's ideas. **The reaction was unanimous, or nearly: everyone—and in France, Voltaire first of all—thought that the progress of science and technology would allow us to avoid such a catastrophe in the future.** The most enlightened people were firmly convinced that this was so. Geology, mathematics, and physics would make it possible to predict, and thus to prevent misfortunes that an absurd nature inflicted so cruelly on human beings. Nature alone was blamed—so that, we note in passing, the mayor of the city was not put under investigation, any more than the architects, masons, and engineers who had constructed the buildings—as they would now immediately be.

**A change in setting, not to mention a change in paradigm: today, it is science that scares us and nature that seems admirable.** We are afraid of cloning, of nuclear power plants, of GMOs, of genetic manipulations, and of "test-tube babies," to the point that research is increasingly supervised by bio-ethics committees. On the other hand, **we have a tendency to idealize nature, to make it sacred,** as if the AIDS or flu viruses were not completely natural!" (pp. 2-3)

"This is shown by the mass media's countless references to **the myths of Frankenstein and the mad scientist.** They point to something very deep, something that is really scary, namely **the feeling that the world is escaping our control, the feeling that our political representatives no longer have any real regulatory power.** We have to recognize that since time immemorial, these two great philosophical myths have been telling us about dispossession, loss of control. According to the images conveyed by such fables, today **it is all the products of scientific activity that are gradually eluding the control of the humans who have nonetheless created them and would thus be dispossessed of what they have engendered.**

... For deep reasons, which I want to analyze now, **the world is escaping our political representatives, probably as never before in the history of humanity, and in any case as never before in modern history since the nineteenth century.**" (p. 3)

"[W]e have to see that **the twentieth century** was characterized by two fundamental traits: the **deconstruction of traditions and the emergence of modern globalization.** These two traits are frightening, and they **lend great power to the ecologists' demand for sustainable development.**" (pp. 3-4)

"...What has caused the moral, intellectual, and cultural landscape to change so much, not only in the domain of high culture, but also in that of everyday life?.. It is **the movement of global capitalism** that **is behind this appearance of Bohemian deconstruction...** [T]raditional values had to be destroyed or at least **deconstructed** so that we could enter the age of **hyperconsumption in which we are now immersed.**" (p. 4)

"...More than the revolutionaries of 1968, the situationists, the surrealists, or the cubists, **the true creator of deconstruction is clearly big capital: I repeat,**

**traditional values had to be deconstructed so that free-trade globalization could flourish.**

...Today, it's the CEOs of large corporations who support contemporary art and create foundations, because they recognize themselves perfectly in a logic of radical innovation that is also their own: in a society dominated by the absolute imperative of benchmarking, anyone who does not constantly innovate simply disappears, so that business leaders like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates have become the Picassos of the computer or of the cell phone. As for my old friends from 1968, almost all of them have gone over to business. In other words, **Marx was right: capitalism is permanent revolution and the Bohemians and deconstructors, even though they were often "on the Left," have served it by doing away with all traditions that ultimately slowed the advance of universal consumption.**

...Indeed, **deconstruction raises two problems: First, it gives rise to fears and increases the feeling that "everything is disappearing," that there are no longer any stable points of reference.** And especially if you understand that it is the result, not of the deconstructors themselves, but of the deepest logic of globalization, it also strengthens the feeling that the world is getting away from us everywhere. And that is the **second**, central problem: **if we want to regulate the economy, if we want to pursue policies of sustainable development, we have to have control over the world,** we have to take it in hand. **But that is what globalization to a very large extent prevents us from doing.**

... What is globalization in its profoundest essence? There are two crucial moments in the history of Europe, and then of the world—because of course this whole thing began in Europe. Thus there are two globalizations... (p. 5)

“...**[T]he first stage in globalization, is simply the gigantic scientific revolution of the Enlightenment, that is, of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries...** **With modern science, what in fact appeared for the first time in the history of humanity was a discourse able to claim, legitimately and credibly, to be valid for humanity as a whole...**

... **The second globalization**, the one in which we are immersed today, is both a consequence of the first and its complete contrary. What characterizes it chiefly is a "fall" - in the Biblical or Platonic sense of the term. **The Enlightenment project "falls" into a structure, that of globalized capitalism, that implies a total**

**competition of all against all, a total competition because it now involves the whole world. In this context of permanent benchmarking, innovation has become an absolute imperative for CEOs, just as it was earlier for Bohemian artists.** Every year, every month, almost every day, our cell phones and our computers evolve. Their functions multiply, their screens get larger, their connections with the net improve, etc. This movement is so irrepressible that a firm that did not follow it would be committing suicide.

...But this completely changes the meaning of our relationship to history... In other words, a CEO knows one thing with certainty, and that is that **in a universe of globalized competition, the law of benchmarking, that is, the law of permanent comparison/competition, not only with neighboring companies, but now also with those that are far away, has become the absolute rule.**"  
(p. 6)

“...**In this new situation, history moves outside human will.** It is no longer drawn out by the representation of final causes, grandiose objectives, but engendered by the automatic, mechanical, anonymous, and blind logic of efficient causes.

... With the globalization of competition, the meaning of history has radically changed: instead of claiming, even if only in principle, to be inspired by transcendent ideals, the progress, or rather **the movement of societies tends to be no more than the mechanical result of free competition among its various components.**

**The modern economy functions like Darwin's natural selection: each company must constantly innovate to adapt, but the global process that this absolute constraint produces, no longer has a goal.** It has neither a predictable direction nor a visible meaning. We are advancing rapidly, but we don't know where we're going or why. **The crisis in the idea of progress that is manifested in contemporary ecology has to do with this—not with the idea that we are no longer progressing, but with a much deeper question, with a concern bearing on the question whether progress itself is really progress.** Are we absolutely sure that we are freer and happier because we will get a new iPhone or Blackberry in three months? It's not clear...

**History has thus become, as Marx predicted, a "process without a subject," a process that no one directs or controls.** As a result, politics seems to lack any kind of common ideal apart from that of the adaptation of our old nation-states to the new logic of globalized competition. Once again: who would be stupid enough to imagine that he is really freer or

happier because he has bought the latest model of telephone or computer? Nobody, and yet we buy it... That is the world we are now living in.” (p. 7)

“...**The number-one-problem of modern politics, a problem that is emerging under the name of "regulation" in the domains of both, the economy and ecology, is this: how can we regain control over a global development that is escaping us everywhere?** How can we restore meaning to what was best in the republican ideal? What can we base ourselves on to give meaning? And at what level can this "regaining of control" be carried out? Certainly not that of the nation. That of Europe?” (p. 8)