Editorial

René Dubos and Jared Diamond dream of Dutch polders

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"Optimism, despite it all" is the title of the last chapter of the last book written by René Dubos, the greatest of 20th century public health writers. Dubos was born in 1901 in France, studied agronomics, and emigrated to the United States in 1924 to start a career in microbiology. He is most known for his writings about ecology and human health. He received the 1969 Pulitzer prize for his bestselling *So Human an Animal*, in which he argues how man is profoundly shaped by his environment.

Everybody knows his famous dictum ‘Think globally, act locally’. This idea was developed in the 1970s, in response to the concern of American students with environmental and social problems. They were advised by Dubos to first consider more local situations. ‘If we really want to contribute to the welfare of humankind and of our planet, the best place to start is in our own community, and its fields, rivers, marshes, coastlines, roads, and streets (…)’.

He died in 1982, and published his last book, *Celebrations of life*, in 1981. Its main message is that ‘resiliency is a universal attribute of all living organisms—from natural ecosystems to individual human beings’, and that technological and social adaptations will enable mankind to face the environmental challenges of the future.

Dubos was profoundly concerned about the environmental crisis which had become apparent during the 1970s, but resisted the ‘contemporary gloom’ which pervaded discussions about these problems. He believed that if humankind can adapt to heat and cold, to crowding and poverty, and to many other social and environmental challenges, then it will surely also be able to adapt to impending energy shortages and other consequences of economic and population growth.

This is part of a bigger ecological story which sees populations of life-forms expanding and then contracting in a pulse-like manner. From this point of view, it is part of the nature of life that it fills up all the available space, and uses up all the available resources until its limits are reached. The main question then becomes whether contraction happens as a disaster, or in an orderly fashion.

Interestingly, in *Celebrations of life* Dubos uses the example of the Netherlands to underpin his optimism that an orderly solution is feasible. An entire chapter is devoted to this ‘horizontal country created by humankind’, with its ‘extraordinary sceneries and a prodigious civilization on (…) a bad piece of real estate’. High agricultural productivity, large-scale land reclamation, and excellent population health (despite industrialization and high population density) are cited as illustrations of humankind’s almost endless capacity for adaptation.

More than 20 years later, Jared Diamond had the same dream in his book *Collapse*. In this book he writes about past civilizations which have completely disappeared because they exhausted their natural resources. In haunting stories of Easter Islanders, Mayas, Greenland Vikings, and several other unfortunate peoples, he hammers down his message that some societies make disastrous decisions.

Easter Island civilization, for example, perished because the inhabitants completely deforested the island. Greenland Vikings perished because they too damaged their environment, and in addition tried to stick to European ways of dairy farming when the climate deteriorated. Diamond argues that our current world is facing environmental problems on an even larger scale, and that we may well suffer the same fate if we do not reduce our impact on this planet quickly.

But then he ends his book by referring to Dutch polders as an example of how people can learn to co-operate to fight environmental dangers together. Reducing the environmental impacts of human activities will only be possible if we can resolve clashes of interest: between economics and environment, between rich and poor, between North and South, between short and long-term, between human beings and the rest of the living world, ….

Diamond sees The Netherlands as an example of a society which has learnt to minimize clashes of interest in its perennial struggle against the water. In support of his slightly nostalgic optimism, Diamond cites this apocryphal Dutch proverb: ‘You have to be able to get along with your enemy, because he may be the person operating the neighbouring pump in your polder’.

Although the struggle to govern the global commons may require other institutions and mechanisms than those developed for dealing with the localized dangers of the past, learning from past experiences is a good idea. If these dreams of the glory of Dutch polders can inspire some co-operation in the management of global environmental change, optimism about the future of our planet is indeed a little more justified.

References


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