

Weaving Time Tracks as an Aspect of Sustainable Development

By Juliane Dross

Sustainable development as defined by the Brundlandt Commission in 1987 is a development “that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

Nowadays there seems to be almost no point in discussing why we need sustainable development. It has become a buzz term, one that neatly decorates nearly every second company home page, and a

term that is used in every other speech given by politicians around the world. So you might wonder: what is the problem then, if everyone thinks that a development in which everyone can sustain is a good idea? What’s the big deal with the Copenhagen conference in December 2009 that brings together all major global decision makers in an attempt to agree on binding goals regarding reduction of CO₂ emissions? Why are so many expert observers in the scientific community so pessimistic about its outcome?

Leaving global governance aspects aside, the answer is difficult and simple at the same time, and you have already, maybe unnoticed, read it in the first paragraph of this essay. It’s in the definition of sustainable development, which demands there be justice between the human beings living on planet earth today (intra-generational justice) and justice between young and old, respectively those people alive today and those yet to be born (inter-generational justice).



It is simple to answer the question why it is so hard to reach sustainable development. But it is extremely difficult to translate this answer into practical action, into a solution, because practical actions are embedded into systems. Two of these (overlapping and interacting) systems in Germany are parliamentary democracy and the market economy. Unfortunately both systems aren’t exactly the most suitable ones for yielding to future generation’s interests. If you look critically, a newly elected administration works within a time frame of four years. And if you are 30 years old at the time you’re reading this essay, your “time horizon” is 54 years if you are female, 48 if you are male. The market economy has brought about stock corporations that literally operate within a span of three months. But even if that’s not the case and you’re talking about the more common case in Germany, small and medium sized enterprises, which are not listed at the stock exchange, the term “strategy” seldom implies a time period exceeding five years.

Different solutions have been proposed to extend the time frame of politicians who set the rules in society, which affect today and tomorrow’s generations. One is to lower the age at which a person has the right to vote to the age of zero which in practice means parents would no longer only vote for themselves but also in the name of their children. Another idea is to widen the entrance to political decision-making for career changers who enter the system as, let’s say scientists or business managers for, let’s say reasons of prestige and who are not locked-into a “four year thought modus”. It goes without saying that especially the former proposal brings

about problems, because it violates the basic democratic principle “one person, one vote”.

So on the one hand resistance against sustainable development results from the difficulty to take into account issues, which will come up further down the road. On the other hand antagonism also results from how the economical and the political systems interact.

German sociologist Hartmut Rosa broaches this issue in his study “Beschleunigung. Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne” (“Acceleration. Changing Structures of Time in Modernity.”). In it he argues that acceleration is structurally and culturally inherent to modern (western) societies.

As long as the different sub-systems accelerate at a similar pace, there will be stability. Or to put it less abstractly: as long as there is an adequate judicial, social, political framework accompanying our (economic) actions, everything is fine. But if they happen to desynchronize, a crash is bound to take place, as can currently be observed in the financial crisis.

This problem of de-synchronization implies a far more serious problem than one might think at first: in a world in which economic actions and political decision-making are globalized, complexity increases. But as complexity increases, political decision making, especially in democratic systems, decelerates. Why? Because in pluralistic societies, interests of different groups have to be determined first, then formulated, then be brought into balance with colliding interests. And still – at this point parliament has not decided upon regulations that give a new framework of action for circumstances which societies have not dealt with before.

If you recall the amount of resources that currently flow into backing the financial system and think a minute about how many opportunities for wise future investments are lost, it is almost needless to say that economic and political crashes are certainly not in tune with sustainable development. All of the previously outlined “time-problems” lead to, among others, two big questions that I would like to leave you with: is economic growth inevitable and if not, what kind of growth are we willing to foster today?



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“Timely” Books

A Wrinkle in Time

by Madeleine L’Engle

Meg and her brother are very concerned, because their father, a gifted scientist, has disappeared. Luckily they get to know the strange Missis Whatsit, who accompanies them during their search. Through magic wrinkles in time, they arrive at the planet Camazotz, a cold, black world ruled by evil. A desperate fight to free their father begins.

Fallen Out Of Time

(Aus der Zeit Gefallen: Biographische Betrachtungen zum Thema Zeit und Erinnerungen)

by Karin Jaques

This book turns the reader’s attention to the question, if the time, in which one lives, is really the one that best corresponds to one’s expectations of life. Or is it the human being who should adapt to time?

Confessiones XI: What is Time?

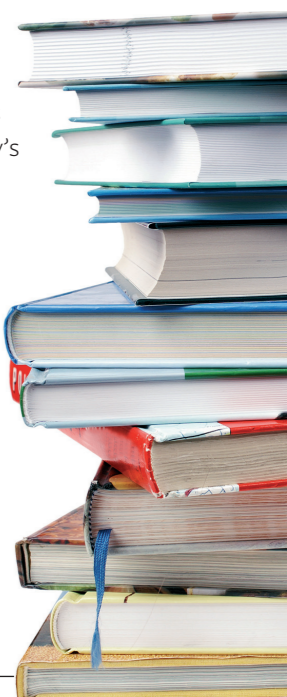
by Aurelius Augustinus

The eleventh book of Augustinus’ *Confessiones* is the most discussed text of the late antique philosophy and is described as the classical philosophical document on time.

Mr. Tompkins in Paperback

by George Gamov

Known to and loved by many readers this volume combines George Gamov’s wonderful popular science books *Mr. Tompkins in Wonderland* and *Mr. Tompkins Explores the Atom*. They lead a bank clerk into the inner world of an atom. Easy to read even for non-physicists these books explain the central concepts of modern physics, relativity and quantum theory.



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