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Human civilisation and Earth

Introduction

In the last few days, information has emerged about certain progress with regard to the attitude of governments and the UN to the Earth's environment. I mean in particular:

a) *Gazeta Wyborcza* dated 16th Feb 2007 (issue no 40.5348)

Governments of the European Union states have reached an agreement on the rudimentary principles of the energy market structure (including the mandatory 20% share of energy from renewable sources in the total energy consumption);

b) *Rzeczpospolita* dated 17/02/2007 [issue no 41(7638)]

Representatives of the world's richest countries and the biggest developing countries have reached a compromise to replace the lame Kyoto Protocol (including the principles of reducing the so-called carbon emissions);

At the beginning of February 2007, the UN published a report forecasting that in the 21st century the average temperature on Earth will go up by 1.4 – 4° C, whereas the sea level will rise by 28 – 43 cm.

What is the problem? Is it only a problem of the environment and energy?

1. Earth and human civilisation

Let us perform the following conceptual exercise, which will help us see the relationship between human civilisation and Earth from quite a different point of view. Let us go up at least a dozen thousand kilometres above the surface of our globe and treat it as a whole.

The macroscopic view (with the naked eye) will not provide us with any details, what we have before us is a planet with visible continents surrounded by water and topped with ice caps. We can guess that there is an atmosphere and speculate with regard to the lower levels.

Only the microscopic approach will reveal the full diversity and complexity of the object that is Earth. It should take no major effort to notice one component of Earth – human civilisation. Its volume, compared to Earth as a whole, will produce the first thought, impression, of the actual place and role of this civilisation within the whole planet.

2. The problem of Earth vs. human civilisation relationship

The materials quoted in the Introduction suggest that there is a problem of “energy”, “climate”, “environment” or some other local problem. What is more, the expression “environment” brings anthropocentrism to the fore. The environment is treated as a cocoon surrounding the Earth's most important component, i.e. human civilisation, as an object practically subservient to it. Likewise, the contemporary concepts of sustainable development, in general, suggest that economy today should not infringe on the chances of future generations and thus focus on humanity.

Copernicus gave us the academic heliocentric system. To paraphrase, the place and role of human civilisation on Earth must not be anthropocentric, in other words, the Earth must not revolve around man (the Sun).

At present, the issue of the Earth vs. human civilisation relationship is in every respect a total one. That is why I am using the expressions “human civilisation” and “Earth”, of which the former is an element. System philosophy teaches us that an element (civilisation) must not be superior to the whole (Earth). Such perception of the problem comprises the following, more important difficulties.

a) Population density and human civilisation density (for example, population density measured as the number of human beings per unit of desirable living space on Earth) has

reached levels disturbing the Earth's global equilibrium. Moreover, human civilisation is constantly expanding, quantity- and quality-wise, as opposed to the other elements of Earth.

b) Human civilisation is "driven" by its elite part, who has reached the highest standard of life. This elite expects that its quality of life will be at least maintained, and is pushing this value above others. The difficulty lies in such phenomena as the existence of huge areas of poverty and unsurpassable limits to growth, including those of resource availability and environment pollution.

c) The megalomania of humankind is embarrassing. It is expressed, for example, in the infinite faith in technological progress, innovation. We think in terms of yesterday and today, whereas tomorrow does not appear to be a factor calling for strict self-limitation. Double standards prevail: the Earth must accept what is good for man. The content of this "good" is defined egocentrically and voluntarily, as well as policentrically by various civilisation entities. Our awareness of the meaning that the other elements of Earth have for the civilisation does not differ much from that represented by a primitive community. Whereas ultimately human civilisation exists thanks to its environment.

d) We have too little cognitive, axiological and normative knowledge about human civilisation, Earth and their interrelationship. What we know does not make for sufficiently effective management of nature and civilisation in compliance with their principles.

e) Human population on the whole develops mainly through trial and error. The existing embryo of a single centre managing the entire civilisation (the United Nations) is inefficient. The scattered policentric power centres are not able to rise above their own egocentrism and divisions. Thus, a poorly controlled evolutionary development prevails.

At its core, as long as we are not able to progress to living in space, this is a problem of a nearly confined vessel with one energy input whose utility we know¹: the Sun. Thus, the issue of the vessel's internal equilibrium and its level rises above all else. There is no doubt as to the global scope of the equilibrium, in terms of lifecycles of the key macroscopic elements of the system, including civilisation and the system as a whole: the Earth.

3. Approach to problem solution

a) The basic assumption is that all the civilisations on Earth are equally important and must live in symbiosis. The Earth is an organised entity. Elements incapable of organising themselves into civilisations (for example, inanimate objects) have their place and a role to play on Earth, too, and they contribute to the longevity of the organisation.

b) It is necessary to develop and effectively implement the policy and strategy for shaping planet Earth as a whole. People must be able to assume leadership over the whole, responsibility for the Earth, also over the very long term. Values and goals, actions and duties, authority and its reasonable application as well as responsibility are interrelated in this scope. One must not count on the indulgence of nature, subjected to the ruthless parasitism of human civilisation. Unless, perhaps, we intend to develop like a microbial colony on culture medium which grows as long as there is enough energy and until it is poisoned by its own waste.

c) It is necessary to subordinate the development of human civilisation to the development of planet Earth. This idea is not iconoclastic, it is vitally important to us. As long as we have not managed to conquer space for utilitarian purposes, the growth strategy of human civilisation must be limited by the policy and strategy of shaping Earth as a whole. The opposite configuration, whereby the Earth is subordinated to human civilisation, must be abandoned. This is primarily a problem of mentality and politics.

d) Subordination efforts should involve a better definition of the problem of the relationship between human civilisation and Earth, as well as better recognition of its causes. It is appropriate, therefore, to apply a diagnostic method, rather than a prognostic one. Solutions

should be aimed at eliminating, blocking, etc. the causes to the problems. The least that should be achieved includes:

- development of cognitive, axiological and normative knowledge of the entire global population, at all demographic and social levels and cross-sections; intensification of academic research and all forms of education are fundamental here;
- raising awareness, i.e. understanding of the direct and indirect significance of the Earth and its relationship with human civilisation, promoting beliefs and attitudes supporting the subordination of human civilisation to the development of the planet, etc.; in this case, education is but an introduction to a whole array of actions, starting with shaping economic relations (that we all know about and yet marginalise, e.g. water prices; environmental taxes, etc.);
- adjusting expectations with regard to the civilisation's standard of living to capabilities, and their viability, in light of the above principle; in other words, the quality of life on planet Earth must prevail over the standard of human life, or otherwise: people must not live above their means;
- honouring the influence of the second law of thermodynamics on social systems, too, that is accepting certain differences in the standard of living within human civilisation; differences in the standard of living are natural and objective phenomena, but there needs to be a method for determining their extent and keeping them within acceptable limits; finding effective solutions in this area is very difficult from any point of view (political, real, etc.);
- reducing the density of population and human civilisation, rationalisation thereof and limiting its displacing influence on other civilisations; a fundamentally different approach to resource utilisation is needed, including non-renewable and renewable sources, as well as a strategy for minimising energy and resource consumption in any form;
- introducing an efficient monocentric Earth management system; this calls for changing the principle governing the entire human population – from an evolutionary one to a centrally operated model, liberal and respectful of diversity.

4. The risk related to subordinating behaviours

The chief sources of risk lie in the obstacles to the growth of knowledge and awareness, as well as changing the management system of the entire civilisation. The attitude presented above is still perceived as utopian, thus going back to the 18th century, which only confirms the diagnosis. Still, a breakthrough is needed instead of behaviours stemming from a belief that there is still time, resources and possible ways out. Globalisation and Töffleresque acceleration are irregular phenomena, that is processes by nature deprived of predefined and clear values and goals. We cannot allow for those phenomena to proceed in a totally uncontrolled, evolutionary way. We must develop an identity, both as human civilisation as a whole, and as Gaia (Pangea). Thus far, we do not have such a holistic identity.

Unfortunately, the prognosis, to use medical terms, is unclear. The patient (relationship between Earth and human civilisation) is in a serious, unstable condition. The risk of the condition turning critical is higher than that of stabilising the serious condition, let alone of recovery. The pace of accumulation of destructive phenomena is higher than the pace of the civilisation self-organising itself.

The balance of growth is adverse. Without agreed, comprehensive and radical actions, i.e. a breakthrough subordinating the growth of human civilisation to the development of Earth, we will soon reach the stage of uncontainable catastrophe (collapse).

[Back](#)

¹ We are not really sure whether other kinds of energy (for example gravitation) have utilitarian functions.