Review

Patrick Bond (2002) *Unsustainable South Africa: environment, development and social protest.* Scottsville: University of Natal Press, London: Merlin Press.

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Introduction

Patrick Bond's hard-hitting book on environment and development in post-apartheid South Africa is both personal and provocative. The author develops a strong and convincing argument based on his own radical perspective, presenting the factors that he believes underpin environmental decision making in South Africa. Second, he identifies and links particular individuals to projects and decisions made in planning and development post-1994, thereby making individuals responsible and accountable for the 'unsustainability' of South Africa. He is highly critical of the ruling party's approach to development, which acts in imperial not local interests. However, Bond also highlights that 'the core of the problem we must never forget is systemic: global capitalism, augmented by patriarchy, racism/ ethnicism, anthropocentrism, religious bigotry, and many other easy vices' (2002:xvi).

Bond supports an alternative approach to the sustainable development debate since he criticises weak sustainability or ecological modernisation and calls for a new approach based on social, ecological and environmental justice. He states that a weak sustainability approach is maintained within a neoliberal strategy that has been adopted in the country during the first eight years of transition. The rhetoric of sustainable development is present in legislation, policies and programmes but the environmental destruction on the ground is intensifying. Bond critically explores why this is so.

Broad approaches and key arguments

With the memory of the much-publicised World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), still fresh in our minds, Bond's new book comes at an opportune time. Hosted by South Africa in Johannesburg in August 2002, the WSSD disappointed those expecting stronger commitments to the original intentions of the United Nations Declaration on Environment and Development drawn up at the Rio summit in 1992.

Within this context, Bond explores South Africa's progress towards achieving sustainability. The central argument of his book is that during the first period of democratic rule in South Africa, from 1994 until now, 'government's attempts to improve environment and development failed miserably' (2002:18). He argues that in the transition from apartheid to democracy, government has succumbed to a World Bank-inspired neoliberalism. In the process, much of the ANC's original intentions outlined in its Reconstruction and Development Programme have been sidelined or watered down. Socio-ecological progress has been set back partly by conditions inherited from the apartheid government but also from unaltered power relations, and the current government's economic priorities geared towards globalisation and trade liberalisation. Bond concludes that 'although on the surface, the ruling party's practices appear grounded in stakeholder ideology, in reality they cement apartheid-capitalism's social, economic, geographic and ecological legacy' (2002:20).

Bond implicitly uses concepts and methods (discourse analysis) developed by Hajer (1995) and Dryzek (1997) among others, which criticise ecological modernisation and propose alternative approaches to sustainability. He identifies three distinctive environmental-developmental discourses that have emerged internationally and in the South African context – neoliberalism, sustainable development/ecological modernisation, and environmental/socio-ecological justice. He argues that the 'overarching rhetoric associated with the post-apartheid state's environmental policy' (2002:19) is sustainable development. This discourse works positively with the neoliberalisation discourse but excludes environmental justice's core issues, and hence remains as weak sustainability. By exploring five specific aspects of development in South Africa (water and sanitation, energy, waste, land use, and pollution), the book considers the role of these different discourses in determining government policy and action.

Part One of the book explores the legacy of apartheid-capitalism, as well as the common discourses associated with the environment-development

debate in South Africa. This section also introduces the five aspects of development mentioned above. Part Two focuses on two unsustainable development projects – the planned Coega Port and Industrial Development Zone (IDZ), and the Lesotho Highlands Water Project. The book then moves onto unsustainable policies in Part Three, focusing on the government's infrastructure policy, in particular water and electricity delivery. Lastly, Part Four is devoted to a deeper analysis of South Africa's macro-economic policies, the WSSD and the eco-socialist response.

A development-environment discourse approach

Bond's use of a discourse approach provides an effective framework for analysing the current development-environment context of South Africa. However, his argument would have been strengthened had he outlined and explored in more detail the theory and concepts proposed by Hajer (1995) and Dryzek (1997), among others. He alludes to discourse analysis and ecological modernisation but does not provide a clear theoretical argument to frame his ideas. The book provides a detailed and argumentative approach, and is aimed at a wide audience; however, a short section on the theory of environmental politics would have been useful.

The book's main objective is to reveal the discursive basis to environment and development projects, policies and politics. Bond describes the neoliberal discourse as dominated by the free-market principle of maximising GDP. This discourse gives limited attention to associated environmental problems, and the provision of free lifeline services to the poor receives little support. In contrast, the sustainable development discourse takes more account of the long-term environmental costs of development. It does this by using technical reformist approaches to bring environmental externalities into the marketplace (ecological modernisation). The vagueness of the concept of sustainable development has enabled it to be incorporated into neoliberal approaches, without requiring real transformation in how the political economy operates. Alternatively called ecological modernisation, 'this discourse incorporates green business practices, and is based on faith in science and technology, instrumental rationality, and an ideological commitment to market democracy' (2002:33).

The third discourse, environmental justice, provides a radical alternative, by putting moral and distributional issues at the forefront, questioning capitalism's ability to bring about real environmental and social sustainability. The values of the environmental justice movement are

embodied in the South African Constitution's Bill of Rights. 'Critical ecology movements', described by Jamison (2002:33), draw upon the environmental justice discourse, by promoting a communicative rationality and deliberative democracy, while remaining sceptical of green business and science and technology. The main problem experienced by critical ecology movements (also referred to as 'red-green politics') is fragmentation based on different forms of environmentalism, and related information and knowledge. However, Bond fails to address the differences between eco-social justice and environmental justice. He does not define the terminology, and uses these terms interchangeably and rather loosely. The lack of theoretical rigour in places detracts from the arguments being presented.

Unsustainable projects

Bond goes further than an analysis of these discourses, by exploring 'how these divergent arguments have competed to win public policy favour within South Africa's first democratic government, led by the ANC' (2002:34). The case studies of unsustainable projects and policies in Parts Two and Three provide the context for uncovering the conflicts between different groups representing these divergent discourses. The proposed Coega port and IDZ and the Lesotho Water Highlands Project are excellent case studies of large projects espousing sustainable development principles, while being largely geared, in fact, towards the neoliberal agenda.

The book argues that the unsustainability of the Coega project relates to the high state subsidies involved, the opportunity costs of resources (including water, air and electricity), and the severe environmental degradation that will result if the project goes ahead. The project has been criticised from economic, environmental and political viewpoints. An alternative development strategy for the region, proposed by local community and environmental activists (the Sustainability Coalition), would provide far more employment and other socio-economic opportunities without the high associated costs of Coega. Bond provides a well-reasoned argument and a wealth of information supporting the alternative option. He highlights the agendas and interests of the individuals driving the project and the government officials who, through their silence or inability to take action, support the project.

The Lesotho Water Highlands Project (LWHP) illustrates the dominance of the World Bank in determining the (un)sustainability of projects. The World Bank was the key roleplayer in organising technical, financial,

social and environmental information relating to the project. Environmental justice critics of the project argued that on legal, scientific and economic grounds, the human and environmental damage of the project had not been internalised, as argued in the sustainable development discourse used by the World Bank and the South African government. The project failed to deal appropriately and justly with the displacement of Lesotho highlands households and the consequent effects on the livelihoods of others through lost land; other potential ecological problems such as soil erosion and sedimentation were not considered at the outset; the resultant rising water costs have impacted hardest on Gauteng's township residents; and the project has been beset by corruption scandals.

Both local and international environmental lobbyists, churches and NGOs took up the challenge of demanding answers and compensation for the environmental damage and costs related with the LHWP. As Bond argues, 'the LWHP has become an important symbol of the extent to which the post-apartheid South African government is willing to listen and respond to socio-environmental justice critiques of its policies and pet projects' (2002:136). This case study provides a useful exploration of the limitations of the sustainable development/ecological modernisation rhetoric, which often acts as a screen for purely neoliberal policies and practices. It also reflects on the role of corruption in ensuring that unsustainable projects can go ahead.

Unsustainable policies

Part Three moves to a review of the ANC government's infrastructure policies, highlighting how the World Bank has influenced the transition of these policies from the original ANC electoral mandate to the neoliberal policies of today. Bond focuses on water and electricity infrastructure provision, revealing that little has changed between the previous apartheid regime's policies and those of the ANC government. Again this illustrates the dominance of the neoliberal agenda and its insistence on 'getting the prices right', avoiding cross-subsidisation of services for the poor, and pursuing privatisation in services provision. In particular, Bond highlights how the dominant service delivery policies of the 1990s profoundly conflict with the Constitution's socio-economic rights clauses.

Apart from limited access to affordable services to the poor, the negative environmental implications of government infrastructure policy include environmental hazards and health issues. These relate to pollution of

ground water and rivers from inappropriate or non-existent sanitation services, poor or non-existent drainage systems, and health costs from inappropriate energy sources. Competing perspectives on infrastructure issues are neatly presented in tabular form (2002:241), comparing the neoliberal and critical (eco-socialist) viewpoints. An interesting point is the extent to which government has gone against its own Constitution and legislation in the pursuit of market-dominated approaches. The National Environmental Management Act (1998) and the National Water Act (1998) are both underpinned by sustainable development and even ecological and social justice discourses. However, the interpretation of the law has not yet gone far enough to ensure environmental justice in practice. Sadly, the poor are the losers through the commodification of water and other essential services. The impact of such policy decisions is explored using the case of the recent cholera epidemic.

Energy issues in South Africa are explored by focusing on the unequal distribution of power. The environmental injustice of air pollution, where the poor absorb the costs of cheap electricity but do not receive the benefits, is examined. Bond considers the policies and programmes of Eskom in securing power for the powerful. He considers the transformation of this large parastatal and suggests that inequality in access to energy is still a critical problem in South Africa. Eskom continues to be a target of dissent owing to its privatisation, poor environmental performance, its policy to cut power to those who cannot afford it, inadequate power supply to poor households, and its reduction in its rural electrification programme.

Bond provides a detailed analysis of the rise of civil society in Soweto as a result of power cuts. He explores how the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee's Operation Khanyisa operated at both a local and global level to challenge basic rights to energy. He ends this chapter by considering the energy and environment debate in South Africa, focusing on the high levels of pollution created by energy from coal. The issue of sustainable energy was a key focus of the WSSD that became marginalised as states withdrew their support for cleaner energy policies and programmes. Bond suggests that South Africa needs to produce a new energy strategy for the country and he provides useful recommendations and key points that should be considered.

An eco-socialist agenda?

In his conclusion, Bond investigates regional eco-development alternatives in the context of regional power relations, and within the broader global

context. He also returns to discuss the World Summit on Sustainable Development – how its commodification of nature and life has eroded the original intentions of sustainable development and the eradication of poverty and environmental degradation. In South Africa, while its policies and legislation and its 'right-based rhetoric' contain many radical intentions to ensure environmental justice, its conservative practices reflect, above all, the discourse of the dominant economic players both nationally and internationally. In response to the current development-environment reality, Bond calls for an eco-socialist conception of environmental management for South Africa. This will require popular mobilisation and 'an increasing convergence of green, brown, feminist, radical/ethnic justice, and class politics' (2002:421-2). As Harvey argues, this requires

> making the quest for environmental and social justice central rather than peripheral concerns ... the environmental justice movement has to radicalise the ecological modernisation discourse. (1996:401)

A critique of 'Unsustainable SA'

Bond provides a critical and eye-opening account, using a great deal of information and research to support his argument. The book is dense and multi-layered, which perhaps illustrates the complexities of the environment-development debate at local, national and international level. A great deal of information is presented, which makes the book difficult to digest on a first reading. However, it provides a useful source of information on sustainability issues in South Africa. In places Bond does not support the statements he makes with enough substantive evidence and this makes the reader question whether these are personal or empirically sound judgements.

In his analysis, Bond has tended to focus more on social justice and basic human rights issues rather than the strong links between the natural environment and social problems (although these are covered as well). This may be in part because of his focus on urban issues, particularly service delivery and the associated costs to the urban poor. Another reason could be the ability of urban communities to mobilise around shared servicing issues more effectively than the rural poor, which has resulted in their issues receiving more attention. He also does not place enough emphasis on green agenda issues, saying little about who should play an advocacy role for the natural environment. In adopting an eco-socialist discourse and in questioning the sustainability of South Africa, he needed to consider the intrinsic value and rights of the natural environment too, thereby addressing the red, the brown and the green.

Trevor Ngwane's comment on the back cover is useful: 'A monumental work. The information is political dynamite, crucial for those of us who believe the way forward leads from exhausted nationalist politics to a post-capitalist society where environment is taken seriously'. Perhaps the greatest warning provided by the book is the role of individuals in promoting or undermining sustainability in South Africa. Bond makes the critical point that it is the officials who adopt sustainable development speak within a neo-liberal strategy, the consultants who implement the weak sustainability approach, focusing on their own agenda and interests, South Africa's growing tradition of 'captive regulators', and ministers who push unsustainable development for their own political careers and power that are responsible for environmental destruction and the resultant social problems of South Africa. He clearly believes silence is a form of consent. It is time for those who sit on the fence and who adopt the neo-liberal, technocentric approaches of ecological modernisation to be made accountable for how they contribute to the environmental crisis in South Africa. As individuals and collective groups we can make a difference: we need to be part of and support the rise of civil society in securing social, ecological and environmental justice in South Africa.

References

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