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Sustainable Futures: An Agenda for Action

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Book Review

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Raphael Kaplinsky is an acclaimed analyst of technology policy, global value chains, and the consequences of China's rise on production and exports in developing countries. In *Sustainable Futures*, he tries to do more than just observe the looming climate catastrophe catalogued in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports. Kaplisnky situates plausible solutions in an analysis of the shift from the Fordist or mass production techno-economic paradigm (TEP) to the contemporary (but not yet complete) information technology TEP. The TEP analytic approach he employs is Schumpeterian. Big technological changes emerge from and respond to eras of economic stagnation by advancing solutions to interlinked problems in basic energy sources, transportation modes, production processes (including both labour control and corporate form), and the saturation of what once were novel commodities. Consistent with its Schumpeterian origins and the interdependence of these technologies, the TEP argues these big changes occur in waves that require sustained political and social support, and thus necessarily entail massive political and social change.

The book analyzes the mass production and information TEPs, in turn, concentrating on how emergent economic and ecological problems in the mass production TEP now confront us. The analysis of the information TEP concentrates on the ways in which potentially provides solutions for those problems. The last two chapters deal with political and social problems actually implementing these solutions.

The Fordist mass production wave involved petroleum, internal combustion engines, assembly line production of standardised goods by standardised workers in large hierarchical corporations, and, paradigmatically, automobiles. Keynesian demand management, expanding welfare states, and regularised collective bargaining provided the corresponding political infrastructure, suburbanisation and the social infrastructure. The materials and energy intensity of the mass production TEP generated much of the climate crisis we now face. Kaplinsky focuses on the emergent problems rather than delving into the processes of endogenous decay generating those problems. Kaplinsky's analysis of how the mass production paradigm spread to developing countries is particularly strong, even though this spread only temporarily compensated for exhaustion of the paradigm in the world's rich country economies.

By contrast, Kaplinsky argues, the information and communications TEP holds out the potential for a more sustainable Circular Economy based on reuse, digital upgrading (rather than trashing) of devices, and a more materials-conserving consumption package based on digital goods. Kaplinsky's Circular Economy should not be confused with Schumpeter's notion of a low or no growth circular economy. This Circular Economy is already visible in some parts of the world and particularly among younger demographic cohorts. Kaplinsky's policy recommendations are thus for a vigorous roll-out of these technologies – solar power, virtual meetings, more connectivity – across all the critical components of the information or digital TEP.

Kaplinsky is surely correct about what needs to be done. However, the pervasive use of the passive voice in the last two chapters suggests he harbours some doubts about how to mobilise constituencies to implement his preferred policies. The market surely will help, as, for example, the levelized cost of solar electricity generation is now lower than coal-fuelled generation almost everywhere, particularly if externalities like air pollution from coal are priced in. But if the TEP approach is clear about one thing, it is that markets are rarely if ever 'natural' phenomena. Firms whose profitability rests on fossil fuel consumption have spent decades and millions trying to skew markets in favour of their products, and resist regulation that might hasten a shift away from fossil fuels.

The key differences between the TEP approach, the more Marxist French Regulation School (Boyer, 1990) and the naïve techno-optimism of, for example, the Masssachusetts Institute of Technology's Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2011), really matter in relation to potential solutions to the looming climate and ecological crisis. MIT techno-optimists are surely wrong to think that new digital technologies are neutral. They are also wrong to assume that because new opportunities will naturally exceed new (and old!) problems, the market will supply solutions on its own. The Regulationists are surely right to think that the massive political struggles – particularly around income distribution and the nature, pacing, and control of labour – matter more than inchoate climate dread on the part of rich and poor country populations. Kaplinsky underplays the scale of the social struggles needed to instantiate the Fordist TEP, as his choice of the label 'mass production' suggests. The

Regulationist 'Fordist' label always implicitly or explicitly carried with it some sense of those struggles. Here, Kaplinsky's lack of a sustained explanation of the endogenous social and political causes for the decay of the mass production TEP weaken his ability to find political solutions supporting a more rapid shift towards an information-based TEP. It also perhaps blinds him to the possibility that the information TEP may already have matured – roughly 70 per cent of the global population already had a smart phone as of 2020, after accounting for folks with multiple phones.

In sum, Kaplinsky has accurately identified the problems facing the global economy and environment and limned how solutions might emerge from the rollout of existing information era technologies. The book is written in a relatively accessible form for a non-academic audience. In that sense, it does help move the policy debate forward by highlighting the social and political sides of technology-based solutions to the climate crisis for that audience. Audiences interested in development issues will, however, find less here, even though the opportunity to deploy new, decentralised power generation and information technologies is in some ways greater given the lack of prior infrastructure and stranded assets, and their corresponding political actors. That said, Kaplinsky is correct to note that the problem developing countries face is not so much about maintaining employment and income as it is about attaining any acceptable level of income before resource exhaustion or environmental collapse causes a human catastrophe beyond their social and political capacities. Here, of course, the current politics of immigration in rich countries does not bode well for a concerted global solution to raise living standards in developing countries in a sustainable way. Even though this response would probably serve rich country interests, current politics suggests that rich countries will raise the drawbridge in the hopes that climate problems fall hardest on someone else.

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