



SUMMARY OF THE KAPUSCINSKI DEVELOPMENT LECTURE

CLIMATE JUSTICE – DISTANT STRANGERS AND THE ILLUSION OF SEPARATION

delivered by Henry Shue

on 4th December, 2014

Climate change is...a giant example of remote – indeed, global – effects that are also the group effects of individuals participating in an international energy regime that is dependent on coal, oil, and natural gas. And climate change is a powerful reason why we need to try to re-think our understanding of responsibility...

As media attention worldwide focussed on the international climate negotiations at the COP20 summit in Lima, Professor Shue's lecture drew attention to the issue of climate justice in the Anthropocene and the need to revise our understanding of responsibility in the context of increasingly human-made environmental impacts.

However, time is not on our side. Critical points of no return have now been passed. For example, Professor Shue pointed to the latest scientific evidence concerning the irreversible melting of the West Antarctic Ice sheet. Thus, he emphasised the importance of a global response to prevent temperature increases in excess of two degrees to avoid a global catastrophe.

What am I responsible for?

Professor Shue's lecture, entitled "*Climate Justice – Distant Strangers and the Illusion of Separation*" attempted to counter popular explanations for the poor record on climate change in developing nations and to reinvigorate public debate about climate justice by exploring the question: What am I responsible for? In particular, Professor Shue, who is also a leading climate change and human rights expert, argued that part of the problem is based on a faulty assumption that what we can turn a blind eye to challenges that which seems far away. In this lecture, Shue invited us to "*think about most people, all the people who are strangers to us – in many cases, distant strangers – for whom we have no reason to feel affection and whose activities and practices we may have no instinctive reason to care about – the vast majority of other people in the world. Do we here have any responsibility toward them with regard to climate change? If so, why? And how much?*"

Shall we care about distant strangers?

Much commentary about our failure to appreciate the significance of climate change for developing nations stems from the assumption that the near effects of our acts are more important than the remote effects, and that the effects we produce as individuals are more important than the effects we produce as members of a group.

Professor Shue's lecture explored how these assumptions limit our possibility for action and also explained why we need to revise our conception of responsibility in the context of the Anthropocene, which is the term given to describe an era in which human actions are the

cause of devastating effects on the planet and, by extension, according to Professor Shue, on distant strangers.

Reflecting on how we might respond to climate change, Professor Shue pointed out that we must consider both the problem *and* the proposed responses “*because of course every response to a problem comes with its own problems*”. As governments come together to negotiate a response to climate change, he stressed the “*need to consider the danger that comes with our responses to climate change*” not only for developed states but also citizens in developing states. If governments act, as most argue that they must, to reduce carbon emissions by curbing fossil fuel use, one danger of such a strategy is “*disrupting development by depriving the poorest of the only energy source that they can currently afford: fossil fuel*”. Thus, he argues, responses to climate change should not be one-dimensional stand-alone strategies which would risk balancing the transition to sustainable non-carbon based energy solutions on “*the backs of the poor*”. Rather, an antipoverty principle should be at the heart of the global action.

The need of cognitive transformation

In response to the lecture, Dr. Lorna Gold of Trocaire, the Irish based international NGO, focused on two issues arising from this talk: the deep rooted contradictions in our understanding of responsibility, and the need to re-imagine humanity to address this crisis. Regarding the first point, Gold argued that although intrinsic values such as mutuality, solidarity, and cooperation, are critical to our understanding of responsibility at family and communities levels, these stand in stark contrast to the centrality of self value (or state) interest that dominate the global discussions. Further, Gold argues that the promotion of self-interest over social cooperation “*has become institutionalised in ways which are now creating blind spots and risk undermining the very foundations of humanity*”. Thus, Gold called for a ‘cognitive transformation’, a re-imagining of responsibility and community where spatial and temporal distances carry less weight:

The reality is that in our world, distant strangers are rapidly becoming proximate neighbours, whether we choose to embrace this or not. Technological advance has outstripped our cultural and institutional capacity to deal with the immediacy of what we now know. There is an urgent need to transform the narrative and values underpinning our understanding of responsibility to embrace this new reality. The alternative is that we become very bad neighbours in an increasingly broken family