

Sustainability and its Discontents

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Abstract

Policy proposals in almost every field of human endeavour, be it in economic and social development, the environment or science, seem to be subjected to the same stringent test, that of meeting some assumed, irrefutable criteria of sustainability. All levels of government, local and national, as well as supra-national governance institutions, such as various agencies of the United Nations and, most prominently, the European Union, condition any consideration, let alone funding, of projects on their adherence to the noble principle of sustainability. Yet, as overarching imperative, the concept of sustainability may well be lacking in substance what it appears to be enjoying in clout. Not least, it is bereft of holistic consistency tending to manifest itself as a particular - economic, social, environmental or cultural sustainability -, its different parts in perennial contradiction to each other. (To the economic sustainability of the firm corresponds the social unsustainability of the unemployed, former workers, it has been obliged to sack.) Second, it is always contingent on scale. (The unsustainability of an island resort necessarily depends on whether it is assessed at the level of its prime beach or that of the island as a whole.) Third, it assumes a sustainable, self-reproducing, natural realm, a model for the application of the concept in society. Humankind is perceived as the disturbing intruder violating natural equilibrium, an indictment to be met by the penalty of sustainability policies. Finally, and perhaps most perniciously, the concept of sustainability annihilates any distinction between the 'is' and an alternative 'ought', with the latter atavistically conflated into the former. When successfully controlling the discursive high ground, sustainability thus appears as the inevitable substitute for a concept that is premised on the 'is' to 'ought' transition, namely that of 'progress'. The paper attempts to throw some light on the contradictions, inconsistencies and ideological a priori inherent in the concept of sustainability, and explain its emergence and dominance in the context of the, equally vacuous, perspective of de-essentialized post-modernity.

Keywords: *sustainability; 'is' to 'ought' transition; de-essentialized post-modernity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the concept of sustainability has held high ground as the cardinal virtue of governance, the overarching imperative to be applied in all policy projects. No development programme, at any level of government, is considered, let alone funded, unless it passes the imagined litmus test of sustainability. Originating in the developed industrial world, the concept is exported fast to developing countries by international funding agencies whose insistence on its planetary application is matched by their contingent dependence of funding on its uncritical espousal by local

actors.¹ In both North and South, the whole package of the sustainability paradigm being thus tied up tightly with the strings of public agency funding.

Yet, ubiquitous though the concept may appear in its application, it is no less problematic in its content. An analysis of its essential elements reveals both in-between-the-elements and within-the-elements contradictions which, in turn, lie at the root of its lacunae as a reliable guide to policy formulation and practice. Moreover, such a totalising concept, to which is ascribed universal applicability and almost exclusive explanatory ability, may well include in its discursive armoury some false assumptions and facile presumptions. And as with all concepts informing practice, such shortcomings extend beyond textual analysis exercises, their repercussions affecting some key defining parameters of the hegemonic² development model. Finally, as concepts are not lone planets floating in universal vacuum, but rather part of a broader intellectual constellation, a *Weltanschauung* of inter-related perspectives, values and principles, it can be argued that sustainability is to be located within the general postmodern worldview, postmodernism here perceived, not as antithetical other to modernity, but rather as some of the latter's evolved 'surface manifestations'.³

2. INHERENT CONTRADICTIONS

It is generally perceived that the concept of sustainability, and its realization as sustainable development, pertains to three key elements of life-being, namely the environment, the economy and society. Some, sensitive to the more symbolic aspects of human existence, add a fourth dimension, namely culture, claiming that sustainability should also ensure a concern for the unhindered re-production of cultural patterns and normative values. Thus, sustainability literature refers to the three 'E's – environment, economy and equity (the latter, as guarantor of societal sustainability) – often complemented by a further two – education and empowerment.⁴ Yet, holistic though this perspective may appear, it cannot conceal the deep rifts that so often develop between the above elements. Any comprehensive sustainability imperative necessarily addresses different elements of the socio-metabolic process. What may ensure sustainability in one, may well be undermining it in another. Moreover, the elements themselves are never fully homogenized, noncontradictory entities, but rather vectorial outcomes of highly complex antagonistic processes.

2.1 In-between-the-elements contradictions

In an exercise of crude market reductionism, sustainability in the economic field is often conflated with viability, in effect the viability of a particular productive sector or, even more crudely, a single firm. Yet, such sustainability is often in direct contrast to sustainability at the level of social equity, as the survival of a sector or firm may well depend on its ability to rationalize its productive processes through ever deeper reductions in its workforce. Not surprisingly, industrial plants not dependent on a local population for the consumption of their products, tend to be most productive, and hence competitive, the higher the heap of unemployment and social destitution surrounding them.

Similarly, environmental, in the form of ecological, concerns are often perceived as an obstacle to economic viability – the term here sounding more ominous and imminent in its negative effects than sustainability with its more diffuse, long-term connotations. Thus, the economic sustainability of a

¹ E.g. as prescribed in the Agenda 21 agreement emerging from the 1992 Earth Summit or in European Commission documents on the subject, starting with its initial response to the Brundtland Report, the *Green Paper on the Urban Environment* (CEC, 1990).

² Hegemonic, in the Gramscian sense of combining a ruling elite's conception with an unquestionably commonsensical perception.

³ See Beck, U., *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Sage (London, 1992 [1986]) and Harvey, D., *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Blackwell (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

⁴ Wheeler, S., *Planning for Sustainability: Creating Livable, Equitable, and Ecological Communities*, Routledge (London, 2004), pp. 27 and 32.

region may well depend on the development of a new airport, with the risk of undermining societal sustainability by siting the airport close to a residential area and exposing communities to unacceptable levels of noise pollution, or denying ecological sustainability by siting it in an area that may be unfit for human habitation, such as a marshland, yet is hosting complex ecosystems,⁵ or, worse still, achieving both, in a fit of ‘the-economy-takes-it-all’ and total disregard of ecological and societal considerations.

Even adherence to certain cultural patterns can undermine environmental, economic and societal sustainability. Indeed, many a cultural norm and practice survives as historical inertia precisely in order to legitimate inequitable, exploitative regarding human relations, wasteful of resources, and hence logically unsustainable, societal, economic and ecological practices.⁶ After all, the cultural realm, especially in the form of popular and mass culture, has always been a safe haven for the surreal, nay, irrational, the seat of the particular and prejudicial.

2.2 Within-the-elements contradictions

Moreover, contradictions within each of sustainability’s constituent elements can be equally glaring. The economy, under free market private capital conditions, is by definition fragmentary and antagonistic. Whose sustainability should sustainability policies serve, that of industrial or financial capital, what types of industrial or financial capital, in terms both of productive sector and spatial spread? And what about the private – public split in terms of allotted resources, with the extra complication of a so-called ‘social economy’ sector further confusing matters? No wonder the sustainability discourse fails to pronounce on the perennial dilemma of economic planning, namely that of choosing between primarily monetary versus fiscal-centered policies.

Reflecting, as well as articulating, economic fragmentation, fissures and rifts, partial interests and antagonistic practices are equally prevalent at the level of society. Assuming win-win outcomes, or at least outcomes in which all are equal winners, are only to be found in Never-never-land, it is hard to imagine how sustainability can be applied as an undifferentiated holistic imperative without reproducing, or producing new, hierarchical patterns. Given the structural determinations of the existing socio-economic formation, sustainability can thus, at best, appear as the overarching desideratum, perhaps the unattainable mirage, of an equitable social order. Yet, as Peter Marcuse puts, “if justice is the standard by which sustainability is measured, why add the criterion of sustainability in judging the measure at all? Why not simply ask if it is just?”⁷

At the level of culture, attempting to apply sustainability principles as a guide for policy formulation is even more confounding. Whose culture to opt for, that of the indigenous or the newcomer, of the permanent resident or the tourist – the former possibly aiding societal sustainability and the latter ensuring economic viability – let alone all the class, gender and ethnicity-rooted cultural traits obtaining in a given spatial entity?

By contrast, sustainability proves a safer policy pointer in the field of the physical, eco-systemic, environment. Here priorities are set by an extraneous agent, namely humankind, the prevalence of mosquitoes or frogs in a swamp is an issue neither of the two groups is consulted about or decides upon. Changes in natural ecosystems are of a strictly quantitative nature, the will, desires and values of different species, other than humankind, hardly obtaining beyond the specifically instinctive. Environmental policy can thus set itself equally quantifiable goals and priorities to ensure sustainability imperatives. However, as soon as the environment is perceived as more than an

⁵ E.g. the aborted project to develop a third London airport on the Maplin Sands by the Thames estuary in the 1970s.

⁶ A topical case in point (June 2011) may well be the conflict between the cultural / religious prohibition of women’s driving and the societal imperative of equitable access to transport for all in a certain Middle East sandy peninsula.

⁷ Marcuse, P., ‘Sustainability is not enough’, *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 20, No. 2, October 1998, p. 106-7.

exclusively natural category, as soon as it is appropriated and socialised by humankind, it becomes a contested domain, its sustainability thereafter depending on the resolution of such quandaries as discussed above in the fields of the economy, society and culture. Drawing a distinction between the environment and urban space, Marcuse insists that “while sustainability may be a useful formulation of goals on environmental issues, it is a treacherous one for urban policy because it suggests the possibility of a conflict-free consensus on policies whereas, in fact, vital interests do conflict: it will take more than simply better knowledge and a clearer understanding to produce change”⁸

3. ‘CRIMES AND MISDEMEANOURS’

3.1 Of spatial and temporal fixes

Any discussion of sustainability develops in a vacuum unless occurring in the context of specified spatial parameters. The environmental and social sustainability of a tourist resort varies considerably according to whether it is assessed at the level of its beachfront or its beachfront plus adjoining coastal areas plus hinterland. The carrying capacity – a most arbitrary concept, no doubt⁹ – of a beach is no comparison to that of a whole island. Scale here is paramount. When in its 1991 definition of sustainable development the World Conservation Union stipulates that it means “improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems”¹⁰, which ecosystems do they have in mind, what their size and complexity? A spatial fix is hence called for, involving agreement as to sustainability’s spatial location.

Similarly, the time scale within which sustainability is to be considered needs to be stipulated. How far is sustainability to stretch? Will it suffice to extend two or three generations ahead (sixty and ninety years respectively) or should the grandchildren of our grandchildren also benefit from our sustainability-couched prescience? According to Richard Norgaard, sustainability “implies that the overall level of diversity and overall productivity of components and relations in systems are maintained or enhanced”, presumably ad infinitum. Otto Soemarwoto is even more explicit. Sustainability, he claims, is “the ability of a system to sustain the livelihood of the people who depend on that system for an indefinite period”.¹¹ A temporal fix is also here called for.

3.2 End-state Elysium

It can be argued that embedded in the sustainability discourse is the assumption of an end-state Elysium where natural harmony extends to the social and economic worlds, a Garden of Eden regained, if only sustainability advocates manage to convince all to refrain from the temptation of resource depletion. With nature perceived as at equilibrium, it objects to the Cartesian imperative of establishing humankind’s control over it. Minimising the substantive essence of conflict, it hopes for its formal subsumption in discursive practices. Contrarious dialectics is out, passive evolutive processes are in.¹²

Acceptance of the sustainability agenda inevitably implies a shift of goalposts. The score, success and failure, is extraneously assessed, not in terms of achieving control, appropriation and transformation of resources by conscient society, i.e. not by humankind, but rather by the resources themselves, by their continued presence. After all, in the proverbial natural state it is consumption of the forbidden fruit that led to the Fall.

⁸ Ibid, p. 104.

⁹ Unsurprisingly, the term fails to appear in the Chicago School ecological paradigm-based analyses of urban phenomena.

¹⁰ Quoted in Wheeler, S., op. cit., p. 24.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹² In this sense, Jurgen Habermas’s faith in discursive practice as providing exclusive means for conflict resolution may well be finding its most passionate disciples among sustainability advocates. See Habermas, J., *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Polity (Cambridge, 1984 [1981]).

3.3 Demise of the subject

A polity that is judged extraneously can hardly claim sovereign status. The subject in the sustainability paradigm is perceived more as the curator of an existing life-order than as the creator of a new one. He/she is primarily the consumer of scarce resources than a producer of affluence. Sim Van der Ryn defines sustainability as “conservation plus stewardship plus restoration”.¹³ Yet, it is the precedence of production over consumption that defines most crucially social hierarchies within the existing social order. A consuming, contemplative, subject will always stand subaltern to his/her producing, transformative of resources, counterpart.¹⁴

Sustainability’s assumption of a harmonious natural order, and concomitant marginalisation of the conscient subject, involves, further, a naturalistic reduction of desires to needs. Humankind needs resources, rather than desires their transformation. However, along the necessity to freedom spectrum of existence, need tends to lie at the necessity end and desire at that of freedom. Hence, desire, rather than need, is the prime vector of will. In this sense, it may well be that, for all its high aspirations, the sustainability imperative is the end addressing subjects with a somewhat impaired, needs-dependent, will.

3.4 ‘What Is Not to Be Done’

Between Isaiah Berlin’s ‘two concepts of liberty’, a negative, prohibitive of certain actions against others, and a positive, enabling individuals applying it to develop their full potentialities,¹⁵ sustainability discourse distinctly errs towards the former. A latent conservatism seems to be informing it. In a nutshell, the sustainability imperative is reduced to the three ‘R’s – reduction, reuse and recycling – hardly a positive agenda for the development of new products and societal relations that such products may give rise to. In William Rees’s definition of sustainable development as “any form of positive change which does not erode the ecological, social, or political systems upon which society is dependent”,¹⁶ one wonders what space is left for ‘positive change’ once nothing is to be eroded. And if it is the case that nothing upon which ‘society is dependent’ should be eroded, how is the latter ever to change? Even in the Brundtland Commission’s, by now, canonical definition of sustainable development as that which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”,¹⁷ the sense of reproduction, or replication, of obtaining patterns once they are able to guarantee their perennity, i.e. their own sustainability, is most apparent.

4. ENTRENCHED IN POSTMODERNISM

Whereas in modernity the ‘ought’ represents a clear break from, nay a denial of, the ‘is’, in postmodernism the former is perceived as emanating from the latter, at best as incremental improvement, at worse as atavistic replication. Whereas in modernity the subject is perceived as the exclusive producer of the new, under postmodernism he/she becomes the, at best, eclectic, consumer of the feasible. Though aspiring to the universal, modernity establishes clear spatio-temporal domains operating in terms of realms and stages. Spurning universal principles, postmodernism, on the other hand, opts for spatio-temporal relativism. From the substantive categories of modernity postulating radical change and a rejection of the ‘is’, one moves to the relative categories of postmodernism, all dependent on a relational link with an appropriated past. Tamed thus, postmodernist categories lose their pertinency, gradually sinking into ‘anything goes’ relativism. Table 1, below, illustrates the different permutations characterising the paradigmatic shift. As subjects, in the form of social classes and movements, become stakeholders, or agents (whose, indeed?), values are turned into interests and

¹³ Quoted in Wheeler, S., op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁴ (Perhaps the present predicament of the Greek polity is a case in point.)

¹⁵ See Berlin, I., *Liberty*, Oxford University Press (Oxford, 2004 [1958]).

¹⁶ Quoted in Wheeler, S., op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁷ Brundtland Commission Report, *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press (Oxford, 1987).

being is relegated to mere living (however comfortable), formerly essential categories get caught in the perceptual maelstrom of de-essentialized postmodernity.

Table 1. Humanity’s back walk from progress to sustainability

MODERNITY	POSTMODERNISM
social movements / classes	stakeholders
goals	restrictions
freedom	necessity
desires	needs
values	interests
being	living
voluntarism	adaptation
restructuring	replication
is ≠ ought	is ⇒ ought
progress	sustainability

The concept of sustainability, in this sense, given its dependence on arbitrary spatio-temporal fixes, its marginalisation of the subject, and inability to arrive at an ‘ought’ that is not dependent on the reproduction of a sustainable ‘is’, can be seen as falling fully within postmodernist paradigm. Indeed, in the eco-system of ideas sustainability seems to be enjoying a symbiotic relationship with postmodernism, as it feeds from the conceptual constructs the latter has developed in its breakaway, or, perhaps, retreat, from modernity. With the postmodernist perspective, albeit in an evolved more diffuse form, on the ascendant, sustainability will continue to hold sway as the all-encompassing imperative in matters of planning and development. Decision makers, at all level of governance, will continue acknowledging it as their guiding star, the most potent weapon in their ideological arsenal, enabling them to appear operating for the common good while obfuscating the divisive conflicts of the present. Yet, precisely because of their symbiotic relationship, the possible waning of the postmodernist paradigm should no doubt impinge on the concept of sustainability, which will then have to battle hard to ensure its own ... sustainability.

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