

Introduction

Why should I care about posterity? What's posterity ever done for me?
– Groucho Marx

What is sustainability?

The idea that we should live ‘sustainably’ has become central to environmental discussions. When an environmental issue is discussed in the media, there is frequently a quotation from a scientist or an environmental activist saying that the trend in question is ‘unsustainable’. Even the slogan of the publishers of this book is ‘publishing for a sustainable future’.

Why has this idea of sustainability become so important in recent years? One reason is because it is much more powerful rhetorically than an idea such as being ‘environmentally friendly’. Not caring about the environment has a long history and is still regarded as acceptable in some circles, but publicly saying that you don’t care that what you are doing is unsustainable sounds tantamount to admitting that you are intellectually incoherent. That cannot be the entire explanation, though. After all, the term sustainability was hardly heard until the late 1980s, 20 years after the contemporary environmental movement got going.

The concept of sustainability in something like its modern form was first used by the World Council of Churches in 1974.¹ It was proposed by Western environmentalists in response to developing world objections to worrying about the environment when human beings in many parts of the world suffer from poverty and deprivation. The concept of sustainable development was put forward by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources in 1980.²

Sustainability and sustainable development finally came to prominence in 1987, when the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, published its report *Our Common Future*.³ The central recommendation of this document, usually known as the Brundtland report, was that the way to square the circle of competing demands for environmental protection and economic development was through a new approach: sustainable development. They defined it as development that ‘meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs’.⁴ They wrote

that sustainable development was about both equity between generations and equity within generations.

The slogan ‘sustainable development’ was quickly taken up by governments and international agencies. At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the world’s political leaders pledged their support for the goal. However, the sight of such unanimous support from politicians has encouraged the suspicion among some environmentalists that sustainable development is a meaningless concept. Different people use the term in different ways, some emphasizing development through economic growth, and others emphasizing sustainability through environmental protection.

Some environmentalists have claimed that sustainable development is a contradiction in terms, and can be used merely as a cover for continuing to destroy the natural world.⁵ On the other side of the debate, some economists have argued that sustainable development is too cautious about the future, potentially leading to sacrifices of economic growth for the sake of excessive concern about depletion of natural resources. Defenders of the concept argue that disagreement about sustainable development does not show that it is meaningless. Rather, it is a ‘contestable concept’ like liberty or justice. Most people support these goals but disagree about what exactly constitutes liberty or justice.⁶ It is also sometimes argued by environmentalists that the compromises inherent in combining ‘sustainable’ with ‘development’ were a necessary price to pay to get the idea of sustainability into the political mainstream at all.

Sustainability and equity

The sustainability debate is not just about ‘environment versus growth’. The Brundtland Commission originally used the idea of sustainable development to try to get round that polarized debate which had already run from the early 1970s. Although sustainability is often presented as a matter of prudence, even of common sense – that you should not destroy the basis of your own existence – it is really more a question of *equity*. Concern about sustainability must be based on moral obligations towards future generations – not just personal self-interest. A crucial sentence in the Brundtland report stated: ‘Even the narrow notion of physical sustainability implies a concern for social equity between generations, a concern that must logically be extended to equity within each generation.’⁷ In this way, the Brundtland Commission’s conception of sustainable development brought together *equity between generations* and *equity within generations*.

Bringing these two ideas together was a political masterstroke. From the late 1960s, when the present-day environmentalist movement was starting, leftists and representatives of the developing countries had frequently accused environmentalists, with their concerns about ‘the population bomb’ and ‘the

limits to growth', of being unconcerned about the plight of the poor. They saw all this talk of 'limits' as a cover for traditional conservative arguments that wealth was too scarce for everyone to share in it – a thinly disguised justification for inequality.

Malthus and Marx

The historical precedent for this view was Marx's critique of the argument put forward by Malthus at the end of the 18th century. Malthus had claimed that uncontrolled population growth among the poor meant that wealth could not be distributed more equally, as some supporters of the French Revolution wanted. The numbers of poor would quickly grow to eat up any surplus and reduce everyone to a state of bare subsistence.

Marx and Engels argued that Malthus's argument was false and was simply an excuse for inequality. The poor could learn the same 'moral restraint' against large families that apparently had kept the rich from breeding themselves into poverty. More importantly, they argued that Malthus's concept of natural limits was oppressive and conservative. It justified social injustice and ignored the potential for scientific and technical progress.

Ironically, today it is free market economists who most enthusiastically echo Marx and Engels's faith in growth and progress. In the 1990s, environmentalists took up Brundtland's idea of the connection between equity within generations and equity between generations. Using the concept of 'environmental space', many environmentalists now claim that sustainability requires people in the industrialized countries to reduce their consumption of resources per head to a level at which everyone in the world would be able to live on indefinitely.

Defining sustainability

Environmental economists define sustainability in terms of non-depletion of capital. It is argued that we are presently depleting the 'natural capital' of the Earth and, as the green economist Herman Daly put it, treating the world 'as if it were a business in liquidation'.⁸ However, there is disagreement around the extent to which advancing technology enables human-made capital to replace natural capital, and how far the idea of non-depletion of natural capital should be taken. Oil is currently being consumed at a million times the rate at which the reserves were laid down. Should we immediately reduce our consumption a millionfold in order to be sustainable?

Even the most radical Greens see the absurdity of that line of thinking. The debate between 'strong' sustainability and 'weak' sustainability is about whether, in general, the proceeds from running down natural capital like oil reserves, that can be substituted for, should be invested directly in substitutes for those

resources – such as solar power technology, or can be invested in other forms of capital – such as education. Another debate is about whether there is such a thing as ‘critical’ natural capital that cannot be substituted for by technology, and must be preserved absolutely.

Risk and inequality are two sides of the same coin

The dispute between environmentalists and economists over sustainability is not just about the capacity of technological progress to substitute for natural resources. In the absence of sufficient understanding of the natural environment and of the capacities of future science and technology to deal with any problems, it involves disputes about how to deal with indeterminate risks. Economists tend to average out such risks in their calculations, burying worst-case possibilities in the average, or often even ignoring the possibility that things might turn out worse than they expect, so tending to advocate risky approaches to environmental futures. Environmentalists instead highlight worst-case outcomes and suggest that extra efforts should be taken to avoid them.

There are parallels between the risky approach that economists take with the future and their lack of support for egalitarianism in the present. Both are a result of the assumptions of the utilitarian philosophy underlying mainstream economics, which is indifferent to the risk of very bad outcomes for some individuals in the present or everyone in some alternative futures. Most contemporary environmentalists are more left-wing, and it turns out that there is a real philosophical parallel between their interest in equity for future generations and equity within generations. Drawing on the theories of the philosopher John Rawls, I will suggest that there are very severe tensions between the utilitarian basis of mainstream economics and sustainability’s concern for equity within and between generations.

More broadly, the liberal objection to limiting each individual’s material consumption only applies if you accept the 17th-century philosopher John Locke’s justification for private property rights – that my expropriation of natural resources does you no harm as there is enough for you. If we live in a world with environmental limits, then that argument does not hold. Resources have to be shared so that there is enough for everybody, both now and in the future.

In this way, sustainability is an idea with a certain amount in common with socialism. In an irony of history, the rhetoric of sustainability was adopted on to the political agenda in the 1990s at precisely the same time that the classical political philosophies that could most readily support its concerns (democratic socialism and social democracy) were being abandoned.

The ecological economist Richard Norgaard⁹ has argued that the concept of sustainable development actually marks the beginning of a break by the dominant strand of Western culture from an idea it has been firmly wedded to

for the past two centuries – faith in Progress. When people believed in Progress they did not worry about taking care of the environment for the sake of their children and grandchildren. Progress was seen in terms of the mastery of nature. People assumed that advancing science and technology, by increasing human mastery over nature, would decrease our dependence on it. In recent years, faith in human beings' capacity to successfully master nature or even to collectively control our own destiny has been diminished.

Will sustainability be like socialism?

I will argue that the present debate about sustainability is part of a wider re-evaluation of many of the modernist values that have been passed down to us from the Enlightenment. It is the ideas of the Enlightenment that inspired Western culture's optimism about science and progress. For a long time, that optimism appeared to be amply borne out. Only in the last few decades has widespread doubt set in about the direction that our path of development is taking us.

However, the environmental movement shares many Western post-Enlightenment values, while criticizing others – it has an ambivalent relationship to modernity itself. The commitment to equity that is crucial to the idea of sustainability comes straight out of the values of the French Revolution. The concept of sustainability is also an extension of the sort of commitment to large-scale social reform that the Enlightenment brought to the Western world. So sustainability combines much of the social optimism of the Enlightenment with disillusion about the means by which its goals were pursued.

The sociologists Ulrich Beck¹⁰ and Anthony Giddens¹¹ have claimed that we are living in the era of 'reflexive modernization', where modernity has turned on itself and is subjecting itself to the same kind of critique that it brought to pre-industrial society. However, the socialist movement also believed that it was about the human race consciously taking control of its historical destiny, rather than allowing capitalist development to proceed blindly into the future. Socialism ultimately failed in its attempt to consciously transform the world to bring about a new society. The idea that we can achieve sustainability implies that we will this time be able to consciously take control of our destiny. To try to achieve sustainability is really to set ourselves a goal at least as ambitious as any of the aims of the Enlightenment or socialism.

The film director Jean-Luc Godard is supposed to have once said that although he agreed that every story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, he did not think they should necessarily be in that order. But in order to describe the complicated story of thinking about sustainability, I think it is best to start by going back to the beginning.