

THE FUTURE OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMY DEPENDS MORE AND MORE ON THE TREND OF THE SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

Through its moving frontiers, the ideology of sustainability prescribes or challenges orderings in the imaginary of societies. Accordingly, sustainability leads to obvious struggles between different systems of representations worldwide, and temporal orderliness is at the core of these battles. In this article, I focus on the future. Moreover, the ideology of sustainability proves to be self-contradictory: on one side promotes cultural diversity, but on the other side operates only under a singular and homogeneous construct of the future.

The 3 pillars of sustainability are environmental, social and economic. Sustainability is an essential part of facing current and future global challenges, not only those related to the environment.

Keywords: Sustainability, future, development, imaginaries, representations

Classification JEL: L80, L89

1. Introduction

Just a few words about what I consider most important in sustainability.

The global push for net-zero emissions—where human-caused greenhouse gas emissions are balanced by an equivalent amount removed from the atmosphere—has gained momentum in recent years. Many nations have pledged to achieve net zero by 2050, aligning with the Paris Agreement’s objective of keeping global warming well below 2 degrees Celsius. At the same time, businesses across industries are setting ambitious sustainability targets, investing in renewable energy, and developing innovative solutions to minimize their carbon footprint. These efforts are often driven by regulatory pressures, stakeholder expectations, and the recognition that sustainable practices can enhance financial performance. Moreover, they present significant economic opportunities, with research suggesting that the market for carbon-neutral goods and services could contribute \$10.3 trillion to the global economy by 2050.

In 2025, organizations will focus their sustainability initiatives on two key areas:

Clean energy: The shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy remains central to sustainability strategies and net-zero goals, a topic that was a major focus at the United Nations’ COP28 climate summit. Many countries are expanding their reliance on clean energy—such as solar, wind, and geothermal power—to reduce their environmental impact. Companies are also accelerating investments in renewable energy projects and adopting energy-efficient technologies and practices. These initiatives align with broader corporate sustainability commitments and can lead to significant cost savings and enhanced environmental performance.

Sustainable supply chains: Growing consumer demand for eco-friendly products and increased awareness of the environmental impact of production and logistics are prompting businesses to adopt more sustainable supply chain practices. This includes using environmentally friendly packaging and materials, minimizing waste, and ensuring ethical labor practices. Many companies are also addressing Scope 3 carbon emissions—those generated by partners and suppliers within their value chain—by reevaluating operational processes and fostering sustainable partnerships. As businesses recognize their influence extends beyond their direct operations, they are taking proactive steps to create more responsible and sustainable supply networks.

Environmentalists demand sustainable ecosystems. Aid institutions demand sustainable development. Citizens demand sustainable lifestyles. Urban populations demand sustainable cities.

Workers demand sustainable jobs. Entrepreneurs demand sustainable empowerment. Customers demand sustainable products. Students demand sustainable careers. A particular set of demands are being made by many, and increasingly have taken root everywhere: from urban to rural settings, from consumers to producers, from professors to students, from young activists to experienced entrepreneurs.

Sustainability and its parental concept ‘sustainable development’ are being demanded in almost all the spheres of social life, taking a prominent position in the ordering of the world. What sense can we make of these demands?

It is often said, but it needs emphasizing here, that demanding sustainability was officially introduced into world affairs with the famous World Commission on Environment and Development’s declaration of 1987, called *Our Common Future*. Accordingly, ‘sustainable development’ was declared to be ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 43). Still, the clarification of what constituted ‘the needs of the present’ remained uncertain. The idea of sustainability was not new in 1987. However, *Our Common Future* represented the first high-profile attempt at conceptualizing it. Also known as the ‘Brundland Report’, this declaration was instrumental in injecting into the mainstream a new type of social responsiveness anchored in a powerful imaginary: the future. As such, it brought out a new ideology of time, leading to a global politics of potentialities.

The association of sustainability with the future goes beyond conjecture and deals empirically with the future itself, which means with its representations. As the anthropology of time shows us, collective representations of the future ‘are both derived from society and also dictate to society’ (Gell, 1996: 4). That is to say, the future is inaccessible except as a representation, an imaginary defined in the present driving and deriving from societies. In this view, the future is a social construct and a way of organizing knowledge: it is about creating rather than describing ‘reality’. So the obvious questions that arise from these are: what representations and imaginaries about the future are being projected that support sustainable interventions? How are these representations and imaginaries being produced and reproduced, and how are they changing or reinforcing systems of choices and social organization in the present? What are the forces behind the globalization of (the idea of) the ‘common future’? And, more importantly, who are the ones working in such representations and imaginaries that, in turn, legitimize sustainable development interventions?

The calls for sustainability resonate with the rise of new understandings, which means that sustainability confers social power by conferring knowledge. Demanding a sustainable future for the planet legitimizes the ideology of sustainability to provide the world with representations, values, knowledges, goals and conducts in and for the present. Hence, most societies have progressively become idealized by a global elite in reference to such authoritative principles.

The ongoing universalization of sustainability is conquering new territories through an intense battle taking place in the field of representations. This should be no surprise, but rather the obvious outcome of forms used by the contemporary politics of domination. More than military conquests, economic dominance or colonial physical occupation, modern global power essentially takes the form of representation. As we will see, sustainability emerged from a world elite aspiring to be a representational universalizing authority and, despite its rhetoric of democratization and local participation, it has been maintained as an elite domain. In particular, the construction and globalization of a ‘common future’ operates side by side with neoliberalism’s moving frontiers; a geographical progression that offers far bigger rewards to those at the top of their game, be they technical consultants, development experts or fund managers.

2. What we expect from the future?

The 1985 film *Back to the Future* directed by Robert Zemeckis has the status of Western cult movie. It had enormous success at the box office and is one of the more endearing and enduring films of the 1980s. In the film, the teenager Marty McFly, played by Michael J. Fox, is accidentally sent back in time from 1985 to 1955. He then has to deal with the impacts of his presence (in 1955) in order not to compromise the future (year 1985), putting even his own existence at risk. While entertaining, and very successful at that, the film transmits a deeper, but clear, message to the masses. A message that later has become the basis for a dominant global appeal: act towards an idealized common future. Implicit is the recognition that the future can and must be planned and worked from the present, otherwise our existence is in danger.

Likewise, the production and circulation of sustainability lie in a specific politics of temporality, in which the conceptualization of a future is the key. The future is represented as fragile matter that must be morally and technically worked, secured and strategized in the name of the health of coming generations. As such, the future is open and highly contingent upon human actions, and therefore globally projected into the present for its vulnerabilities to human decisions and agency. Like the attempts by Marty in *Back to the Future* to help couple his future parents while inhabiting the past, sustainability appears as a new institution of rightful measures towards a common idealized project of the future.

Although the future is declared in sustainability discourses as a common matter, it is, however, only foreseen by a few. In the film, Marty knew how the future was and thus the dangers if the right actions were not taken. This gave him the power to identify the rightness and wrongness of actions in the present. The same seems to happen with the experts of sustainability. Particularly under the vision that ‘it’s all connected’ – meaning ‘think globally, act locally’ – futuring for societies has become a legitimate task for sustainable developers. ‘When they write or speak’, (Hughes, 2015: 158) said, ‘conservationists use “should”, “would”, and other markers of this mood’ to ‘impute current existence to a desired future’. This legitimacy comes mostly from the privileging of technical knowledge that circulates in already dominant development and academic institutions, from where most of the sustainability experts come. The emphasis on providing and trading ‘scientific products for future scenarios’, as it is commonly mentioned by the natural scientists in the corridors of funding institutions, relates closely to the technocratization of governance and, by extension, sustainability. The environmental and social world is now more than ever interpreted through numbers, scientific indicators, statistics, charts and comparable data provided by experts. Although contrary to the prevailing development rhetoric, the fact that sustainability policy increasingly relies on technical sophistication makes the involvement of non-experts in decision-making more and more difficult.

As pointed out by many political ecologists, especially in regard to largescale scientific investigations, ‘the knowledges of scientific practitioners and other “experts” are embedded in cultural norms, social relationships, and value-laden judgments’ (Robbins, 2017: 120). Most of such knowledge systems and their representational outcomes are, in effect, ‘used by experts to secure employment, control resources, and justify extraction and enclosure’ (Robbins, 2017: 120). The globalization of such systems of knowledge and the representations that accompany them have the obvious capacity to structure our understandings of, and legitimize proposals aimed at assuring, a ‘common future’. Such a representation of the future is, ultimately, a political and powerful matter.

3. Conclusion

In transnational sustainability discourses, the future operates as a globalizing representation of a universalized thing in itself; a total social fact that is globally homogenized, assessed and worked on through human expertise. This is mostly done through resorting to technoscientific accounts of environmental and societal conditions and changes. However, as many political ecologists have persuasively pointed out, ‘and as is revealed in histories of science, the very categories of scientific investigation are the same order of “social objects” as the false commonsensical notions of the lay population’ (Robbins, 2017: 115). Knowledges, methods and experiences do indeed produce different structures of representations. Along these lines, the dominant framework that supports global sustainable interventions negates the incorporation of different versions of the future, as of those societies that do interpret it as cyclical, or in which the very perception of the long term is contested. Moreover, despite the use of the language of participatory development and cultural diversity, the sustainability framework contains the version of a singular common future with which it attempts to exercise global institutional authority.

In this sense, sustainability is based on a very basic contradiction: on one side, it requires community participation and advocates for the diversity of perceptions and beliefs – the often-stated ‘traditional knowledges’ – but on the other side, it operates under a singular perception and belief about the future: ‘our common future’. This ethnocentric politics of temporality fails to recognize the unwillingness of cultures to abandon different representations of the future in order to be incorporated into a system that promotes sustainability ideals. What is foreground by the sustainability proposal is, thus, the incongruity of claims for participation and diversity along with the reluctance to adopt other representations of the future than its own.

Regardless of all that, transnational sustainability discourses do prescribe a particular morality. Or, putting in another way, sustainability produces legitimacy because it supplies a motto that carries moral outcomes. The idea that we all share a common future that is in danger if the proper measures are not taken operates as a moral force for ordering human actions and, in turn, to legitimize interventions on local development by supranational organizations. The relevance I hope to have raised here is that this moralization of global interventions leads to a process of subordinating peoples and places to a ‘Western’ politics of technocracy, which, in turn, obtains its hegemony through the government of imaginaries and representations.

4. Bibliography

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