PART IV
THE QUEST FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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The apocalyptic horizons of environmental concern were set in the early 1970s by survivalists who argued that economic growth and population expansion would have to yield to global environmental limits, sooner rather than later. Private Prometheans denied the existence of limits. The problem-solving discourses surveyed in Part III are essentially agnostic about global limits, focusing instead on the work to be done in the here and now. Yet problem solving is energized by the need to achieve some kind of resolution to conflicts between ecological values and economic values.

Life would certainly be less troublesome if such conflicts did not exist, or, failing that, could be dissolved. The unresolved dispute between the limits discourse and Prometheans could be put behind us, and environmental problem solving could proceed with renewed vigor in the knowledge that solutions are available that can respond effectively to a range of key ecological and economic concerns. Throw in commitments to global justice through the eradication of poverty and to the wellbeing of future generations, and the prospect would surely be irresistible. But what could possibly combine ecological protection, economic growth, social justice, and intergenerational equity, not just locally and immediately, but globally and in perpetuity? The answer is sustainable development, which specifies that we can have them all.

Since the early 1980s, sustainable development has become hugely popular as an integrating discourse covering environmental issues from the local to the global, as well as a host of economic and development concerns. Just what sustainable development means in practice is a matter of some dispute, as is the question of whether it can actually deliver on some, most, or all of its promises.

The notion of sustainability receives greater precision in the second discourse covered in Part IV: ecological modernization. Ecological modernization addresses the restructuring of the capitalist political economy along more environmentally defensible lines. The key is that there is money to be made in this restructuring and transition. At one level ecological modernization is about the search for green production technology, and especially clean energy. But this search also opens the door to intriguing possibilities for

more thoroughgoing transformation, involving political change as well as technological change. So although at first sight ecological modernization looks like a rescue mission for industrial society, albeit an imaginative one, it also points to political and economic possibilities beyond industrial society.

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Greener Growth: Sustainable Development

What is sustainable development?

Sustainable development refers not to any accomplishment, still less to
a precise set of structures and measures to achieve collectively desirable
outcomes. Rather, it is a discourse. Since the publication of the report of
the Brundtland Commission in 1987 (World Commission on Environment
and Development, 1987), it is arguably the dominant global discourse of
ecological concern. As Torgerson (1995: 10) put it, "public discussion
concerning the environment has become primarily a discourse of sustain-
ability." But just what is sustainable development? The most widely quoted
definition is Brundtland's: "Humanity has the ability to make develop-
ment sustainable—to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without
compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"
(World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 8). Later in
the report Brundtland declares that "In essence, sustainable development
is a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction
of investments, the orientation of technological development, and insti-
tutional change are all in harmony and enhance both current and future
potential to meet human needs and aspirations" (p. 46). Beyond reiterat-
ing Brundtland, the organizers of the 2012 United Nations Conference on
Sustainable Development in Rio say "Sustainable development emphasizes
a holistic, equitable and far-sighted approach to decision-making at all lev-
els. It emphasizes not just strong economic performance but intragenera-
tional and intergenerational equity. It rests on integration and a balanced
consideration of economic and environmental goals and objectives in

both public and private decision making."[1] The economic, environmental, and social dimensions are sometimes referred to as the three pillars of the concept.

Sustainable development did not begin with Brundtland. The two words have been joined occasionally since the early 1970s, originally in a radical discourse for the Third World. The concept has a deeper history in the renewable resource management concept of maximum sustainable yield (perhaps deeper still in the ability of indigenous peoples to use local resources that are replenished). Maximum sustainable yield is the maximum catch from a fishery, or cut from a forest, or kill of game animals, that can be sustained indefinitely. But the maximum sustainable yield concept says nothing about growth in resource use (indeed, rules out growth), or about how management of different resources might interact, or what to do with nonrenewable resources. Sustainable development is much more ambitious in that it refers to the ensemble of life-support systems, and seeks perpetual growth in the sum of human needs that might be satisfied not through simple resource garnering, but rather through intelligent operation of natural systems and human systems in combination.

Brundtland's definition did not satisfy everyone, and other definitions of sustainable development proliferated. Opinions differ as to what human needs count, what is to be sustained, for how long, for whom, and in what terms. Attempts to take an analytical razor to the concept (e.g., Dobson, 1998) are only partially successful because they soon leave the ambiguities of the real-world discourse behind. In the early 1990s the Transportation Research Board of the United States National Academy of Sciences spent a million dollars trying to come up with a definition, but failed to do anything more than simply aggregate the concerns of its members. By 1996 the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was sponsoring a project to clarify the meaning of the concept in a number of disciplines, with a view to making the concept a scientifically usable one—implying that it was not yet a scientific concept.[2] The passing decades still do not yield convergence on any precise definition (Lipschutz, 2009: 136). But the proliferation of definitions is not just a matter of analysts trying to add conceptual precision; it is also an issue of different interests trying to stake their claims in the territory. For if sustainable development is indeed a dominant discourse, astute actors recognize that its terms should be cast in terms favorable to them. Environmentalists might try to build in respect

for intrinsic values in nature that is conspicuously missing in Brundtland. So Rockwood et al. (2008) stress the protection of nature as central to sustainability. Third World advocates would stress the need for global redistribution, and highlight the needs of the poor to which Brundtland pointed. Business groups equate development with economic growth, such that sustainable development mainly means continued economic growth, even if it is styled "green growth." Partisans of the limits discourse can use the language of sustainability. After endorsing Brundtland, Meadows et al. (1992: 209) go on to say that "From a systems point of view a sustainable society is one that has in place informational, social, and institutional mechanisms to keep in check the positive feedback loops that cause exponential population and capital growth." For Meadows and colleagues sustainability means an end to economic growth; for the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, sustainability requires perpetuation of economic growth. As the Council declared in its foundational document, "Economic growth in all parts of the world is essential to improve the livelihoods of the poor, to sustain growing populations, and eventually to stabilize population levels" (Schmidheiny, 1992: xi).

Does this variety of meanings mean we should dismiss sustainable development as an empty vessel that can be filled with whatever one likes? Not at all. For it is not unusual for important concepts to be contested politically. Think, for example, of the word "democracy," which has at least as many meanings and definitions as does sustainable development. Part of what makes democracy interesting is this very contestation over its essence. Democracy is doubly interesting because just about everyone who matters in today's political world claims to believe in it. The parallels with sustainable development are quite precise. Just as democracy is the main game in town when it comes to political organization, so sustainable development became the main game (though not the only game) in environmental affairs, at least global ones. Sustainable development, like democracy, is a discourse rather than a concept which can be defined with any precision. The discourse itself does, though, have boundaries. Sustainable development is different from limits and boundaries because while it recognizes that ecological limits should be respected, they can also be stretched if the right policies are chosen, so that economic growth can continue indefinitely. Langhelle (2000: 310–11) suggests that for Brundtland, at least, the limits in question were energy supply and climate change; though he also recognizes lingering

ambiguities in the discourse on the question. Sustainable development is different from Promethean discourse because it requires coordinated collective efforts to achieve goals, rather than relying on human spontaneity and ingenuity. And it is different from the varieties of environmental problem solving surveyed in the previous three chapters because it is much more imaginative in its reconceptualization of the terms of environmental dispute and in its dissolution of some long-standing conflicts.

The career of the concept

Prior to the 1980s, sustainable development was part of the environmentalist lexicon, especially in a Third World development context. The concept was an alternative to mainstream interpretations of development as economic growth, which had failed to deliver. Impetus was received through contention by the emerging limits discourse that the Earth could not withstand a Third World that duplicated Western levels of affluence (Carruthers, 2001). Advocates were interested in the potential of appropriate technologies or intermediate technologies, which were low-cost, low in the environmental stress they imposed, and consistent with local cultures (see Schumacher, 1973). They preferred energy generation from cattle dung over nuclear power stations or large dams, small workshops over large factories.

The concept's prominence grew, and its meaning began to change in 1980 with the publication of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's *World Conservation Strategy*. But the real transformation into the contemporary discourse of sustainable development can be dated to 1983, when Gro Harlem Brundtland, Prime Minister of Norway, was asked by the Secretary-General of the United Nations to chair an inquiry into inter-related global problems of environment and development. Brundtland's World Commission on Environment and Development published its report, *Our Common Future*, in 1987. The report contains analyses and recommendations pertaining to the international economy, population, food, energy, manufacturing, cities, and institutional change. Its main accomplishment was to combine systematically a number of issues that have often been treated in isolation, or at least as competitors: development, global environmental issues, population, peace and security, and social justice both within and across generations. Brundtland developed a vision of the simultaneous

and mutually reinforcing pursuit of economic growth, environmental improvement, population stabilization, peace, and global equity, which could be maintained in the long term. Such a vision was seductive, though Brundtland did not demonstrate its feasibility, or indicate the practical steps that would be required.

Since 1987 the discourse of sustainable development has flourished at the international level. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, was a high point. The 171 national government delegations, many with heads of government present, gave sustainable development their stamps of approval (though the various delegations may have held to different meanings of the term). The Conference endorsed *Agenda 21*, a lengthy and detailed follow-up to Brundtland's efforts, which argued that global environmental problems had arisen mainly as a result of the profligate consumption and production of the richer countries, but also recommended more economic growth for all to finance solutions. After the Conference the United Nations established a Commission on Sustainable Development to implement *Agenda 21*, with special reference to how national and local governments might act. Sustainable development advanced as a discourse for all, North and South, rich and poor; though the rich eventually lost sight of the global equity aspect that was central to Brundtland and her more radical predecessors (Meadowcroft, 2000: 379).

In 2002 Johannesburg hosted the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), then the world's largest-ever international conference. The WSSD endorsed a "Plan of Implementation" for *Agenda 21*. The plan was a little short on concrete measures, how they should be accomplished, and who exactly should do it (von Frantzius, 2004: 470), with the partial exception of targets and dates for improved access to clean water and sanitation for the world's poor. Thus sustainable development remained very much a discourse, rather than a plan of action. The WSSD saw some major repositioning in relation to the discourse. Wealthy states, long the champions of environmental concern at such gatherings, now seemed more interested in pushing the benefits of development that could be achieved through globalization and free trade (this was somewhat less true for the European Union than the United States). And Third World governments, once skeptical about environmental concern as a luxury for the rich, now recognized the severity of their own environmental problems

(Wapner, 2003: 4–6). Perhaps the most successful discursive repositioning was accompanied by the corporations present, which confirmed the status of business as a major participant in sustainable development, not a source of problems to be overcome. This role was solidified in partnerships involving business, governments, and NGOs, several hundred of which were established at the WSSD.

In 2012 sustainable development returned to Rio with the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), which produced much less in the way of tangible agreements, commitments, and plans than did the 1992 version. While widely seen as disappointing by environmentalists, perhaps the 2012 conference simply confirmed that the day of comprehensive global agreements was over, with the discourse of sustainable development now to make itself felt in a multiplicity of locations.

Outside summits, sustainable development has infused the discourse of international institutions. The World Bank, long castigated by environmentalists for its complicity in ecologically disastrous development projects (such as large dams and high-technology agriculture), established an Environment Department, appointing a Vice-President for Sustainable Development, and sponsors a series of publications on environmentally sustainable development. Its 2002 *World Development Report* was organized around the idea of sustainable development, though it lost sight of the global equity aspect of the discourse, recommending that the rich countries could best help the poor by becoming still richer and providing bigger markets for poor countries' products. In 2012 the Bank declared "inclusive green growth is *the* pathway to sustainable development" (World Bank, 2012: xi), the "inclusive" modifier recognizing that growth had not always meant poverty reduction, still less environmental protection. The Bank has also sponsored research on the development of indicators of sustainable development as alternatives to more established measures of national wellbeing such as gross national product. Such indicators include "comprehensive wealth" that covers natural capital (World Bank, 2012). The European Union has incorporated sustainable development in some of its constituent treaties, has adopted a Sustainable Development Strategy, and saw the WSSD as an opportunity to distinguish itself from the more skeptical position of US negotiators. The European Union proved the lone champion of renewable energy against the United States and Third World countries pushing expanded fossil fuel use (von Frantzius, 2004: 472).

While the sustainability discourse is most evident at this international level, it has made major inroads within states (see Meadowcroft, 2000 for a catalog). In 1990 Japan established a sustainable development program, with an eye to maximizing Japanese opportunities in the emerging sustainable eco-economy (opportunities which are not hurt by the energy-efficiency of the Japanese economy). China has in recent years added sustainable development ideas to its earlier emphasis on economic growth at all costs, and there exists a China Business Council for Sustainable Development. In Australia, the federal government in 1990 set up an ecologically sustainable development process, with working groups on agriculture, energy, fisheries, forestry, manufacturing, mining, transport, and tourism. Symbolizing sustainable development's positive-sum approach to economy and environment, each working group contained representatives of both industry and environmental groups (along with government and trade-union officials). The working groups reported in 1992, and their efforts were incorporated into a National Ecologically Sustainable Development Strategy, though for domestic political reasons the process and the strategy subsequently languished (see Christoff, 1995).

In the United States, the sustainable development torch was carried in the Clinton administration by the President's Council on Sustainable Development, which could draw support from Vice-President Al Gore's personal views (Gore, 1992). The Obama administration embraced the language of sustainability in its interagency Partnership for Sustainable Communities created in 2009, which pushed the idea of "smart growth." However, the dominant US approach to sustainable development is captured succinctly by Bryner (2000): "Sorry, not our problem," with little support in Congress, and no resonance for any broader public. Indifference has however been broken by right-wing Republicans. In one of the stranger episodes in the life and times of sustainable development, in 2012 the Republican National Committee passed a motion equating *Agenda 21*'s commitment to social justice with "socialist/communist redistribution of wealth," and referring to *Agenda 21* as "a comprehensive plan of extreme environmentalism, social engineering, and global political control." One could ask why, if *Agenda 21* represents such a danger, it took twenty years for the Republican National Committee to notice it existed.

Sustainable development has received at least lip service from most governments in the developed world (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000),

though none has addressed their own over-consumption of resources and stress on global ecosystems (Meadowcroft, 2000: 374). In Britain, the government initially endorsed Brundtland's stress on sustainable development but—astonishingly—asserted that existing British economic policy met these principles, further proof of just how far the concept can be stretched (Department of the Environment, 1988; see also Jacobs, 1991: 59). After 1997 Tony Blair's Labour government set up a Sustainable Development Unit to examine the practices of all government departments. In 2011 Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron's government published *Mainstreaming Sustainable Development,* in keeping with Cameron's promise to lead the greenest UK government ever.

International business is increasingly prominent. The International Chamber of Commerce and World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), chaired by Stephan Schmidheiny of the Swiss company UNOTEC, were active at the 1992 Rio Summit. The Business Council was formed in 1990 at the invitation of Maurice Strong, secretary-general of the Summit. The Council is committed to economic growth, but with an environmentally sensitive face. Its component corporations such as 3M, Rio Tinto, Du Pont, Shell, Mitsubishi, and ALCOA can point to success stories in their own operations of environmentally aware practices such as recycling, efficiency benefits achieved by waste reduction, sustainable forestry, and energy-efficient production (see Holliday et al., 2002 for a compilation). By 2012 the Council was composed of 201 of the world's largest corporations, mostly from the manufacturing, mining, and energy sectors (membership is by invitation only). Not all of these 201 companies have exemplary environmental records. They once included Enron, the energy supply corporation linked to President George W. Bush, before it went bankrupt in 2002. At the 2012 Rio+20 conference the Council styled itself "the representative of progressive business."

Under the banner of "Business Action for Sustainable Development," the WBCSD was highly visible at the 2002 WSSD, where it mounted a concerted effort to publicize and embed the business view. The major statement launched at the WSSD by Holliday et al. (2002) argued that economic growth produced by free trade was the only hope for the world's poor. However, the Council did not propose growth at all costs, proclaimed commitment to corporate social responsibility, and joined with Greenpeace to criticize the United States' withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol on climate

change. The Council succeeded in establishing partnerships with business as the dominant tool for pursuing sustainable development. Cynics saw this as "the privatization of sustainable development" (von Frantzius, 2004: 469), threatening to reduce the discourse to a series of commercial projects (Wapner, 2003: 4). At Rio ten years later the Council reiterated its commitment to partnerships. Reacting to the lack of action agreement on the part of the governments assembled at Rio in 2012, WBCSD President Peter Bakker declared it was now up to business to take the lead. Breaking with the moderation of his predecessors, he accepted that "if you add up all the CSR [corporate social responsibility] programmes across the world and all the 200 plus commitments from this week [in Rio], we are not nearly going to save the world." Referring to obstructive businesses, he said "the 20% of really bad guys we need to regulate out of existence." (interview in *Guardian*, London, June 22, 2012: "Rio+20: WBCSD president says the future of the planet rests on business").

Where are the environmentalists in these developments? After all, sustainable development began life long ago as one of their concepts. Environmental groups have become less visible with time. But some environmentalists, such as Friends of the Earth Europe, have tried to keep up with the discourse, to remind everyone that sustainable development requires wholesale reductions in the stress that economic activity imposes on the environment, and respect for intrinsic values in nature. It is a struggle to sustain the idea that sustainable development might point to transformation to a different kind of world (Hopwood et al., 2005) in the face of all the forces trying to assimilate it to the status quo (Parr, 2009).

Discourse analysis of sustainable development

The core story line of sustainable development once began with recognition that the legitimate developmental aspirations of the world's peoples cannot be met by all countries following the growth path already taken by the industrialized countries, for such action would over-burden the world's ecosystems. Yet economic growth is necessary to satisfy the legitimate needs of the world's poor. The alleviation of poverty will ameliorate what is one of the basic causes of environmental degradation, for poor people are forced to abuse their local environment just to survive.

Economic growth should therefore be promoted, but guided in ways that are both environmentally benign and socially just. Justice here refers not only to distribution within the present generation, but also across future generations. Sustainable development is not just a strategy for the future of developing societies, but also for industrialized societies, which must reduce the excessive stress their past economic growth has imposed upon the Earth.

Basic entities whose existence is recognized or constructed

Sustainable development's purview is global; its justification rests in present stresses imposed on global ecosystems. But unlike the discourse of limits and boundaries, it does not stay at that global level. Sustainability is an issue at regional and local levels too, for that is where solutions will have to be found (as made clear in *Local Agenda 21,* whose principles have been adopted by local governments around the world). Thus the basic entities stressed in sustainable development are nested systems, ranging from the global to the local. The systems in question are both social and biological. Natural systems are not separate from humanity: as Brundtland put it: "The environment does not exist as a sphere separate from humans ambitions, actions, and needs...the 'environment' is where we all live" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: xi). The biological components of systems are treated with more respect than the brute matter that Prometheans see in nature. But rather than seeing problems in terms of global limits and solutions in terms of global management, sustainable development takes a more disaggregated approach. Particular resources and systems can be used and developed more or less wisely, imposing more or less environmental stress.

The Brundtland Report itself is a bit ambiguous on the existence of limits. A statement that "Growth has no set limits in terms of population or resource use beyond which lies ecological disaster" in part because "accumulation of knowledge and the development of technology can enhance the carrying capacity of the resource base" is followed immediately by a recognition that "But ultimate limits there are" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 45). These ultimate limits too prove capable of being stretched by technology. As Brundtland herself later put the point, "The commission found no absolute limits to growth. Limits are

indeed imposed by the impact of present technologies and social organization on the biosphere, but we have the ingenuity to change" (quoted in Hardin, 1993: 205). Ecological constraints should be respected, but once this is done economic growth can proceed indefinitely. Some commentators have tried to resolve the ambiguity here by distinguishing between "strong" and "weak" versions of sustainable development, the former explicitly recognizing limits, the latter denying them (see Hay, 2002: 214–17). Another way of putting it is that weak sustainability believes human-made capital can substitute for natural capital (Barbier, 2007). But any such resolution leaves most sustainable development discourse somewhere between the two poles; the zone of ambiguity is much larger than the polar regions.

When it comes to social systems, sustainable development now takes the capitalist economy pretty much for granted (this was not true in the more radical discourse of the 1970s). However, the structure of political systems is not taken as given. The reorientation in problem solving that sustainable development prescribes may require shifts in power between different levels to meet more effectively the challenge of sustainability. The frequent appeals to coordinated international action and grassroots participation suggest that these shifts would be away from the nation-state as presently constituted to both higher (transnational) and lower (local) levels of political organization, as well as sideways to partnerships with business. Networked governance as an alternative to top-down administration (see Chapters 4 and 5) fits well here.

Assumptions about natural relationships

The most important relationship regarded as if not exactly natural then at least attainable is the positive-sum one: economic growth, environmental protection, distributive justice, and long-term sustainability are mutually reinforcing. In the contemporary world of sustainable development there are few hierarchies recognized in human affairs. Instead, there is cooperation. However, there is a hierarchy which puts human beings above the natural world. In keeping with its integration of a range of agendas, sustainable development can take the protection of nature on board. For example, Brechin et al. (2003) argue that the basic needs of the world's poor can be met while protecting biodiversity in the ecosystems on which they depend. But for the most part sustainable development remains

anthropocentric. It is sustainability of human populations and their well-being which is at issue, rather than that of nature. Relationships of competition are de-emphasized, though it exists in the background capitalist economy. Sustainable development is to be achieved through cooperative rather than competitive effort (witness the partnerships that dominated the 2002 WSSD), distancing the discourse from both economic rationalists and Prometheans.

Agents and their motives

Sustainable development's key agents are not the global managers of limits and survival or the experts with a managerial hierarchy at their disposal of the administrative rationalists. Instead, the relevant actors can exist at many levels, consistent with basic notions about the existence of nested social and biological systems. In practice, sustainable development marginally de-emphasizes national governments (one reason perhaps for the Republican opposition to the concept in the United States, discussed earlier). However, states are still needed to construct international agreements and work with NGOs and business. In the 1980s sustainable development was established as a discourse of international society, especially as that society is populated by intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) (such as the United Nations and the World Bank) and NGOs (such as global environmental groups). There is a role for the grassroots too: the green radical slogan "think globally, act locally" can be adopted here. *Agenda 21* calls for more citizen participation in environment and development decisions. And corporations have clambered on board the bandwagon to show that business too can play a constructive role. Sustainable development has been cast as a discourse of and for global civil society (see Conca, 1994; Lafferty, 1996; Wapner, 1996), though the ever-growing role of global business does perhaps attenuate that association. And more traditional areas of national government are not excluded.

Key metaphors and other rhetorical devices

Prometheans and economic rationalists alike rely on mechanistic metaphors, treating the world as a machine whose bits can be arranged to better meet human needs. In contrast, sustainable development's metaphorical structure is organic. Organisms grow and develop; so can societies. Growth here is not just physical maturation that happens automatically, for sustainable

development also stipulates self-conscious improvement. As such, it is consistent with notions of personal human growth that stress education and growing awareness, enabling the individual to negotiate his or her social environment in more effective fashion. The image is of an increasingly sensitive, caring, and intelligent human being—only, of course, it is sensitive, caring, and intelligent political-economic systems which are at issue, and the environment to be negotiated is not just a social one, but also a natural one. Just as in models that portray human development in terms of lifetime learning, the growth in political-economic capacities is seen as open-ended. The difference is that individual humans eventually die, whereas for sustainable development growth in political-economic capacities can go on in perpetuity.

The discourse does respect nature—to a point. But nature is treated mainly as something that provides useful services to humans. The "natural capital" metaphor is sometimes invoked (Dobson, 1998: 41–7; Sachs, 1999: 33). That is, nature's capital stock deserves respect and should be sustained because it is imperfectly substitutable by man-made capital. This way of thinking about nature is very economistic, especially when the stock of natural capital is valued for the "ecosystem services" it provides to humans (Kareiva et al., 2011).

Sustainable development in its very name links itself to the idea of progress, and progress is one of the most powerful notions in the modern world. Whatever their other differences, Victorian industrialists, Marxists, social democrats, liberal democrats, and market liberals have all believed in the essential idea of history moving in the direction of social improvement. Sustainable development carries this idea into an environmental era.

Sustainable development also involves a rhetoric of reassurance. We *can* have it all: economic growth, environmental conservation, social justice; and not just for the moment, but in perpetuity. No painful changes are necessary. This rhetoric of reassurance is far from the images of doom and redemption found in survivalism, or the horror stories beloved of economic rationalists. Advocates of sustainable development are more likely to highlight local success stories of sustainability than they are to dwell on instances of unsustainability (Holliday et al., 2002; Schmidheiny, 1992: 181–333; UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2008).

Box 7.1 provides a summary of the discourse analysis of sustainable development.

Whither sustainable development?

If we were to look for sustainable development, where would we find it? As discourse, there is a lot of it about (see Zaccai, 2012). But can we identify any practices and policies inspired by, committed to, and achieving sustainable development?

This question may not be quite the right one to ask, if we conceptualize sustainable development as a discourse rather than a target. But the same might be said of "democracy," yet this does not stop political scientists producing comparative studies of the quality of different democracies. However, such comparisons are rough and contested. It is easy to conclude that (say) contemporary Canada is more democratic than Russia under the Tsars, very hard to say which of Canada and Japan is today more democratic, harder still to conclude that Canada is a true democracy. The same applies to sustainable development. Yale and Columbia researchers working for the World Economic Forum (WEF) between 1999 and 2005 ranked 142 countries according to a sustainability index, and Finland, Sweden, and Norway initially occupied the top three places. But Finland's number one ranking did not mean it had

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BOX 7.1	Discourse analysis of sustainable development

1. **Basic entities recognized or constructed**
   - Nested and networked social and ecological systems
   - Capitalist economy
   - Ambiguity concerning existence of limits
2. **Assumptions about natural relationships**
   - Cooperation
   - Nature subordinate
   - Economic growth, environmental protection, distributive justice, and long-term sustainability go together
3. **Agents and their motives**
   - Many agents at different levels, transnational and local as well as the state; motivated by the public good
4. **Key metaphors and other rhetorical devices**
   - Organic growth
   - Nature as natural capital
   - Connection to progress
   - Reassurance

achieved an adequate level of sustainability, and environmental groups were quick to point out Finnish shortcomings in forest management. The WEF index was controversial, and really just compiled measures of environmental performance rather than sustainability per se. As such, it missed the "development" part of the equation. This was perhaps recognized when in 2006 the sustainability index was abandoned in favor of an environmental performance index, which in 2012 put Switzerland at the top.[3] The development question becomes especially perplexing in light of sustainable development's core story line, which specifies that poor countries cannot follow the growth path already taken by wealthy countries such as Finland or Switzerland without overstressing the world's ecosystems.

Thus it is better to think of sustainable development not as a path taken by countries such as Finland and Switzerland, but as at most a discourse that will inspire experimentation with what sustainable development can mean in practice. Sustainability, like democracy, is largely about social learning, involving decentralized, exploratory, and variable approaches to its pursuit. Sustainable development (unlike survivalism) can be a multilayered and multifaceted enterprise. Rather than try to impose a common definition replete with an associated set of precise goals (which is what administrative rationalists would do), a "decentered" approach would stress pluralistic and local experimentation (Brooks, 1992; Torgerson, 1994; 1995). In this search, the very fact that agreement on the essence of sustainable development has been elusive proves to be a help rather than a hindrance, for no avenues are ruled out by stipulation, and so all kinds of new possibilities might be unearthed (Torgerson, 1994: 310–13; see also Thompson, 1993).

But if the pursuit of sustainability is to be decentered and piecemeal, what would actually harness all these efforts to the common good? The answer lies in the necessity for widespread commitment to the discourse itself, the only conceivable glue to hold these various efforts together. In this light, the sought-after restructuring of power relationships becomes understandable. Sustainable development is a discourse of and for global civil society, not just states. Luke (1997: chap. 6) interprets this feature quite cynically as simply serving the interests of managerial "ecocrats" employed in IGOs and NGOs, not to mention rhetorical cover for failure to achieve anything substantive (Luke, 2005). Luke's argument would be plausible if sustainable development did indeed constitute a unified approach. But with the decentered, piecemeal twist, the role played by global civil society can become

democratic rather than managerial, an antidote to governments increasingly under the sway of market liberal ideas and committed to reducing environmental controls, expanding trade, and promoting economic growth at all costs (Lafferty, 1996). The problem is that market liberalism is now a powerful discourse in the international system itself, furthered by the same corporations now so active in the international politics of sustainable development.

There is no guarantee that widespread commitment to and pursuit of sustainable development in piecemeal fashion will deliver the goods. Economic rationalists see the whole enterprise as just the latest in a long line of futile attempts to replace markets by political management, trying to impose a discipline on people's decisions which is properly exercised by the market's price system (see Anderson and Leal, 1991: 167–71).[4] Prometheans see a lingering stress on limits poisoning the discourse (for example, Beckerman, 2002). Radical environmentalists deny that development (interpreted as economic growth) can ever be sustainable, and denounce the anthropocentric arrogance implicit in the discourse (for example, Merchant, 1992; Richardson, 1994). Radicals also argue that in an age of market liberalism, sustainable development's promise of social justice is hollow, as inequalities between rich and poor expanded in the 1990s within and across nations (Carruthers, 2001: 103). Even moderate environmentalists might wonder whether sustainable development diverts their energies by asking them to take on all the problems of the world, poverty and economic development as well as environmental protection (Wapner, 2003: 10). Survivalists attack any denial of limits and carrying capacity explicit in the discourse; so Garrett Hardin (1993: 204–6) takes Brundtland to task for failing even to ask whether the population growth she sees as inevitable and the economic growth she sees as desirable can be accommodated by the Earth's resources (see also Milbrath, 1989: 320–3). Similarly, Herman Daly (1993) believes that Brundtland's vision of a world economy five to ten times larger than its 1987 size is impossible given that the present human economy already appropriates 25 percent or more of the world's "net primary product of photosynthesis." Criticizing the declaration of the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, a spokesperson for the Climate Action Network and other NGOs stated "You cannot have a document titled *The Future we Want* without any mention of planetary boundaries, tipping points, or carrying

capacity" (*Guardian*, London, June 20, 2012: "Rio+20 Earth summit talks turn into rubber-stamp job").

Such criticisms notwithstanding, Lafferty (1996) argues that there is simply no better vehicle than sustainable development for environmentalists to pursue their various goals. The different strategic choices made by some eminent survivalists are noteworthy in this context. Meadows et al. (1992) disguise their survivalism in the words of sustainable development, and praise Brundtland; Hardin (1993) rubbishes sustainable development, and berates Brundtland.

The success or failure of sustainable development rests on dissemination and acceptance of the discourse at a variety of levels, followed by action on and experimentation with its tenets. Yet the thirty years that have seen sustainable development establish itself as the leading transnational discourse of environmental concern have seen much less in the way of wholesale movements in policies, practices, and institutions at global, regional, national, and local levels. Those same thirty years have seen a more effective global movement in a very different direction about which sustainable development is sometimes silent, sometimes (in its business-friendly variant) accepting. That direction involves the increasing trans-nationalization of capitalism, especially following establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1994. The WTO joined the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in policing international economic regimes. Free trade, capital mobility, and governments all over the world committed to market liberalization and ordinary (unsustainable) economic growth as their first imperatives threaten to override sustainable development (though lip service to sustainable development could be found in the agreement that established the WTO). At the WSSD there were no serious suggestions that the WTO could be made to submit to sustainable development, but plenty of arguments from developed countries' national delegations that on trade issues the WSSD had to proceed in the context set by the WTO.

In a world dominated by market liberalism, sustainable development's prospects are poor unless it can be demonstrated that environmental conservation is obviously good for business profitability and economic growth everywhere, not just that these competing values can be reconciled. As we shall see in the next chapter, this is exactly the claim advanced by ecological modernization.

NOTES

1. <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/index.php?menu=62> (accessed June 8, 2012).

2. This project was under the auspices of UNESCO's Management of Social Transformation Program, and organized through the Institute for Social-Ecological Research in Frankfurt, Germany.

3. <http://epi.yale.edu/> (accessed June 9, 2012).

4. Anderson and Leal regard sustainable development as sufficiently important for its contrast with their free-market environmentalism to form the conclusion of their book, which is widely regarded as the definitive statement of economic rationalism applied to environmental affairs. However, they wrongly assert that sustainable development involves a globally administered regime of zero economic growth and zero use of nonrenewable natural resources. In other words, they mistake sustainable development for an extreme form of limits and survival.