

## ***ANNALS OF DISCOURSE***

### **Embracing the Politics of Ambiguity: Towards a Normative Theory of “Sustainability”**

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#### **Introduction**

One of the most interesting problems within the burgeoning literature on ecological sustainability is that the concept itself, while politically ubiquitous, is analytically ambiguous. There is even some concern that it has become “intellectually empty;” deployed “to justify and legitimize a myriad of policies and practices ranging from communal agrarian utopianism to large-scale capital-intensive market development.” Indeed, concerns about the contested meanings of “sustainability” have motivated a new field of critical analysis of ecological discourses and symbolic politics. Attempts to distinguish approaches to sustainability often take the form of boundary work, where “good” uses of the concept are separated from “bad.” In addition, it is now commonplace to distinguish between weak and strong definitions of sustainability, or between approaches that propose “incremental reforms to the status quo” and those that prescribe a “radical reorganization and restructuring of society along ecological principles.”

This tension is also visible in public discourses about ecological politics, particularly around the problem of climate change. At a new London Science Museum exhibition, for example, climate change is characterized—in obvious quip—as a “burning issue” rather than as an objectively existing crisis. Another Science Museum exhibit called “The Science of Survival,” co-produced with Fleming Media, interprets climate change from the hindsight of 2050, presenting the likelihood of major undesirable changes in social life worldwide—but not a sense of its ultimately unsustainable character. The American Museum of Natural History recently entered into political fray after opening an exhibit entitled “Climate Change: The Threat to Life and a New Energy Future,” prompting criticism that it failed to offer a balanced representation of the scientific controversy. The British Broadcasting Corporation now hosts an extensive web resource on the climate change debate, with sections dedicated to “impacts” and “policies,” saying simply that “our climate will be a very different place in the next ten to twenty years.” And Channel 4’s broadcast of *The Great Global Warming Swindle* in 2007, simultaneously lauded and decried, suggested that the whole climate change crisis affair was a political mythology. In each of these examples, the problem of sustainability is represented as an apolitical quest for truth amidst the confusion of competing bodies of scientific evidence, while harder questions about how normative boundaries are actually drawn between sustainable and unsustainable practices are ignored.

Many political activists and academic researchers, however, use different vocabularies and imageries to speak about climate change. Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* issued a stark warning that “humanity is sitting on a ticking time bomb. If the vast majority of the world’s scientists are right, we have just ten years to avert a major catastrophe that could send our planet into a tailspin of epic destruction.” The U.K. Sustainable Development Commission has stated that “for those of us closely involved in Sustainable Development stakes, it is nail-biting stuff—even though this is a race being played out in decades rather than minutes.” The recently founded Climate Crisis

Coalition aims to “create awareness and convey a sense of urgency about the climate crisis and broaden the constituency of the climate action movement.” And the website of the U.K.-based Crisis Forum, an academic forum for the study of crisis in contemporary society, argues there is a “high probability that unless we drastically change our global political and economic practice, the human species may not survive into the foreseeable future.” Indeed, for this group global warming is simply one of a number of interconnected crises, including “third world starvation, resource wars, a spiralling decline in biodiversity, AIDS, the risk of global economic meltdown, the threat of terrorism, forms of religious fundamentalism, and so on,” which together constitute an “all-encompassing systemic dysfunctionality.”

In public life, we are hence confronted with radically different interpretations of climate change, some of which present it as a problem to be addressed through technological and social adaptations, and others that visualize it as an impending catastrophe which may (or may not) be averted only through radical cultural, political and economic transformation. How might we account for and interpret this discrepancy? One obvious temptation is to interrogate the accuracy of the scientific facts; however, the sociology of knowledge and science teaches us that the meaning of scientific knowledge is often precisely what is in dispute in such debates. Perhaps more importantly, the scientific dimensions of sustainability discourses are likely to remain grounds for contestation precisely because they are necessarily tied to deeper and more situated visions of “the good life” and its means of accomplishment.

Many attempts to determine the diverse and contested meanings of sustainability thus also reflect deeper concerns to clarify the political and ethical implications of the term in practice. In some contexts, it signifies a profoundly conservative attitude in which the aim is neither to transform institutionalized ecological practices nor to challenge the logic of capitalist development. In fact, many mainstream etymological definitions of the word imply that it means to “support, uphold the course of, keep in being, endure [and] bear the weight of” existing conditions. This is one basis for critiques of the standard Brundtland-style definitions, which characterize sustainable development as a problem of fulfilling current needs, however so defined, without compromising the ability of others to meet theirs in the future. On the other hand, notions of sustainability have potentially radical implications, signifying a rejection of unethical and inhumane social practices, communicating normative critiques of short-sighted and exploitative economic logics, and implying a commitment to imagining future alternatives. As Kate Soper has argued,

the attempt to accommodate ecological crisis...can be made in a variety of ways: capitalist, socialist, authoritarian, fascist, all of them in contestation over what it means for human beings to “flourish” (which means also over the issue of whether some, more than others, should be allowed to do so).

Given these ambiguities, does the concept of sustainability serve any useful analytical purpose? Can it help us frame critical questions about how we live and how we might live, particularly as the presumed cultural conditions of sustainable social life—including faith in the possibility of efficacious collective action—are no longer themselves taken for granted?

In this paper I argue that it does, and that by problematizing rather than despairing about the uncertainty which is inherent in the concept of sustainability, we can gain better insight into how it is employed in efforts to motivate ecological action.

Because the limits of sustainability are normative and political, declarations of *unsustainability* communicate normative judgments about the legitimacy of existing material conditions as well as assessments of the urgency of maintaining or transforming them. By understanding definitions of sustainability as matters of critical judgment, we are better able to examine what determines the difference between “status-quo,” “reformist,” or “transformative” definitions of sustainability in practice; what makes voluntaristic responses appear radical to one actor and conformist to another; and how it is possible for these perspectives to change. For example, Joel Kovel’s most serious criticisms of certain approaches to sustainable development are levied not at particular strategies of environmental reform but rather at “the *judgement* that holds that piecemeal reforms are all that is needed” and at “the *attitude* that refuses to look at the problem as a whole and contemplate radical change.” In light of such questions, it is clear that the concept of sustainability cannot be considered intellectually bankrupt simply because its meaning is unfixed. Nor can it be considered ideological merely because it is bipartisan. Rather, it is more useful to explore how the idea works discursively to frame normative political projects, particularly those that aim to evoke critical reflection on the desirability of present social conditions and to create possibilities for imagining alternative futures, or even the more controversial hope of “transforming consciousness.”

This is not only a theoretical question, for the rhetorical power of “sustainability”—and its negations, such as the threat of ecological catastrophe—have long been considered to be sources of motivation for political action. Of course, as Ulrich Beck has pointed out, the prospect of imminent crisis may produce a range of responses from “a compulsion to act” (which is certainly one hope of sustainability activism and education) to denial, fatalism or apathetic withdrawal. But environmentalist discourses remain laden with presumptions that transformative action can be instigated through emotive, mediated appeals to human and environmental solidarity by stressing the role of individual action in resolving structural problems and by producing alarming images of potential dystopias. Indeed, particularly during the early years of the environmental movement, it was often presumed that raising cultural awareness about the un-sustainable nature of dominant trends in capitalist production and consumption would naturally lead to mass response. In the Brundtland Report, for example, the World Commission on Environment and Development stated that “unless we are able to translate our words into a language that can reach the minds and hearts of people young and old, we shall not be able to undertake the extensive social changes needed to correct the course of development”—in other words, suggesting that improving public understanding of the scientific evidence would enable the implementation of new environmental policies and practice. And, along with other more ostensibly “transformative” projects, the commission also advocated the development of a “common endeavor and for new norms of behavior...changes in attitudes, social values, and in aspirations...vast campaigns of education, debate and public participation.”

However, as Fredric Jameson has argued, the proliferation of cultural work towards sustainable futures has been accompanied by “an inverted millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that.” Specters of the end of history, end of peace (for those privileged enough to experience it), end of reason, end of humanity, and indeed, end of the world as we know it are communicated vividly. Interestingly, however, they are not as consequential as often expected. For environmental activists and others motivated by a consciousness of crisis, this is a vexing state of affairs, and there is much disappointment that public awareness of threats to ecological “sustainability” fails to materialize in either

a radical transformation of consciousness or the mobilization of collective action. This is accompanied by a sense of incredulity that people would *not* act to avert the possibility of unprecedented environmental and social catastrophe or be satisfied with small and often contradictory changes to everyday practices that fail to challenge the basic principles of economic and social organization which necessitate them in the first place. As Kovel writes,

...one wants to scream out this brutal and plain truth, which should be on the masthead of every newspaper...but it is nothing of the kind. Yes, endless attention is paid to the crisis, a great deal of it useful, some of it trivial, and some plainly harmful. But where is the serious, systemic reflection of the brutal truth—that humanity is in the hands of a suicidal regime, which scarcely anyone thinks is either possible or desirable to fundamentally change?

Kovel's characterization of the contemporary global order as a "suicidal regime" clearly invites reflection and debate. However, it also points to a crucial and often unarticulated question: under what conditions do perceived threats to "sustainability," particularly in their most extreme articulation as threats to the physical survival of oneself, other living beings and the natural environment, *not* become sources of motivation for transformative action?

Although this question is closely tied to contemporary environmental politics, it also has precedent in other political movements that have emphasized cultural transformation. This question is also a central preoccupation for social scientists interested in the role of knowledge, language, and representation in political struggle. It has been particularly well developed within critical social theory, where successive experiences of mass apathy in the face of extreme threats to humanity—the rise of fascism in interwar Europe; later, the nuclear arms race; and most recently, the militarization of security states and global ecological degradation—have resulted in systematic studies of the "distortion" of human nature in late-modern societies, as well as the complex relationship between material, cultural and psychological change. Within this tradition, it is therefore not only presumed that all definitions of sustainability are historically and socially situated, but also that we cannot fully understand the concept in isolation from the analysis of its interpretation and political implications in practice.

When placed in this context rather than posed as a singular problem of contemporary ecological politics, sustainability does not appear "intellectually empty." Rather, it becomes possible to argue that its symbolic ambiguity stems from its role as a heuristic device for communicating critiques of existing conditions, re-orienting attention towards alternative futures, and evoking a sense of urgency about the need for individual and social action. It also becomes possible to consider that this may be a productive space of possibility rather than an empirical limitation.

### **Sustainability: The Very Idea**

The concept of environmental sustainability, as related specifically to ecological politics, is relatively young. It emerged during the 1960s, exploded into popular politics after Earth Day 1970, and was institutionalized during the 1980s in the World Conservation Strategy (1980), the Brundtland Report (1987), and a plethora of national and international strategies developed to address concerns about the exploitative and unequal use of natural resources. It coincided with and is indicative of a widespread rebellion in 20<sup>th</sup> century thought against the notion that the "progressive" control over nature was an unqualified good—the loss of faith in neutral technological development

and a sense that the human “triumph over nature” was an ideological conceit of positivist scientism, as well as increasing evidence of both ecological damage and eco-social exploitation.

However, while the concept of environmental sustainability is historically specific, the *idea* of sustainability—particularly the normative distinction between sustainable and unsustainable practices—is a more historically prominent element of social criticism. As Lumley and Armstrong point out, even in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, concerns about “inter- and intra-generational equity, concern for the future, altruism, the conservation of nature, the protection of natural resources and balanced development” were familiar to British (and European) philosophers. These themes continued to develop as modern European theorists explored the contradictory consequences of colonialism, rationalization, and modern industrial capitalism on the quality or even viability of human life. The otherwise diverse works of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Sigmund Freud, for example, share a desire to identify the “organic” possibilities of human nature and protect them from social distortion or abuse. Freud’s theory that “civilization is a trade-off in which we achieve a certain security by sacrificing a certain degree of individual desire” is homologous to mainstream notions of sustainability, and Marx’s *Capital* can be read as a critique of the desire to sustain an economic and political system which is continually threatened by its own contradictions.

It would clearly be a stretch of imagination to link contemporary sustainability discourses directly to classical theories of capitalist modernity. However, what is significant is that these theorists regarded as imminent threats to humanity certain practices which have long since been normalized as conditions which cannot, and in some cases should not, be realistically challenged or transformed. Although most of this early work deals only tangentially with ecological issues, it nevertheless offers insight into how problems of human and, to some extent, environmental sustainability were framed when the architecture of modern capitalism seemed provisional rather than permanent, before, as it were, it became easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism, or indeed any alternative.

The notion of sustainability has also been employed practically to mobilize political struggles against various forms of instrumentalism, dehumanization, and exploitation in modern society; it has been used to demarcate moments of crisis between existing social practices and conditions, on the one hand, and normative ideals of their transformation on the other. Throughout modern struggles against exploitative labor, during campaigns against nuclear armament, and as part of more recent environmental movements, thresholds of sustainability have been used to communicate, and often to produce, a normative consciousness of crisis about conditions of life that may otherwise be perceived as unproblematic—or in other words, to encourage a “profound reorientation of prevailing values and worldviews.”

For example, consider the following statement made by British socialist writer William Morris in the 1880s, regarding the organization and conditions of labor in English factories. Morris wanted to

get [people] to see that the old system of organizing labor for individual profit is becoming unmanageable, and that the whole people have now got to choose between the confusion resulting from the break up of that system and the determination to take in hand the labor now organized for profit and use its organization for the livelihood of

the community. [...] Looking back on what has been, we shall be astonished to think of how long we submitted to live as we live now.

Here, Morris presents opposing conceptualizations of sustainability. The technical problem of capital was how much exploitation could be tolerated both by individual workers and by general public opinion before the system or the people that sustained it fell apart. The moral problem, however, was that the system of production for private profit was inherently unsustainable in human terms, and would exist only until thresholds of intolerance necessarily materialized in both theory and practice. Speaking in the future anterior tense, Morris expressed a hopeful—perhaps uncritically so—vision of sustainable progress. The argument that “we shall be astonished to think of how long we submitted to live as we live now” suggests a confidence in moral pedagogies; a belief that exploitation and its sufferance are caused by misguided ethical, material and political priorities; and an assumption that the limits of sustainability are marked by objective “tipping points” in an otherwise upwardly mobile human experience.

By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with the grossest and most visible excesses of labor exploitation ameliorated or obscured for the Northern white working and middle classes, some social critics turned attention towards the threat of nuclear war between what C. Wright Mills once referred to as the world’s two “over-developed” industrial societies. In 1963, for example, the American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon called “A Knock at Midnight,” in which he queried whether human beings had retained the means and will to avert self-annihilation. While many of his other sermons during this period had defined racism as the most serious threat to human futures, he was highly critical both of the development of nuclear technologies and of uncritical faith in the power of scientific and technological knowledge to guarantee social justice and progress and sustain human futures.

It is midnight within the social order. [...] Man [*sic*] now has atomic and nuclear weapons that could within seconds completely destroy the major cities of the world. Yet the arms race continues and nuclear tests still explode in the atmosphere, with the grim prospect that the very air we breathe will be poisoned by radioactive fallout. Will these circumstances and weapons bring the annihilation of the human race? [...] When confronted by midnight in the social order we have in the past turned to science for help. ...But alas! Science cannot rescue us now, for even the scientist is lost in the terrible midnight of our age. Indeed, science gave us the very instruments that threaten to bring universal suicide.

One year later in his 1964 tract *One-Dimensional Man*, German social philosopher Herbert Marcuse echoed King’s concern that advanced industrial societies were on the brink of being physically unsustainable, proposing that this possibility paradoxically contributed to maintaining an ultimately unsustainable social system and pointing to the inherently normative substance of sustainability itself. He asked,

does not the threat of an atomic catastrophe which could wipe out the human race also serve to protect the very forces which perpetuate this danger? [...] We submit to the peaceful production of the means of destruction, to the perfection of waste, to being educated for a defense which deforms the defenders and that which they defend.

In the following decade, with the threat of nuclear war still looming large on the political horizon, Marcuse’s colleague (and later critic) Erich Fromm also asked whether there was any viable alternative to this presumably pending nuclear catastrophe. Deciding that there was marginal hope, he remarked:

...the almost unbelievable fact is that no serious effort is made to avert what looks like a final decree of fate. While in our private life nobody except a mad person would remain passive in view of a threat to his total existence, those who are in charge of public affairs do practically nothing, and those who have entrusted their fate to them let them continue to do nothing. How is it possible that the strongest of all possible instincts, that for survival, seems to have ceased to motivate us?

This question persists to the present day, as evidenced by the “Doomsday Clock,” a more explicit representation of the unsustainable character of modern social life. Created by the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, the clock represents a board of scientists’ judgments of proximity, in minutes and hours, to the imagined end of human existence. While it was initially created to evaluate the threats posed by nuclear politics, it now also takes into account climate change, global security, political conflict, biosecurity, and genetic engineering. In 2007, the board “reset” the clock “two minutes closer to midnight,” from seven minutes to five, to represent what it considered to be grave threats from both global nuclear arsenals and climate change. It was last closer in 1984, at the height of the Cold War.

Numerous criticisms can be made of this “clock,” not least of all that it reduces complex perceptions, events, and relationships to simple points of “time,” which give the impression of having an ontological reality. However, its theoretical significance is that it aims to represent a *non-linear* and *non-deterministic* philosophy of history; a *social* or *political time* in which futures are shaped by human action and ethical choices rather than simply by natural processes, or as Anthony Giddens once put it, by the wild careening “juggernaut” of modern capitalism. The Doomsday Clock also illustrates with simple elegance what the other examples merely imply—that definitions of sustainability are often matters of political judgement and collective deliberation.

### **Risks, Thresholds and Ethical Will**

These disparate statements about the exploitation of labor, nuclear weaponry, and climate change have three things in common. First, from William Morris to the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, they suggest that perceived crises of sustainability do not simply emerge as objective crises from structural contradictions, and that consensus about the definition of sustainability is not necessarily forthcoming in everyday experience. In doing so, they shift attention away from questions about which practices or conditions are inherently sustainable and towards the problem of how certain practices and conditions become defined as such. Second, they share in common a sense of surprise that neither the promise of sustaining particular practices and conditions nor the threat of their *unsustainability* is inherently motivating or mobilizing. Finally, the statements all communicate a sense of anxiety about the absence of a more general ethical will to respond to perceived threats to human and/or ecological survival.

In other words, unlike conceptualizations of sustainability, which point to tensions between individual autonomy, social justice, and collective futures as a problem of the irrational use, distribution, and regulation of resources, for critical theorists the question of what constitutes sustainable living must be preceded, or at least accompanied, by an analysis of what makes such future orientation valuable and desirable in the first place. The statements therefore indicate a particular constellation of concepts—risk, threshold, power, and ethical will—that can be utilized to theorize the conditions under which a consciousness of crisis about the “unsustainable” nature of certain conditions and practices may (or perhaps more significantly, may not) emerge.

The first concept, *risk*, refers to subjective assessments of “the anticipation of catastrophe,” but not necessarily to actual threats. As Beck argues, risk thus exists “in a permanent state of virtuality,” only “becoming real” when articulated as such in dialogue and practice. It is necessarily dependent on the definition of *thresholds*, subjective decisions about where and when sustainable practices become unsustainable. And as thresholds of pain and possibility are socially situated and rooted in judgments of value, debates about what practices can or should be sustainable are inherently *political*. Each of the above statements suggests that threats to human freedom and existence are rooted in relations of power rather than in technical problems, and that their resolution entails the neutralization of these power relationships. This therefore raises questions about the opportunities—and the *desire and will*—that people have to define risks, challenge alternative thresholds, and act to either maintain or transform existing conditions.

Significantly, then, the primary question in each statement is not how a crisis of sustainability comes about, but why such crises are not universally experienced. This explains why, to return to the theme of ecological crisis, it is often difficult for people who nurture the consciousness of crisis to understand why others do not. The abovementioned statement from Kovel, for example, illustrates the type of incredulity which emerges in the face of disagreement about the gravity or even existence of ecological crisis, and hence about the lack of a natural compulsion to radical action. “Something,” he concludes, “has gone terribly wrong in the relation between humanity and nature.”

Rather than focusing simply on the distortion of this relationship, however, it is also important to understand its constitution—i.e., to understand how and why boundaries are marked out between sustainable and intolerable or devastating conditions. As Kovel points out, “ecological crisis is an *abstraction from an obdurate set of facts*: that ‘environmental’ troubles are breaking out all over the place, that this is peculiarly linked to the contemporary condition, and that it clearly poses a major threat to the future integrity of society and nature.” However, if the constitution of a set of facts *as* a crisis is an act of theoretical abstraction or cognitive interpretation, it cannot be assumed that there is an organic relationship between material realities, immediate experience, consciousness of crisis, and the mobilization of transformative action. Nor can it be assumed that the unsustainable nature of climate change will simply reveal itself either through a gradual shift in social consciousness accomplished through political pedagogy, or through “involuntary enlightenment” from “wake-up calls” such as catastrophic weather events, flooding, mass extinctions, etc. And at the most basic level, recognizing the situated and normative character of the concept, we cannot simply presume that even the most compelling definitions of sustainability will enable political consensus about the nature of human need, acceptable forms of economic organization, or meanings of the good life.

### **Towards a Critical Theory of “Sustainability”**

Given these ambiguities, we therefore need a theoretical approach to ecological sustainability that conceptualizes it not as a technical problem of rationalizing the distribution and use of resources, but as a normative position which is accomplished through political and cultural struggles to assert certain values (for example, of human life and social dignity) against their subordination to others (such as the logics of power, profit, and individualized desire). Such an approach does not aim to achieve basic levels



of social and environmental stability within a social system predetermined as inevitable or desirable. It is also not oriented towards understanding how existing modes of production and consumption, or indeed certain existing value systems, may be altered without upsetting the legitimacy of the broad status quo. Rather, it opens questions about how the will to sustainability is variously constituted, and how to identify the limitations and possibilities for constructing it differently within existing conditions in order to transform these conditions themselves. In doing so, it aims to define alternative thresholds of risk and sustainability which challenge those that are accepted as common-sense, and to *ab*normalize and denaturalize ideas and practices which may have been normalized as natural, reasonable or desirable. The objective, in other words, is to regard the ambiguity of the concept as a starting point for critical inquiry into the political meaning of sustainability in particular discourses rather than as a problem requiring closure.

In order to clarify this difference, it is instructive to compare the Brundtland Report's 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" with Herbert Marcuse's theory of socially constituted needs in his classical *Essay on Liberation*. In the first definition, both needs (particularly of basic survival and human dignity) and limitations (pressures placed on the environment by social and technological organization) are represented as politically neutral. Marcuse's work offers an interesting contrast, arguing that in the ecological politics of advanced industrial societies, "what is at stake are the needs themselves." Here, needs are understood not as innate, but as historical and socially constructed; they are, like thresholds and risks, perceptions of "what is desirable and necessary for the prevailing societal institutions and interests." Thus, "the established universe of needs and satisfactions is a fact to be questioned," and many of our existing needs need to be unlearned, not only in order to create space for alternative conceptions of self, but also "in the interest...of all those whose misery is the price of [our] satisfaction." Marcuse thus advocated a "transvaluation of values," a "change in the "nature" of man [*sic*]" and a "redefinition of needs."

In recent years, Marcuse's theory of need, and indeed much critical theory focusing on subjective transformation, has come under scrutiny and been criticized as unnuanced and reductionist. It is perhaps possible even to argue that it has been superseded by more nuanced and critical analysis of both consumer action and human nature. However, the basic principles and concepts of Marcuse's approach offer a particularly useful way of framing questions about present and future needs, and hence about the definition of sustainability, as social and political ones. From this perspective, we can ask "why some things appear as needs and others do not...why this way and not otherwise?" This perspective also enables us to consider that "the judgement of needs and their satisfaction, under the given conditions, involves standards of priority—standards which refer to the optimal development of the individual, of all individuals, under the optimal utilization of the material and intellectual resources available to man." Or, as Soper argued, to remember that "any ecological politics includes a choice of what—and whose—needs or preferences are going to be satisfied in the light of the available knowledge of ecological constraints."

This is particularly important now, as there is a resurgence of discourses advocating the "rise of a new consciousness" or, at the very least, of hoping for a "major cultural change and a reorientation of what society values and prizes most highly" in order to shift thresholds of ecological sustainability. However, we need not necessarily

assume that this must be preceded by the emergence of some transcendental sort of “new mind,” in the most psychosocial Marcusean sense of the term. Indeed, the deeply contested ambiguities over the meaning of “sustainability” indicate the problematic nature of this homogenizing possibility. Rather, it is possible to argue that we need a deeper understanding of how definitions of sustainability are normatively constructed and situated; how they are used to demarcate boundaries of both value and time; and how they may be conceptualized and reconceptualized as sites of struggle over future alternatives. We can accomplish this by embracing the contested politics and ambiguity of sustainability discourses; situating current debates about ecological sustainability within a broader tradition of social criticism; and conceptualizing “sustainability” as a heuristic tool for identifying thresholds of critique rather than as a thing in itself. Far from being “intellectually empty,” therefore, competing interpretations of “sustainability” may be alternatively viewed as invitations to explore the complex processes through which competing visions of just futures are produced, resisted, and realized in political practice.