

# Sustainability and Contemporary Society

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## Abstract

Contemporary human societies face with perplexity and lack of fundamental solutions challenges represented by current sustainability crisis, in the context of increasing economic and social inequalities in despite of the expansion and deepening of market logic on a global scale, unprecedented in humankind history. That has challenged not only our perceptions about the benefits of economic growth and capitalism, but also about the capacity of planet to absorb damage inflicted by human-kind “ecological footprint”.

**Keywords:** Crisis, sustainability, ecology, inequalities, capitalism, economy.

## Sostenibilidad y la sociedad actual

### Resumen

La sociedad contemporánea se enfrenta con perplejidad a la falta de soluciones fundamentales en la actual crisis de sostenibilidad, en el contexto de incrementar las desigualdades sociales y económicas en vez de expandir y profundizar en un mercado lógico a escala global, sin precedentes en la historia de la humanidad. Esto ha desafiado no solo nues-

tras percepciones sobre los beneficios de crecimiento económico y capitalismo, sino que también en la capacidad del planeta en absorber el daño causado por la humanidad “la huella ecológica”.

**Palabras clave:** Crisis, Sostenibilidad, ecología, desigualdad, capitalismo, economía.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the economic, social and political contemporary context, the issue of sustainability has become in vogue and at the center of debate [1]. Conspicuous representatives of the *status quo*, as well as detractors, seem to be deeply concerned not only about the problems of ecological deterioration, but also about aspects related to the lack of economic and social sustainability prevalent in modern societies (Leff, 1998)<sup>1</sup>. Regardless of the sign of their ideologies and their belonging to different economic systems and political regimes, the various contemporary human societies face with perplexity and lack of fundamental solutions challenges represented by resources depletion, air, soil and water pollution, destruction of ecosystems and global warming phenomenon. All this happening in the context of increasing economic and social inequalities, despite of expansion and deepening of market logic on a global scale, unprecedented in humanity history.

Thus, the sustainability discourse has been appropriated by not only the ‘green’ parties or environmental organizations like *Greenpeace*, but also by national governments and global agencies guarantors of international establishment. Apparently, there seems to be a common concern for saving the planet from self-destruction, after decades of rampant ecological degradation as a result of the quest for finding a social welfare allegedly deriving from economic growth (Riechmann & Naredo, 1995).<sup>2</sup>

## 2. GROWTH, INDUSTRIALIZATION AND GLOBAL CAPITALISM CRISIS

Particularly in the postwar period, industrialization at all costs became the *leitmotif* of governments on a global scale, regardless of their different political ideologies. The phase of capitalist expansion sustained on the emergency of “Fordist” mode of regulation<sup>3</sup> in main central economies, radiated its effects not only economic but also political and

ideological to the peripheral economies of underdeveloped capitalism, leading to the flowering of “developmentalist” ideology (Rodríguez, 1980)<sup>4</sup> and to the setting up of a series of public policies based on the state intervention in the economy (Pinto, 1975)<sup>5</sup>. All this made with the purpose of promoting, in some cases, of creating the conditions for the widespread of trade and monetary relations by means of a deliberated industrialization under the state protection (Salama 1976)<sup>6</sup>. In the Latin American case, this gave rise to a form of peripheral capitalism based on what some authors call a “late and subordinated” industrialization model (Orive & Cordera, 1970),<sup>7</sup> conducted under the tutelary presence of state and under the ECLAC’s political and ideological orientation<sup>8</sup>, as a way to bring Latin American economies with lower relative backwardness to economic progress and modernization of its societies according to the Western model.

However, after the wave of optimism raised by the “Keynesian spring” in the Western world and by the so-called “real socialism” in Eastern Europe, the world capitalism crisis in the seventies and the collapse of Soviet bloc in the eighties opened an era of pessimism and puzzlement. That has challenged not only our perceptions about the benefits of economic growth and capitalism, but also about the capacity of planet to absorb the damage inflicted by humankind “ecological footprint” (Leff, 2007)<sup>9</sup>. Both in the center and in the periphery of global capitalist system, the crisis widespread because of decline in industrial productivity (and consequent general rate of profit slow down), the bankruptcy of the international financial system created at Breton Woods and the external debt crisis of main Latin American economies such as Mexico. The advent of neoliberal policies in the eighties and the dictates of Washington Consensus in the nineties, with its claim for the creation of a single global market and realization of total capitalism utopia (Bustelo, 2003)<sup>10</sup> have aggravated the ecological, social and economic sustainability crisis that is living the contemporary world.

### 3. THE TERMS OF DEBATE ON SUSTAINABILITY

However, for several decades there has been a wide range of perceptions and proposals around sustainable development or, if you prefer at this very moment, about *sustainability*, which makes us wonder about the intimate nature and the theoretical status of this phenomenon in order to place it in a proper analytical and praxiological perspective. There-

fore, we will try to identify the various schools of thought on sustainability in order to analyze critically the viability of their proposals and its relationship with the social interests that represent and advocate. Later, we will move on the elements of an alternative interpretation based on the theory of social forms (Girard, 1983), [12] which keeps all its force in light of current transformations of global capitalism, which is experiencing the deepest crisis in its history.

Debate on sustainability has developed following in general the argument lines that define the different paradigms of thinking about the nature of modern societies. Therefore, encompasses a wide range of positions and shades ranging from the most obtuse conservatism to necessary transformation of society as the only path to reach an effective sustainability of collective existence. The debate includes various reformist proposals that approach one or other extreme positions. This seems to obey, of course, to the fact that the sustainability crisis has become a privileged dimension for expressing social antagonisms (Foladori, 1999), [13] which reflects the varied perceptions and ideological representations of social groups according to their particular interests, depending on their place in the existing economic and political power structures.

This ideological prism has been conditioned (though not necessarily in all cases) by the concrete material interests of countries, corporations, international agencies and individuals. This fact largely explains the difficulty to reach a praxiological convergence and a minimum of common goals in the search for sustainability. That happens in despite of the concerns on this matter and the collective belief (at least on the rhetorical plane) on the severity of disaster that looms over the planet due to the lack of sustainability of the current collective modes of life.

The very term *sustainable development* has generated a variety of interpretations that hinder the achievement of a shared understanding and unity of action in the field of collective work and public policy. As rightly pointed out Hopwood, Mellor and O'Brien (Hopwood, Mellor & O'Brien, 2005) [14], sustainable development represents a major effort to understand man's relationship with nature and relationships between men themselves, beyond the dominant Western dichotomous thinking based on a clear separation between the environment and economic and social problems. However, the lack of a defined and rigorously constructed theoretical statute for this concept has led to abuse and ineffec-

tiveness in the sphere of social practices and even to see it as a logical contradiction: the terms of *sustainable* and *development* would be, by definition, mutually exclusive (Kempf, 2007).<sup>11</sup>

Thus, over recent decades various debates about *sustainability* and *sustainable development* have developed, which we believe are false or at least insufficient; not so much because its particular content be false, but because they finally have failed to address the problem of sustainability from an organic and holistic perspective. Such is the case of the opposition between “weak” sustainability and “strong” sustainability, centered on the degree of substitution/complementarity between capital and technology vis-à-vis natural resources, as if the problem of lack of sustainability be purely technological (Morán, 1999). [16]. This has led to treat environmental issues as mere productive variables, with varying degrees of technical interchangeability among themselves, thereby neglecting the factors related to the lack of economic and social sustainability.

A similar situation exists in the divergent character (and even contradictory one) of the approaches in which predominate environmental concerns and those with a strong emphasis on issues related to equity and economic and social welfare (O’Riordan, 1989) [17]. This has led to discuss the different approaches and contributions about sustainability in terms of a double dichotomy. On the one hand, the opposition between the degree of “ecocentrism” or “technocentrism” existing on them and, on the other hand, the opposition between approaches with a complete lack of concern for social and welfare issues and those with such concerns as the core of its argument.

However, despite the many combinations that can be made from these coordinates, the truth is that this type of analysis, even with an undeniable taxonomic value, is insufficient to adequately understand the sustainability crisis that face the modern world. Even the effort for locating the various contributions on sustainable development according to its degree of defense of the *status quo*, and its character reformist or revolutionary, hides at heart a moralist and ahistorical approach that rather than help the understanding of the phenomenon mystifies it, obscuring its understanding.

Such is the case of the Brundtland Report,<sup>12</sup> which gives rise to ambiguity that leads to private companies, governments and global organizations to stand up for sustainable development, without

questioning the changes that are necessary to achieve it, especially those that might call into question the current *status quo* and the dominant tangle of vested interests. However, it also is the case with approaches that combine a strong concern for equity and welfare with an equally urgent concern about the increasing environmental degradation, as the currents of social ecology (ecosocialism, ecofeminism), radical ecology, anti-capitalist movement of environmental justice and the group ATTAC.<sup>13</sup>

The Association pour la taxation des transactions financières et pour l'action citoyenne (*Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and for Citizens' Action*, ATTAC) is an activist organization originally created in France in 1998 for promoting the establishment of a tax on foreign exchange transactions.

#### **4. TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION OF THE SUSTAINABILITY CRISIS**

Despite its large and obvious ideological and programmatic differences, these “leftist” or “rightist” currents have a common denominator in its approach to sustainability crisis in terms of more or less undesirable and/or avoidable consequences derived of the functioning of market economies. They fail to perceive that this crisis exists *in embryo*, so hidden, in the elementary social form in which modern capitalist society originates, that is to say the merchandise-form. Therefore, it is in the deployment of the antagonism that defines the intimate nature of the merchandise (the contradiction between its *use value* and its *exchange value*), that we can understand the genesis and historical evolution of the contemporary sustainability crisis. This crisis is inseparable from the very genesis and historical evolution of capitalism as the dominant social and economic system on a global scale.

Phenomena such as depletion of natural resources and the increasing deterioration and contamination of soils, forests, air, and waters (including oceans) have certainly rooted in consumerism inherent to a regime of growth based on mass production and the insatiable search for profit. Therefore, in spite of the existing regulations of governments and global organizations on the environment and ecosystems, all collective effort not leading to limit the private use of social richness and its effects on income concentration is doomed to failure from the standpoint of the

(lack of) sustainability. As it has already been mentioned above, the market economy incessantly reproduces the antagonism that opposes, on the one hand, human activity in capitalist conditions of social production and reproduction and, on the other, nature; that is to say between capitalist economic growth and sustainability. For this very reason, the term “sustainable development” is self-contradictory: by definition, all capitalist development breeds unsustainability, which in some cases mitigates through state interventions carried out under the pressure of social agents involved. Consequently, it is peremptory to promote the organization of society as a collective team in defense of sustainability projects. This alternative approach, of which there are already some elements in several notable contributions (Foladori, 1999), [13] allows the characterization of the (lack of) sustainability as an historical and structural phenomenon, that does not depend on the goodwill of companies, governments and citizens or on partial actions, whether at global or local level. It opposes society as a whole to a system based on an unbridled pursuit of profit. In this sense, sustainability crisis is located in a privileged dimension of social conflicts. In this approach, *nature* is no longer conceived as opposed to society and subject to be exploited for the enjoyment of a minority of the latter, but as an integral (embedded) part of nature, whose irrational use has catastrophic implications for human life and viability of the planet Earth (Kempf, 2007).<sup>14</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

The generalization of the merchandise form associated to the development of contemporary global capitalism has led to sustainability crisis to a situation that many authors define as a non-return point, and that compels us to contemplate it, on a global scale, as a task and an inescapable dimension of social transformation. This forces us to wonder seriously about the very relevance of the concepts of development and social transformation: if we are not able to build new social forms based on equity and social justice, and to restore the original unity between man and nature, perhaps we deserve as a species to disappear from the planet like modern dinosaurs.

### Notes

1. Leff, E. (1998). *Saber Ambiental: Sustentabilidad, racionalidad, complejidad, poder*, Mexico: Siglo XXI Ed. and PNUMA.
2. On the appropriation of sustainable development discourse by international agencies and individual governments, see [2].
3. See in this respect [3,4]
4. For a critique of “developmentalist” ideology, see [5].
5. For a deliberate policy of the State in favor of industrialization at all costs, see [6]
6. See in this respect the work of Salama [7].
7. See in this respect the work of Orive y Cordera, 1970
8. See the pioneering work of Prebisch [8] and the Tavares and Serra’s work [9], to mention only the most representative authors on this matter.
9. See Leff (2007), [10] op. cit.
10. For a critique of Neoliberalism and the “Decalogue” of public policies advocated by the Washington Consensus, see Bustelo [11].
11. See the recent contributions of non-growth theorists, including that of Kempf [15].
12. See the *Brundtland Report*, United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987.
13. The Association pour la taxation des transactions financières et pour l’action citoyenne (*Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and for Citizens’ Action*, ATTAC) is an activist organization originally created in France in 1998 for promoting the establishment of a tax on foreign exchange transactions.
14. On the threat of global catastrophe, caused by a lack of sustainability, which looms over the planet, see Kempf [15], op. cit.

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