

THE STERILIZATION OF ECO-CRITICISM: FROM SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TO GREEN CAPITALISM

LA ESTERILIZACIÓN DEL ECO-CRITICISMO: DEL DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE AL CAPITALISMO VERDE.

Santamarina, Beatriz
Universitat de València
Beatriz.Santamarina@uv.es

Vaccaro, Ismael, (McGill University)
Beltran, Oriol (Universitat de Barcelona)

Abstract: Development has been a dominant and highly visible trope of the global political and economic life of the world since the 1950s. As such it has been inevitably linked to some of the most important social processes of this era: colonialism, globalization, post-colonialism, global ecological crisis, the rise of environmentalism, and more. The consolidation of the contemporary consumer global society came, hand by hand, with the certainty that it sustained a way of life that as a collateral damage, included a global ecological crisis. From many quarters of the world new voices raised concerns about the costs of globalization and proposed alternatives and solutions: modern eco-criticism was born. This article analyzes the historical process of emergence of eco-critical concepts as well as on its appropriation, redefinition, and use by mainstream political and economic agents. Specifically we reflect on how “development” and “growth” under heavy criticism during the 70s were gradually transformed on “sustainable development” first, and, as the conversion was still raising significant disapproval, to “sustainability” later. The adoption of these new ideological frameworks to legitimize development allowed Western societies to dismiss more critical approaches such as “zero growth” or “de-growth”.

Keywords: environmentalism; environmental crisis; eco-criticism; development; growth; sustainable development; sustainability

Resumen: *El desarrollo ha sido un tropo dominante de la vida política y económica global en el mundo desde 1950. Como tal ha estado inevitablemente conectado a algunos de los procesos sociales más importantes de esta era: colonialismo, globalización, post-colonialismo, crisis ecológica global, el crecimiento del ecologismo, entre otros. La consolidación de la sociedad del consumo contemporánea llegó de la mano de la certeza de que sostenía un sistema de vida que, como daño colateral, incluía una crisis ecológica global.*

Desde muchos lugares del mundo nuevas voces apuntaron críticas en relación a los costes de la globalización y propusieron alternativas y soluciones: el eco-criticismo. Este artículo analiza el proceso histórico de emergencia de conceptos eco-críticos así como su apropiación, redefinición y uso por los agentes políticos y económicos. Reflexionamos especialmente sobre el “desarrollo” y “crecimiento”, conceptos sometidos a fuertes críticas que fueron gradualmente transformados, primero en “desarrollo sostenible” y luego en “sostenibilidad”. La adopción de estos nuevos marcos ideológicos para la legitimación del desarrollo ha permitido a las sociedades occidentales ignorar aproximaciones más críticas como “decrecimiento” o “crecimiento cero”.

Palabras clave: *ecologismo, crisis ecológica, eco-criticismo, desarrollo, crecimiento, desarrollo sostenible, sostenibilidad*

Introduction

During the 60s and 70s the environmental crisis became a central trope of Western society. Certainty around the tangibility of the crisis is articulated by a powerful narrative that, while discussing conflict and environment, in reality challenged the entire productive global system and destabilized its standing normative arrangement. Realizing that the evidence of this new social movement could not be denied, the status quo had to accommodate this narrative before it became a powerful enemy: emergent alternative discourses were appropriated and redefined. The goal, in using an environmentally friendly common language with implicit but vague accepted meanings, was to provide legitimacy to the established capitalistic growth ideology while simultaneously reducing the possibility of social fractures.

Environmental discourses that started with works of ecological denunciation, (Carson 1962; Ehrlich 1968) and pointed to the need to limit growth, achieved normative maturity with the social acceptance and consolidation of the “sustainable development” complex that, rather than questioning our developmental model, sustained it. In fact many of the concepts we will discuss in these pages emerged from the need to provide a political answer to the social pressure generated by the increasing awareness of environmental disasters.

The goal of this article is to track down the genealogies and different morphologies of eco-critical discourses in order to substantiate their progression from subversive to systemic. These pages demonstrate how, when considered over time, critical social and ecological discourses have been progressively appropriated, translated, and rendered devoid of critical potential by mainstream political and economic agents. In other words, the succession that goes from “limits to growth”, to “de-growth”, “sustainable development” and finally “sustainability” represents a conceptual progression by which eco-criticism is disciplined by virtue of its banalization and its commodification.

We will deconstruct sustainability both as a concept and in its current usage to understand its ideological genealogy, how it emerged, its context, and how it was transformed. The systemic post facto re-formulation of a set of concepts that *a priori* were critical, concepts such as “sustainable development” and, in its modern incarnation, “sustainability,” have served to contain criticism, halted questioning and, in fact, helped to sustain the status quo. These reformulations, in addition, have occurred at moments in which the system was under attack. This ideological transformation helped redefine the contemporary relationship between ecology and economy and created a consensual bridge between development and ecologists.

From a methodological perspective we have conducted a content analysis of the documents produced by the main environmental meetings of the last forty years, sustainable development documents, eco-critical main works, and the textual production of important companies involved with the green economy. Taking into account the inconceivable amount of texts produced in these fields by an every growing amount of actors and stakeholders, and the limitations of an article we were not intending to cover absolutely everything. The goal was to provide a discursive smorgasbord, a taste of sorts, of environmental rhetoric and counter-rhetoric to illuminate this process of sterilization of the critical potential of key concepts of early environmentalism.

The Emergence of Eco-criticism

To understand the current, hegemonic, form of eco-criticism we must first take a look at its historical context of emergence in the 1960s and to the development of its genealogy from an ideological, but also political perspective.

During the few decades before and after the WWII the industrial societies developed their productive capacity at a previously unseen accelerated pace. The growth of these societies brought about a significant improvement on the quality of life of a significant part of their citizens and an unprecedented erosion and impact of local and global natural processes. The second industrial revolution translates into an elongation of capitalist capacity. Its new format, closely related to the consolidation of new energy sources triggers the beginning of a new era characterized by a permanent global ecological crisis (Riechmann and Fernández Buey 1994).

In this period, the relationships between these industrial societies and the rest, known as the global South, are still governed by the colonial paradigm. The independence processes are at different stages of progress, but what becomes the global ideology that regulates the interchanges between the north and the south are the Development narratives, mostly connected with the idea of modernization (Martinussen 1997). The alleged goal of these narratives, ignoring the impacts that the North's industrial way of life has on a global level, is to expand this industrial modernity everywhere. Here we will not dwell on the fact that this developmental ideology seemed more about perpetuating the old colonial dependencies than about generating postcolonial self-sufficiency (Goldman 2006; Smith 2008; Wallerstein 1979). It was, in any case, a period of extreme transformations. The large scale ecological transformations, which include also the certainty of the devastation produced by WWII in general and the atomic bomb in particular (Deléage, 1991). It is in this period wherein we were assessing these new menaces to life that we also witnessed the development of ecology as science (Worster 1989).

This inquietude about the environment was developing at the same time as civil unrest was becoming a general phenomenon throughout the world. The 1968 student and civil rights social mobilizations (US, France, Mexico, Czechoslovakia, England, Italy and so forth) were bringing protests to the streets leading civil society to reorganize itself with the creation of social wellbeing defense groups. It was only a matter of time before these groups started to expand their demands into the environmental realm.

During the 1960s the growth of the environmental movement was evident and spectacular. In the US, April 22nd 1970 became a reference date to identify the consolidation of the new social movement: this is the day when the first "Earth Day" was celebrated (Duban 2000; Mitchell 1992). Throughout these years information about the environmental crises became common in the mainstream press and, consequently, concern about the environment became a public social trope. Local and global environmental issues, centrally framed and facilitated by the newly popularized colour TV, entered into every household of the west (Duban 2000). Mass media had a fundamental role in the creation of a new sensitivity, the discursive elaboration of new problematics, and in influencing political agendas.

In addition, the consolidation of the post-fordist society with the emergence of post-materialistic values (Inglehart 1997) and the transition toward "leisure society" (Galbraight 1999; Giddens 1995; Nazareth 2007) generalized access to and interest in outdoors activities. This development actually put people in direct contact with environmental degradation (Dunlap and Mertig 1992). It is in this period that there was a significant increase in the voices that denouncing the dangers of environmental degradation and demanding the establishment of limits to the excesses of the political and economic system. In this historical moment, the foundational texts of environmentalism were published: *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (1962), *Science and*

Survival and *The Closing Circle* by Barry Commoner (1963), *Our Synthetic Environment* by Murray Bookchin (1962), and *The Population Bomb* by Paul Ehrlich (1968).

Eco-criticism succeeded in gaining momentum, legitimacy, and range from the combination of this scientific base and the common sense narratives produced in daily life experiences and through stories in the mass media. Carson and Commoner's works were soon followed by an ever expanding bibliography with activist titles: *Small is Beautiful* (Schumacher 1973), *Utopia or Death* (Dumont 1973), *The Greening of America* (Reich 1970).

This literature, this "end of days" literature (Eckersley 1992), triggered intense discussions about the viability of contemporary economic models. All these works on the unsustainability of the system brought about the need to discuss limits and growth. Commoner and Ehrlich, amongst others, started the discussion about zero growth. This debate eventually reached policymaking circles with the publication of the Club of Rome report *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972). The scientific and technical aspects of the Club of Rome report as well as its solidity and intensity of its data and predictions contributed to its dissemination. The Report was a product of the scientific community and its authors could not be dismissed as environmentalists impersonating scientists or as apocalyptic messiahists. The authors came from institutions as prestigious as MIT and used the ostensibly neutral technological tools of science. Their results claimed objectivity; the results were further the outcome of computerized simulations. The report had a quick and wide distribution with multiple translations and its pessimistic predictions were made available to the general public (Jacob 1999).

The reports *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972), *Mankind at the Turning Point* (Mesarovic and Pestel 1974), and *Reshaping the international order* (Tinbergen 1976) offered harder questions. The reports are articulated around three basic ideas that are clear in their titles: there is a need to establish limits, action is unavoidable, and the solution requires global strategies. Despite the clear technocratic tone of the first works of the Club of Rome, these works included three important elements. In the first place, they made evident a crisis within the normally unquestioned notion of progress vis-a-vis growth and technology. The authors also highlighted the unintended consequences of the capitalistic system, according to Jacob, a cultural and philosophical critic (1999: 221). Finally, the reports introduced the idea of globality from an ecological, political, and ethical perspective. This expansive notion of globality was a framing of global and globalizing management that was picked up by the 1972 Stockholm Conference (Escobar 1995). The works of the Club of Rome defined the debate and the 1970s more generally. The emphasis on limits underlined the tension between the finite nature of the planet and its natural resources, and the belief in boundless growth. The report popularized what environmentalists had been saying for quite a while, and put on the table a degrowth theory under the rubric of "Zero Growth" or "Limiting Growth." The Club of Rome's enormous impact represented systemic challenge.

Awareness around ecological degradation and increased organization of civil society and the scientific community resulted in social pressures that demanded answers from political authorities. In the international arena the first international response was articulated around the First Earth Summit in Stockholm (1972), which recognized the environment as a global issue. In the US, new federal environmental agencies were created, including the *Environmental Protection Agency* (1970) and the *Council on Environmental Quality* (1969) - and with them, abundant environmental legislation

was promulgated (Dunlap and Mertig, 1992; Duban, 2000). After the political tsunami provoked by zero growth theory, political institutions started to commission their own studies. In 1977 Carter ordered the Council on Environmental Quality and the State Department to do a global analysis of demography, resources, and the environment. *The World in the Year 2000* was born. After all, the definition of a new reality was at stake and governments wanted to produce their own narratives.

The sociopolitical context in the West is constrained, if not defined, by the acute international crisis. The oil crisis of 1973 highlighted the need to find alternative energy sources and to design new energy policies. The nuclear energy option generated strong reactions and debate. The relentless environmentalist fight, environmental research, a succession of ecological/humanitarian disasters¹, and the publication of successive environmental reports contributed to a state of opinion in relation to the environment. The time was ripe for the governments and public institutions to act. Public opinion demanded it.

Appropriating sustainable development

At this point, however, we observed a transition from the zero growth model, sustained by the first ecopolitical works and popularized by the early reports by the Club of Rome, to the consecration of a sustainable development framework, promoted by the Environmental World Commission and strengthened by the Rio Summit (Bernstein 2002).

The first reaction to growing international concern was produced by international multilateral organizations. Not in vain, the environment was perceived as one of the primary transnational issues. The United Nations organized two conferences on the environment (1972, 1992) and a plurality of summits dealing with different environmental aspects: population (1974, 1984), food (1974), human settlements (1976), water (1977, 1992), desertification (1977), new and renewable energies (1981), and climate (1979, 1990). These meetings pointed to the importance that ecological problems were acquiring, but also emphasized the difficulties in treating them in integrated ways. These encounters translated into the creation of a plethora of new organizations and specialized programs that, in fact, sometimes complicated the possibilities for integral work on the environment (Almenar, Bono and García 1998).

It is in this context that sustainable development as an economic and institutional paradigm took shape. Sustainable development, however, was not really a new thing. Some authors track its genealogy to eighteenth century economists, a handful of conservationists from the 60s, and the ecodevelopment proposals of the 70s (Naredo 1996). Others consider it a more recent phenomenon: Redcliff (1987) stresses that the first time the concept was used was on the Declaration on Environment and Development of Cocoyoc (1970), while Lelé (1991) signals that the concept takes its true relevance as a result of its adoption by International politics during the 80s when it is introduced by the *International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)* in its *World Conservation Strategy. Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development* (1980). In real-

1 Three Mile Island (US), partial nuclear reactor meltdown; Bhopal (India) 1984, gas leak at the pesticides chemical plant of the American corporation, *Union Carbide Corporation*; Basel (Switzerland) 1986, fire at the *Sandoz* pharmaceutical corporation storehouse; Rhine (Germany) 1986, massive uncontrolled chemical spill by *Ciba-Geigy*; and the worst of them; Chernobyl (Ukraine), explosion of a nuclear reactor generating 100 times more radioactivity than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs together.

ity, there are similar narratives and formulations, overlapping across time. The novelty, in any case, as pointed out by García (1995), is that there exists in this formulation no question that the environment has become an issue and environmentalists are not conceived as radicals anymore. Environmentalism, hence, has become an interlocutor. However, in this process, institutional acceptance and mainstream adoption occurs in parallel to a process of appropriation and reformulation of the environmentalist agenda.

In 1983 the UN created the World Commission for Environment and Development and commissioned a study to inform “a global program for change”. In 1987 *Our Common Future*, known as the *Brundtland Report* was presented. The report puts zero growth aside when it proposes “a new era of growth” (Brundtland et al. 1992: 21) with a clear goal in mind: security. Development’s core ideology is not only reinforced by the report, it also received an additional new form of legitimacy associated with the need to generate security. The continuity of the economic and political control associated with classic development was strengthened by a particular conceptualization of risks and dangers. One of the most durable legacies of the report can be located in the Principle, a polemic and polysemous definition of sustainable development: “a development that satisfies the needs of the current generation without undermining the capacity of future generations to satisfy their own needs” (principle 3). This definition, talking about contemporary and future needs, will be reclaimed by the Rio Summit and is key in the construction and legitimization of new environmental discourses.

This report represents a rupture and a significant change in environmental narratives. To define reality, new notions are included. The report speaks about crisis, but also about networks, borders, or enemies, and the risks, in their new conceptualization, must be assessed in order to ensure security. It is not surprising then, to see that the report argues for the creation of specialized institutions and legal measures. The environment ceases to be a closed field analyzed only by scientific specialists and becomes a political problem (Jacob 1999: 263). The formula that articulated environmentalism since its beginnings, defining “the limits of growth”, is inverted and becomes, managing “the growth of limits”.

The Brundtland report connects with a neoliberal reality because it assumes capitalistic modernity as it is starting point and it assumes its fundamental characteristics and an essential part from which the report builds its own discourse (Escobar 1995: 9). The Brundtland formula helped to mesh ecology and economy together and created an instrument capable of generating consensus between environmentalists and developmentalists (Redclift 1987; Borowy 2013). The sustainable development promoted for the first time by the World Commission on Environment in 1987, and reinforced by the second Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, became a hegemonic ideology after the Johannesburg Summit of 2002 (UN Conference on Sustainable development). Interestingly enough, however, despite a definition based on the idea of covering the needs of present and future generations, none of the summits produced an actual political plan of action. The definition of sustainable development became an expression of undefined good will against poverty through equality and cooperation: connected to classic mantras of political modernity: “*liberté, égalité, fraternité*.” This connection was founded on the interaction between two abstract concepts and realms of knowledge in the fields of economy and ecology. The problem in the background was how to harmonize development and sustainability (Macekura 2015). From an institutional perspective development is about economic growth that considers the capacity of a given territory to sustain itself. Under this logic, development is growth that must be sustainable, but without defining what must be sustained. Sustainability, following this path, takes a symbolic more than practical role, and it allows for the rebrand of the idea of develop-

ment. The report “constitutes a good example of the strength with which the winds of conformism blow in the economic discourse” (Naredo 1996: 133).

The success of the sustainable development concept was based on the ambiguity of its definition and the vagueness of its theoretical and analytical framework (García 1995; Naredo 1996; Sosa 2001). This fact spawned multiple interpretations of development, sustainability, and the combination of both, becoming an efficient and evocative trope (Lélé 1991). Sustainable development achieved the status of a philosophical proposition without a transformative political program. Behind its formulation one encounters a void that opens the door for all sort of interpretations ensuring consensus while at the same time deactivating its praxis. Institutions present it without definition, as its mere pronunciation was a guarantee of collective comprehension and good agency. The concept itself becomes a fetish that enables false consciousness. What is evident by itself, what speaks by itself, operates as a clear mechanism of legitimation and normalization of the *status quo* (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991).

What is a given in sustainable development? What is hidden by its omnipresence? And why is it used for so many contexts as an ideal, evocative, formulation of economic praxis? For some authors sustainable development was so successful because it uncritically appropriated fundamental tenets of western modernity. Progress and development have been key foundations of our civilization. Development as an ideology to structure and hierarchize the world, inheritor of its predecessors evangelize and civilize (Bestard and Contreras 1987), symbolically started in 1949 when President Truman used the concept “underdevelopment” to describe most of the “other” planet. Development was presented as the means to achieve a particular El Dorado, material happiness. It became the path prescribed for all humanity. The two centuries old Enlightenment discourse recovered as “one of the most persistent myths of the second half of the twentieth century” (De Rivero 2001: 140). It is in this period that Gross National Product (GNP) becomes the measure of countries’ development and, as a collateral effect, the position of each country in the invisible international hierarchy. According to Sachs (1991), behind the fragile emancipatory promise held by development (a secular salvation), there was a legitimation for postcolonial imperialism.

In the 70s development suffers its first setback when Marxist theorists and environmentalists alike question the model of growth that does not guarantee the reduction of poverty. To compensate for this criticism institutions start talking about human development as a move towards quality over quantity (i.e. Index of Human Development). This shift adds to the lack of semantic precision. Human development speaks about good intentions, but, again, nothing concrete is offered as the lack of concern for health, education, or equality in the Structural Adjustment Plans imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund on many underdeveloped countries has proved (Goldman 2006; Sachs 1991). As we have seen, later on, in the 80s, oil and debt crises and numerous ecological disasters allowed for the questioning of the development formula. The sustainable development formula appeared as a discursive, untainted alternative to heretofore vilified development. To Sachs, the change of paradigm, the union between development and sustainability, prompted a shift: sustainability went from being about the conservation of nature to being about the conservation of development.

We are describing then, a process of conceptual colonization of a narrative that had the potential to challenge the system; a narrative that then ends up promoting the reproduction of this very system. During the years that separate the two Earth summits the emphasis and debates changed substantially: the discussion went from studying limits to promoting sustainability. The second summit links, in its very name, environment with the questionable notion of development (UN Conference on Environment and Develop-

ment): an unequivocal sign of the new winds and of the triumph of the political definition of sustainability.

The next step was to formulate actual strategies to promote sustainable development. In 2001 the European Union published the report *A Sustainable Europe for a Better World: A European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development*, **the US designs its National Strategy for Sustainability** and creates President's Council on Sustainable Development (1993-1999). This process of intellectual appropriation culminates with the 2002 (Johannesburg) and 2012 (Rio+20) Summits. Rio+20 was called the UN Conference of Sustainable Development. Environmental education was officially relabeled as education for a sustainable development.

In the studied period, thus, we observe the appropriation and institutionalization, by mainstream political actors, of environmental discourse. This occurs at the same time as economic actors proceed to commercialize, to create green capitalism as a green stamp that might foster deeper levels of consumption and thereby –growth.

From sustainable development to sustainability

Some environmentalists perceived that fundamental concepts of eco-criticism were being appropriated and rendered devoid of meaning by the machinery of development-oriented ideology. A new wave of eco-criticism, protesting and denouncing both the prevailing environmental praxis and the pretend mainstream environmentalist discourses, emerged. The 90s version of the limits to growth (from the 70s) is the zero growth or degrowth movement (D'Alisa et al. 2014). Growth and development objectors started demanding a radical change to the predominant economic model. It is a movement with a complex historical genealogy: the much discussed Rome reports, the Georgescu-Roegen entropy theories (1971), ecofeminism (D'Eaubonne 1978; Gard and Gruen 1993; Shiva 1988 and 1997), and poststructuralism (Escobar 1995 and 1996).

In the 70s, while alternative movements were requesting a controlled growth, degrowth theorists openly demand economic downscaling to ensure the planet's viability. Two fundamental tenets therein are that the current production system is beyond carrying capacity, and that we must reject the notion that growth for its own sake should be sought: "to live better with less". According to Latouche (2004, 2008, 2009, 2012; Latouche and Harpagès 2011) growth's main purpose is to generate profit for capital owners without consideration of the environmental consequences. Degrowth theorists propose to abandon faith in development and progress and to criticise the modern form of the progress myth: sustainable development. Sustainable development, they claim, does not represent a significant change in the political ecology of capitalism, and does not impose any limitation to the current production and consumption levels. In the last twenty years, pushed also by the successive economic crises that have swept the world, degrowth has found a wide social base.

To answer to these renewed criticisms, and in direct confrontation with the degrowth paradigm, the mainstream institutions in charge of labeling and administering the social capital of systemic environmentalism dropped the highly devalued word "development" from their public jargon: "sustainable development" simply became "sustainability". Between the Johannesburg conference and Rio+20 many institutional documents slowly replaced sustainable development with sustainability. Sustainable

development was a much institutionalized term and it took time to replace it with something else.

In 2007 the European Union presented a new development strategy for a sustainable development. This new document, replacing the document of 2001, drops the term “development” from its title: “A Sustainable Future in Our Hands”. Although sustainable development appears occasionally inside the document, following Rio’s recommendations, sustainability as a force and solo idea is more present than ever.

In 2010, in the middle of its worst economic crisis, the EU takes a deeper and louder step: the “2020 Europe. A strategy for an intelligent, sustainable, and integrative growth”.

In this document growth is openly retaken as a leitmotif. Growth as a term had been avoided since Rio 1992. In this document growth is understood in economic terms. The word growth had been replaced by development precisely to avoid the association with a heartless economic approach without social or environmental concerns. The document appeals for a growth that is “Intelligent”, “Sustainable”, and “Integrative”: at the end of the day, neoliberal growth. A year later the United Nations, following the same language economy, approved the “Initiative for a Sustainable Energy for All”. In Spain, in 2007, the three great sections of the Spanish Strategy for a Sustainable Development (a title inherited from its 2002 iteration), are Environmental Sustainability, Social Sustainability, and Global Sustainability. The term development has been taken out from the operational definitions. The Spanish government, in 2009, approves the controversial Sustainable Economy Law.

The consolidation of this sustainability narrative as de facto sustainable growth prepared the ground for the next step: the emergency of the green economy. Although the legitimizing narrative connects, ideally, growth with environmental sustainability, we are in fact talking about capitalistic enterprises that derive additional profit from their activities through adhering to a supposed set of environmental values and goals. The circle was complete. Nature had become integrated into economy: environment was a set of natural resources available to be transformed into commodities. In theory, in their value, the services provided by these ecosystems there was its salvation. The environment had been translated into a currency that capitalism could understand. The results, however, were quite the opposite: once a commodity a new set of rules applied (Appadurai 1986).

The two flagships of this new moment are the creation, thanks to the Kyoto protocol, of an international carbon emissions market and the penetration of the mining industry, as interlocutor, sponsor, and/or partner, into the conservationist movement. Both represent the consolidation of the “right to pollute” and to make a business out of it (Castree 2008; Igoe et al. 2010).

Rio+20, in 2012, despite being called, as its 1992 predecessor UN Sustainable Development Summit, introduced the Green Economy concept to the big stage: another success of the capitalist quest for profit; the opening of a new business niche. The first Rio summit was applauded for its resolutions and agreements devised to embrace the environmentalist cause. Twenty years later, however, the worst predictions had come true. The IV Earth Summit failed to move forward and provide solutions to the worsening of the ecological and social crises. In fact, the unfolding global crisis was definitely undermining Truman’s development myth. The PNUMA in its final report, “The Future We Want” describes green economy as an economic model that results in human improvement and social equity, significantly reducing environmental risks

and ecological scarcity. Critical voices quickly identified this new concept as problematic as it implied raising the markets' interest in the environment solely in terms of economic profit by attributing economic value to nature (Attac 2012; de Sousa Santos 2011).

Rio+20 came at the heels of the G20 Pittsburgh Summit where, this time with the attendance of the world's most important political leaders (unlike Rio 2012), where under the pretense of overcoming the consequences of the 2006 financial crash and new global strategy for growth was designed ("*Framework for Strong, Sustainable, and Balanced Growth*"). The path towards a green economy (more growth that is) was paved. It had started, at least initially with the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol (2005 with an initial compliance period starting in 2008). The protocol, in its actual tangible form, established the mechanisms with which to buy and sell the environment (in fact, the right to destroy it), and even to profit from this right by selling Western countries assigned carbon emission credits and buying cheaper underused Global South polluting rights (Bohm et al. 2012; Dalsgaard 2013; Lohmann 2010).

A parallel case of commercial speculative penetration into the environmentalist world under the cover of green economy is the landing of the mining industry amidst the large environmentalist NGOs (MacDonald 2010): being the 2010 agreement between RioTinto and IUCN a spectacular milestone (Kapelus 2002; Seagle 2012). Environmental NGO's, across their history, have had to deal with the temptation of collaborating with the very agents that promote environmental degradation: mitigation or prohibition (Macekura 2016). Another form of the right to pollute is the REDD agreement (Reducing Emissions from Degradation and Forest Degradation) designed to mitigate emissions impact but, under which, companies can buy the right to pollute by buying, planting, and sustaining forests in the Global South (Bumpus and Liverman 2011; McGregor 2010; Stidsen 2009).

To summarize, under the cover of the 2006 economic crises "sustainable development", in a marketing move, had become "sustainability". The term "sustainability" in turn had been violently stripped of any environmental meaning and became overarching discursive framework justifying a return to growth: a growth that, in many sectors, was connected to environmental issues through emissions trade-offs, or mining compensatory schemes.

Conclusion: Normalizing Environmentalism

Presently, there are numerous narratives available about sustainability. It is our contention that sustainability, in its mainstream formulation, has been redefined to cover the fractures generated by the capitalist appropriation of the world. It has become, in fact, a tool that facilitates exploitation of natural resources and the generation of even deeper social inequalities.

The history of environmental conflicts, capitalist development, and the resolution of the toxic impacts of humanity over the environment has been riddled with the tensions generated by contending and often opposite views about how to live and think on and about a world in permanent transformation. The multiplicity of actors, the discursive diversity, and the sociopolitical interests at stake have shaped complex assemblages that have been evolving across time. From an historical and ideological perspective the solutions assumed and promoted by the instances of power (in its most pragmatic definition) have tended to appropriate and neutralize the subversive charge of eco-

critical discourses. The process is fairly simple: facing the eruption of an event with the potential of destabilizing the basic meaning prescription structures, and facing the risk of losing the attribution of defining order and disorder, hegemonic power reacts by assuming uncomfortable demands. During this process of assumption the event is redefined, and its subversive potential deactivated as it is the center, not the margins, who manages its process of socialization. This is why we speak of sterilization. Sterilization refers to a complex structural process, institutional and normative, where elements with destabilizing potential are, after a discursive battle between social actors with very uneven political powers, neutralized. It is not by chance that the most significant advances in environmental policies have come, more often than not, after demolishing critiques to the standing economic model coupled with solid pushes for alternate modes of existence. Across these pages we have seen how development became sustainable development, and how in turn, sustainable development became sustainability and, again, how sustainability morphed into green capitalism. From the alternative margins this historical process had a completely different face: it started with "limits to growth", it moved towards zero growth and from zero growth to degrowth.

The neutralization of environmentalism via its social normalization, however, did not start with the diverse and successive shapes and drapes worn by sustainable development: Conservation itself experienced this instrumentalization. The first symptoms of systemic ecological distress shown by the dominant modern political and economic model can be found in the last years of the nineteenth century. These years witness the emergence of the first environmental protection movements, precursors of everything we have today (Lemkow and Buttel 1983; Bramwell 1989; Vincent 1992; Dunlap and Mertig 1992; Duban 2000). The first environmentalist societies are constituted in the United States during that period (*Sierra Club* in 1892 and the *National Audubon Society* in 1905). Of that initial phase its most significant legacy is the creation of protected areas promoted first in the US but quickly exported to the rest of the world. This first conservationist model, public and modern, differs from previous protectionist movements, mainly European, that focused on guaranteeing the preservation of agrarian or forest resources. This new model had a strong ethical base. For the first time there is a consciousness of the destructive capacity of humankind and of the ethical obligation to preserve nature from its voracity. A new moral imperative was created: duties toward nature and toward future generations. In the US this emerging focus on the preservation of pristine nature pivoted around two views. On the one hand we encounter preservationist views: an ethical call to preserve a romantic and transcendent nature. This movement was articulated around well-known figures like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and John Muir. This view defended the need to establish protected natural areas without human presence, and had a strong religious component as they continuously emphasised the spiritual values of nature and regarded nature as God's temple. On the other hand we encounter the conservationist wing of early environmentalism, characterized by the emphasis on the preservation of resources and heralded by Gifford Pinchot, first head of the US Forest Service and advocate of the efficient use of the nation's natural resources. Both trends were part of the initial push of modern conservation, although Pinchot's conservationism prevailed in national parks management. In any case, what is important is that both encapsulated a certain level of ecocriticism directed at the prevalent economic model these movements perceived as a threat. Capitalism, with its ever increasing demand of raw materials and the privatization of space, was contributing to the rapid destruction of landscapes everywhere. In this context, the firsts conserva-

tionist petitions, reconnected to capitalism and nationalism joined the romantic ideal of creating paradises.

This first ecocritical movement focused on, in expanding the Yellowstone spirit, preserving certain limited spaces from anthropogenic threats. Almost 150 years later it is difficult to evaluate this process. On the one hand protected areas have grown exponentially. Today 20.6 million square kilometers of the global surface (15.4%), and 12 million square kilometers of sea (3.4%) are protected (UNEP 2014). This, of course, is a quantitative success and resounding conservation success. But, on the other hand, the increase of protected area declarations has not stopped the accelerated loss of biodiversity (Mora and Sale 2011). One of the Millennium goals (7.B) was to slow down and stop biodiversity loss. Qualitatively speaking, something has failed. The conservationist success and defeat are two sides of the same coin and are a clear example of how potentially subversive proposals can be integrated without questioning or modifying the pillars of the socioeconomic system that are, in fact, the real issue and origin of the detected problems. It is the system that is failing. Its pillars do not guarantee the planet's sustainability. It goes without saying that "out there" there are numerous alternative discourses about progress, development, and sustainability: key movements or concepts such as deep ecology, eco-sufficiency, ecotopia, green belt, indigenous cosmopolitics, and people like Naes, Prigogyne, Stengers, Shiva, Mies, de la Cadena. We acknowledge their existence and their importance. This article, however, focuses on the symbolic violence implemented on key environmentalist concepts when they were exported as commodities into modern capitalistic mainstream political arenas.

In any case, nineteenth century's ecocriticism succeeded in consolidating the environmental protection project and its ideological foundation - the declaration of discrete protected areas - informed a mainstream major policy program. Very much in the same way, the 1960s and 70s ecocriticism that we have analyzed in these pages, has translated into important changes in policy agendas across the globe.

The arrival of "sustainable development" was an official recognition that things were not going so well. Its subsequent conceptual reconversions up to the arrival of the green economy have been attempts to salvage the dominant model by subsuming the constant pressure of counterhegemonic discourses (Bernstein 2012). The strategies implemented by the large transnational corporations have proven that development, sustainability, and green economy are subject to market regulations and have reduced these concepts to marketing and corporate image (Sabin 2013). In the context of advanced neoliberalism we are not surprised by the images of large multinationals signing agreements with conservation NGOs (Rio Tinto London Limited- IUCN), sponsoring Earth Summits (Coca Cola), or writing a Decalogue of their commitment to sustainability (IKEA). These three cases are examples of formulae designed to contain the model's fractures. Rio Tinto, one of the world's largest mining corporations, cleanses its image through IUCN while continuing its massive extraction of minerals all over the globe. Coca Cola attempts to look good funding international green conferences while avoiding any hard environmental commitments. Finally, IKEA promotes their commitment towards sustainability ("For a more Sustainable Future") while exacerbating overconsumption through the permanent renovation of our furniture ("Renew Your Life with IKEA", "Life is a Catalogue of Novelties", or "Adapt your Bedroom to each Season"). Meanwhile the political answers are equally intangible. They are subjected to the economic demands of the big players and introduce impossible confining mechanisms.

The pernicious results of carbon emissions trading is just a case of the political paradoxes of regulating the symptoms without questioning the true causes. The green economy and the arrival of a new green PIB both seem a bit like more of the same old thing. The fundamental issue is in recognizing that our system does not work. It is not about small correction measures: it is about recognizing that the model we exported all over the globe is based on accumulation, resource overuse, overconsumption, and unequal access to resources, and consequently, is unsustainable from a social and ecological perspective. Our communities are facing an impasse, perhaps today more than ever, and we need far more than the political and economic rhetoric of a green economy.

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