



History of Sustainability: Reading and Discussion Notes

by

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1. Overview and Rationale

Sustainability may eventually be seen as one of the most significant conceptual developments of the twentieth century. With a present [world population of 6.9 billion](#) likely to [reach 9 billion by mid-twenty-first century](#) and with economic growth and consumerism putting mounting pressure on the earth's life support system, it is not difficult to see why some experts such as Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute are describing our civilization as "on the [Edge of Environmental and Economic Collapse](#)."

In this [History Center in Tompkins County](#) seminar, we shall consider the ways in which the sustainability concept has come about, both in the literal sense of the timing of the main propositions and in terms of some of the major agreements and disputes that have arisen about the usefulness or appropriateness of sustainability as a concept. In this March 10 discussion, we shall examine Simon Dresner's *The Principles of Sustainability*. I believe the Desner book will set a good stage for your discussions of [Ronald Wright's A Short History of Progress](#), a book with a broader scope and reach that will place the sustainability concept within the context of world history more generally. Or maybe you will see it differently.

2. Structure of the book

I recommend we focus our discussion on certain points raised in the book – however, you should feel free to bring up any sections or specific issues you want.

- Pages 1–74. History of the sustainability concept from [The Enlightenment](#) to the present. We will focus most of our discussion on this section of the book. Let's try to get a clear picture of why sustainability became an important idea and what are its most commonly understood meanings.
- Pages 75–120. Topics and debates in sustainability and economics. Let's focus on the two issues of
 - Sustainability and (versus?) economic growth
 - Sustainability and (versus?) equity (in terms of rich and poor; in terms of generations – in terms of anything else?)
- Pages 121–136. Sustainability and ethics. Some overlap here with the equity discussion in the previous section. Let's try to grasp the main idea of [John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*](#), how it connects to sustainability and whether you find it convincing.
- Pages 137–173 (the end of the text). If we have time after the discussions above, I recommend that we focus on [Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History?*](#), since it is the best known and most commonly cited of the three theories Dresner contrasts here.

3. Discussion questions

3.1 Why do you think the author spends time considering intellectual views from the Enlightenment and/or [Romantic](#) periods? Did any particular earlier thinker resonate especially in your view after you read the later discussion of the [Brundtland Report](#) and other recent documents on sustainability?

3.2 What does the famous debate between Malthus and Marx (and Engels) have to do with modern sustainability?

3.3 Based on what is in the book, or also with other knowledge about her, if you have it, how does [Rachel Carson](#) and her book [Silent Spring](#), fit into the concept of sustainability?

3.4 What (North-South) problem did the Brundtland Commission (The World Commission on Environment and Development) have to solve? How well did they do?

3.5 What seem to have been the main achievements and main shortcomings of the Rio Conference (also known as [The Earth Summit](#) and Agenda 21)

3.6 What major achievements and problems have arisen since the Rio Conference – that is, where are we at now in your view?

3.7 How does [Herman Daly's](#) “steady state economics” differ from the approach to sustainability taken by the Brundtland Commission? Are there ways in which it is the same?

3.8 Why is recent “happiness research” possibly of importance to advocates of sustainability?

3.9 What is the main fault line between classical economists and sustainability advocates? Does this hold for sustainability advocates and Marxism? Do you see a way to reach a meeting of the minds between either set of opponents?

3.10 Why are “externalities” a problem for classical economists?

3.11 How might Herman Daly's “principles” of the steady-state economy operationalize the concept of sustainability? [see page 83]

3.12 CAN we put a [price on the planet](#)?

3.13 How would you explain the connection between equity and sustainability? Why is this an issue in the literature?

3.14 What is the fundamental assumption of John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*? Do you see it as relevant to sustainability?

3.15 What does Rawls mean by the “[difference principal](#)” and what does it have to do with sustainability?

3.16 Why does Dresner apparently believe that socialism has nothing to offer to the sustainability movement? Or does he?

3.17 What kind of society do we see at Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*? Does Dresner seem to think such a society is sustainable? Do you? Why or why not?

3.18 What do you see as the main pros and main cons of a program of “relocalization?” How might this apply to Ithaca and Tompkins County, sites now somewhat well known as centers of sustainability?

4. Definitions of Sustainability

See Dresner, pages 31–35 for the definition(s) in the Brundtland Report

See Dresner, page 83 for Herman Daly’s operational definition

Some other definitions: do you want to comment on their strengths and/or weaknesses?

<p>1. “The principal conditions of a stable society – one that...can be sustained indefinitely while giving optimum satisfaction to its members – are: (1) minimum disruption of ecological processes; (2) maximum conservation of materials and energy...(3) a population in which recruitment equals loss; and (4) a social system in which the individual can enjoy, rather than feel restricted by, the first three conditions” (Goldsmith et al. 1972:23). Goldsmith, Edward, Allen, Robert, Allaby Michael, Davoll, John, and Lawrence, Sam (Editors of <i>The Ecologist</i>). 1972. <i>Blueprint for Survival</i>. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.</p>
<p>2. “Sustainable society is one that lives within the self-perpetuating limits of its environment. That society ... is not a no-growth society. ... It is, rather a society that recognizes the limits of growth... (and) looks for alternative ways of growing. (Coomer 1979:1). Coomer, James C. 1979. <i>The Nature of the Quest for a Sustainable Society</i>. In Coomer, James C., ed. <i>Quest for a Sustainable Society</i>. New York: Pergamon Press. Published in cooperation with The Woodlands Conference.</p>
<p>3. “Sustainable development – development that is likely to achieve lasting satisfaction of human needs and improvement of the quality of human life...” (Allen 1980:23). Allen, Robert. 1980. <i>How to Save the World: Strategy for World Conservation</i>. Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books.</p>
<p>4. “Sustainability...a symbiotic relationship with nature. Development must operate within the constraints of local ecosystems. It must maintain and encourage biotic diversity as an insurance for the future. Essentially, it must be ecologically sustainable in terms of local ecosystems and the biosphere.” (Dasmann 1984:20). Dasmann, Raymond F. 1984. <i>An introduction to world conservation</i>. In Thibodeau, Francis R. and Field, Hermann H., eds., <i>Sustaining Tomorrow: A Strategy for World Conservation and Development</i>. Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England. Pp. 16–24.</p>
<p>5. “The market does not distinguish an ecological sustainable scale of matter-energy throughput from an unsustainable scale, just as it does not distinguish between ethically just and unjust distributions of income. Sustainability, like justice, is a value not achievable by purely individualistic market processes” (Daly 1986:320). Daly Herman E. 1986. <i>Thermodynamic and Economic Concept as Related to Resource-Use Policies: Comment</i>. <i>Land Economics</i> 62(3):319–22.</p>
<p>6. “The primary objective [of sustainable economic development] is reducing the absolute poverty of the world’s poor through providing lasting and secure livelihoods that minimize resource depletion, environmental degradation, cultural disruption, and social instability” (Barbier 1987:103). Barbier, Edward. 1987. <i>The concept of sustainable economic development</i>. <i>Environmental Conservation</i>. 14(2):101–110.</p>
<p>7. “Sustainable economic development maximizes the goals across the biological and resource system, the economic system, and the social system” (Barbier 1987:104). Same source as 6 above.</p>
<p>8. “A social definition of sustainability might include the continued satisfaction basic human needs—food, water, shelter—as well as higher level social and cultural necessities such as security, freedom, education, employment and recreation” (Brown et al 1987:716). Brown, Becky. J., Hanson, Mark. E., Liverman, Diana. M., and Merideth, Robert W. Jr. 1987. <i>Global sustainability: Toward definition</i>. <i>Environmental Management</i> 11(6):713–19.</p>
<p>9. “Sustainability must be defined in terms of productivity and management...” (Carpenter and Harper 1989:44). Carpenter, R.A. and Harper, D. E. 1989. <i>Towards a science of sustainable upland management in developing countries</i>. <i>Environmental Management</i> 13(1): 43–54.</p>
<p>10. Sustainable development is “a pattern of social and structural transformation...which optimizes the economic and other societal benefits available in the present without jeopardizing the likely potential for similar benefits in the future” (Goodland and Ledec 1987:36). Goodland,</p>

<p>Robert, and Ledec, George. 1987. Neoclassical economics and principles of sustainable development. <i>Ecological Modeling</i> 38:19–46.</p>
<p>11. "...development which allows all future generations to have a potential average quality of life at least as high as the average quality of life of the current generation....quality of life depends on traditional material consumption as well as on leisure, environment quality and so on (Norwegian Research Council for Science and Humanities [NAVF] 1990:233 cited in Lafferty and Langhelle 1999:8) Lafferty, William M., and Langhelle, Oluf. 1999. Sustainable development as concept and norm. In Lafferty, William M. and Langhelle, Oluf, eds. <i>Towards Sustainable Development: On the Goals of Development – and the Conditions of Sustainability</i>. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc. Pp. 1–29.</p>
<p>12...a community's control of capital, in all of its forms – natural, human, human-created, social, and cultural – to ensure to the degree possible that present and future generations can attain a high degree of economic security and achieve democracy while maintaining the integrity of the ecological systems upon which all life and production depend. Stephen Viederman 1995 as published by the World Conservation Union. Viederman, Stephen. 1995. Knowledge for sustainable development: what do we need to know? In Trzyna, Thaddeus C., ed., <i>A Sustainable World: Defining and Measuring Sustainable Development</i>. Sacramento and Claremont CA: Published for The World Conservation Union by the International Center for the Environment and Public Policy of the California Institute of Public Affairs. Pp. 37–43. Quote from page 35.</p>

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If you would like to see my recent writings on sustainability and on racism, go to:

<http://chss.montclair.edu/anthro/frankerecentwritings.htm>

My publications (many can be downloaded free):

<http://chss.montclair.edu/anthro/franke.html>

My current blog on the Sustainable Tompkins Website:

<http://sustainabletompkins.org/sustainability-blog/a-safe-operating-space-can-we-measure-it-can-we-maintain-it/>

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I would be pleased to hear from any of you at any time.