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# Article

## ***Is There a Crisis of Sustainable Development?***

**Edward Sankowski and Betty J. Harris\***

*This article argues that there is a crisis of sustainable development. Sustainable development may mean a value system, but also may mean a set of societal development processes, manifested in political economy and culture. One crisis of sustainable development in either meaning arises from a combination of elements under neoliberalism. We stress three. (1) Sustainable development includes complex demands about justice. These involve conflicts among neoliberal justice and rival more philosophically plausible concepts of justice. (2) Care for the environment (basic to sustainable development) is complex, and generates multiple sometimes, conflicting demands on decision-making. (3)*

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*Persisting unresolved conflicts from the Cold War period continue to generate normative issues about political economy and culture. This suggests that attention must be paid to ethical conflicts unresolved with the “end” of the Cold War, (conflicts grown sharper today, given neoliberalism), if we are to understand and resolve one main crisis of sustainable development.*

**1.**

This paper argues that there is a crisis of sustainable development. (That is, there is at least one such crisis, as we will mostly continue to phrase it; or there are a number of related crises). To call this a crisis is not to shorten the time frame of the events. At a minimum, the crisis of sustainable development as addressed here extends from the 1980s to the present and the immediate future. As we discuss later, sustainable development may mean a value system, but also may mean a set of societal development processes, manifested in the political economy and culture. The crisis of sustainable development in either meaning arises from a combination of elements. We mention three elements next.

**2.**

One element of the crisis is that sustainable development in its canonical form as a value system includes complex demands about justice (sometimes “equity”). If we take justice seriously (not, for example, in its neoliberal versions, which are implausible from a normative ethics point of view) the requirements of sustainable development will tend to be either puzzling as to what their content and priorities are, or if made definite, complex and quite likely rather radical if the wording of the value system is taken seriously. If radical, then the gap between sustainable development and actual global political economy and culture will be so great that one type of crisis is discernible, a vast gap between affirmed values and social reality.

Another element of the crisis (or crises) of sustainable development is that the notion of care for the environment (so basic to sustainable development in its canonical form) is quite complex and generates multiple demands on decision-making. This is a point well made by Amartya Sen, particularly in an article published in *The New Republic* (Sen 2014). Beyond the examples stressed by Sen, we need to cope with not only global warming, but atmospheric pollution, threats to biodiversity, problems of urbanization, agriculture, population growth, mass immigration, land reform, etc. Many such

environmentalist demands will also have radical implications. Not least, dealing with poverty on much of the planet requires economic development, plausibly construed, as Sen says. There is arguably a “right to sustainable development” or something akin to that, which has force about poorer regions of the world.

Another element of one type of crisis of sustainable development is that continuing unresolved results from the Cold War period continue to raise normative issues about political economy and culture. Those conflicts were and are conflicts of power politics (as we might phrase it) but they were and are also to some extent conflicts of normative ethics and normative socio-political visions, however much of those visions were submerged in mere conflicts of power. Capitalism has not been entirely reducible to crude greed, and Adam Smith was much subtler than typically understood; communism has never been entirely reducible to state-bureaucratic lust for control, and Karl Marx was far deeper than that. (Putting it this way does not imply a false equivalence between capitalism and communism.) This suggests that some attention must be paid to ethical issues unresolved with the “end” of the Cold War, if we are to understand the crisis of socio-economic development depicted as a crisis of sustainable development.

### 3.

The crisis of sustainable development can be considered a global legitimation crisis, a crisis of the world system. The crisis can be articulated in part by interpreting the relationship in recent decades (mainly from the 1980s to the present) between sustainable development and the apparent end of the Cold War between capitalism and communism (and the expansion of what this essay calls neoliberalism, e.g., especially as marked in the U.S. and UK by the Reagan and Thatcher regimes, with their consequences for other parts of the world).

We stress two features of sustainable development that are actually indissolubly conjoined if both are well understood: environmentalism and the social justice commitments of sustainable development. In some circumstances, environmentalism in a less than robust form is advocated in a way that downplays the social justice aspects of sustainable development. This generates one crisis within sustainable development as a value system or set of social processes. For real-world sustainable development to live up to its more attractive and demanding value-system versions, the multiple demands of environmentalism must be acknowledged and integrated with an ideal of global social

justice that has dimensions never yet adequately expressed and supported, but about which we around the world have some shared intuitions. The intuitions, if shared by any of multiple groups, may well prompt constructive social activism. The results of such an integration of environmentalism and global social justice would suggest some ways in which the ideologies and practices of Cold War capitalism and communism (sometimes expressed in hot wars by proxy) were both seriously defective. Moreover, the self-styled victory of capitalism with the end of the Cold War (as well as the recent metamorphoses of capitalism) still leaves us with neither an adequate environmentalism nor social justice in critically adequate formulations (nor do we have a plausible route to greater social justice and more plausible care for the environment). Liberal democracy in its primarily capitalist versions is dramatically failing adequately to address problems of environmentalism or social justice, or their combination. In some cases, notoriously, liberal democracy is apparently in danger of devolving into authoritarian “illiberal democracy.” The problem is not, as Francis Fukuyama apparently now wishes to argue, something about identity politics and “the politics of resentment” (Fukuyama 2018). Rather, conditions for the ethical legitimacy of the global order will be impossible to understand or approximate in real practices unless sustainable development or some more truthful and stronger successor doctrine and set of processes gains traction internationally.

#### 4.

The mention of Fukuyama is worth briefly elaborating on. With the supposed end of the Cold War, Fukuyama argued that ideology had ended, and he anticipated the increasing international role of liberal democracy, conjoined with a market economy (Fukuyama 1992). Fukuyama now (in 2018) regards his earlier self (at that time of capitalist triumphalism) as “conservative,” a phase he apparently now thinks he has outgrown. (His arguments and rhetoric, however, suggest otherwise.) Fukuyama appears now to be engaging in a re-thinking of his earlier views about the end of the Cold War and the subsequent problems faced by the world system, despite what appeared to be the victory of liberal democracy plus markets and the end of ideology. We will not launch into a detailed discussion of Fukuyama. But he is relevant to our essay particularly because he has seriously underestimated the moral flaws of what he called the market economy, including its worst threats to the environment and justice, and has failed to understand the potential for neoliberal and authoritarian “populist” excesses of evolving capitalist political

economy. Fukuyama misdiagnoses the ills of the current time because he avoids a critique of neoliberalism and rather turns to criticism of ideas about identity politics.

## 5.

We do find it interesting also that a Marxist critic of Fukuyama, Slavoj Žižek, has repeatedly criticized Fukuyama's end of ideology view. What is most relevant about Žižek to this essay is an environmentalist/social justice aspect of part of Žižek's critique of Fukuyama. On Žižek's view, one of the apocalyptic features of our current global situation is that there is an environmental catastrophe looming, as well as major problems of social justice symbolized most dramatically by widespread apartheid (whether or not South Africa in particular has ended legal apartheid), walls and exclusion (Žižek 2016). (The Trump example of a wall between the U.S. and Mexico is instructive in this regard.) The end of the Cold War and the ascendancy of markets, particularly in their global capitalist forms, for Žižek, only continued and accelerated problems of justice and environmentalism.

Moreover, Žižek shows some signs of subscribing to a deflationary, negative view about sustainable development. He suggests that the global antagonism between the Included (more privileged) and the Excluded (those impoverished, the refugees, etc.) is the key one for understanding four dimensions of apocalypse: "without it, all others lose their subversive edge. Ecology turns into a problem of sustainable development..." (Žižek 2016: 113). For Žižek, it seems that sustainable development is an ideological construct, in a Marxist sense of ideology (supplemented by Lacanian psychoanalysis, in Žižek's version). The key global antagonism, according to Žižek, "is ultimately a question of justice" (Žižek 2016: 114).

It is of particular interest that in his attempt to reformulate "communism" for the current moment, Žižek stresses the concept of "the commons" and egalitarianism, while apparently regarding the real politics of twentieth-century communism as having come to a dead end. "The enclosure of the commons" is used as a metaphor by Žižek for (unjust) privatization in many domains of the contemporary global political economy and culture. The historical metaphorical allusion to land enclosures suggests what should be emphasized as part of environmentalism: major environmental topics include not only problems about global warming and air pollution, but also frequently connected problems

about land ownership and land use. All this is at once very abstract and metaphorical, but suggestive.

What is missing from Žižek's scheme is a more definite positive strategy and action plan that would link (among other matters) the overcoming of and progress beyond capitalism with either enhanced justice and/or improved environmental conditions. Independently of all this, Žižek still displays ample interest in mulling over the history and documents of twentieth century communism and/or Marxist theorists (of one sort or another) ambiguously related to actual societal phenomena with "communist" dimensions. What this suggests to the authors of this article is that (despite his occasional protestations to the contrary) Žižek wants to retrieve something of value from twentieth-century Marxism and real-world communism that possibly survives the end of the Cold War, something that might help supply a direction for current theory and practice. That is still an obscure object of desire, but clearly justice and improvements meeting environmental concerns are part of what he wants to advance. But as yet, he says most about critique of ideology rather than definite proposed alternatives. Moreover, he seems aware of this lack.

Our way of interpreting Žižek on the environment and social justice fits in with our general view that the end of the Cold War should be understood as crucial for defining and evaluating sustainable development. Indeed, unless we all come to understand the implications of the end of the Cold War not only for formerly communist countries, but also for the West (and other parts of the world), we will be lacking in understanding of the problems and possibilities for sustainable development, and lacking in understanding of the crisis of sustainable development.

## 6.

Referring to sustainable development, as already indicated above, may designate a value system or a set of social processes. The classical explicit formulation of the value system is in the Brundtland Report of 1987, a collective product of a three-year effort by The World Commission on Environment and Development, a United Nations commission composed of representatives from various countries, some capitalist, some communist, some non-aligned. The effort was coordinated by Gro Harlem Brundtland.

The Brundtland Report has been notably updated in a sense by the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals, but these "SDGs" do not seem to have replaced much of the basic Brundtland Report value system, except by some elaboration of an account of

normative priorities (United Nations 2015). Here the truth becomes more complicated. While in a sense the basic value system might be the same or similar in the Brundtland Report and in the 2015 SDGs, the 2015 SDGs have occasioned criticisms about their allegedly implausible assumptions and the absence of a critical dimension about neoliberal capitalism. “An Open Letter to the United Nations,” signed by various critics including Noam Chomsky, Thomas Pogge, and others, exemplifies such criticisms. They write:

As the UN and the world’s governments ratify the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) today (September 25), we must be clear that they do not represent the best interests of the world’s majority—those that are currently exploited and oppressed within the current economic and political order....

It is possible to overcome poverty in a way that respects the Earth and helps tackle climate change. The planet is abundant in wealth and its people infinitely resourceful. In order to do so, however, we must be prepared to challenge the logic of endless growth, greed and destruction enshrined in neoliberal capitalism.

It is time to envision a new operating system, based on social justice and symbiosis with the natural world. As currently formulated, the SDGs merely distract us from addressing the challenges we face. (Ladha 2015)

Before and after the issuing of the Brundtland Report, the world was undergoing changes that might be summarized as increasing global capitalist marketization. The so-called end of the Cold War diminished the anxieties of some persons in many parts of the world about the conflict between capitalism and communism. Fears of nuclear confrontation somewhat subsided, for a time. Even in societies such as China, with its official Marxist self-understanding, socialism with Chinese characteristics came to include an important role for “markets” (in some sense of the term). In much of the former Soviet bloc, e.g., Poland from 1989 on, explicit emphasis on free markets became common.<sup>1</sup>

It seemed, in 1989 and later, especially to many observers in the primarily capitalist world, that capitalism had won. Some, such as Francis Fukuyama, optimistically projected a bright future for liberal democratic societal organization that included (and for many, still is said to include) what were interpreted as capitalist market institutions (Fukuyama 1992).



In retrospect, as is widely though not universally conceded, much of the optimism seems to have been questionable. Market ideology intensified to the point that some saw capitalist markets as in many respects preferably replacing the functions of the democratic state. The value system of democracy has come to seem all too often irrelevant to the real course of events, too often “ideological” in the bad sense. (And might this apply to many pronouncements about “sustainable development,” as Žižek implies?) Some contemporary commentators emphasize the early 1980s as the beginnings of an intensifying of what is often called neoliberalism. It is characteristic of neoliberalism to identify justice, in particular, with what would result from the workings of a well-arranged market economy (and presumably accompanying institutions). At the very least, neoliberalism must by definition assume that much of social activity should accept and abide by the logic of capitalist markets. (Admittedly, what markets exactly consist in is less clear than is often assumed by apostles of marketization, or even by critics of markets.)

7.

During the period of increasing marketization, sustainable development also came to be widely invoked as a value system. Between 1987 and the present (as we write in 2018) countries with very varied political economic arrangements (and many types of institutions, governmental and non-governmental) declared themselves in favor of sustainable development. There were objections by some individuals and groups to the value system, to be sure, but it is striking how much (at least in a verbal sense) sustainable development became an element in a frequently affirmed global framework that for most countries included a major and growing role for “markets.”

Justice considerations, however, clearly could never really be reduced to the processes and outcomes of markets, even idealized markets. Adapting a version of philosopher G.E. Moore’s “open question” argument (devised by Moore for a different ethical purpose), it would always be meaningful to ask about the processes and outcomes of markets, or market-centered political economies, “Is this just?” (Moore 1903).

8.

To recapitulate, sustainable development as a value system, as enunciated in the Brundtland Report, had two major parts. In part it was an expression of multifaceted concern with an intention to address globally shared problems about environmental issues

broadly construed. In a second respect, sustainable development was also an expression of concern and attempt to address problems about equity or social justice (and justice in varied contexts, some intra-national, some international). Oddly, some later environmentalist (and other) writers overlook or downplay the full and explicit social justice component of sustainable development. This is not solely a matter of justice among the current generation and future generations (as is often emphasized), but also a matter of justice among contemporaries, within the nation-state, and on a global scale. An anti-poverty goal was always fundamental to sustainable development. That is even more obvious in the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

Sustainable development, however, as presented in the Brundtland Report, was never advanced together with any philosophically sophisticated or pragmatically powerful account of social justice. The Brundtland Report stressed priority for assistance to the worst off, and made many normative ethical and normative political judgments about particular problems, but offered no normatively detailed analysis or justification for its nonetheless often intuitively plausible claims about justice. Yet its claims about justice resonated powerfully among many persons, even as the claims were typically disregarded by corporate or bureaucratic elites in practice. The Brundtland Report addressed itself to all persons, but also to trans-national corporations, as if such organizations might come to be more sincerely and effectively mindful of the demands of social justice and environmentalism.

The drift of the Brundtland Report on sustainable development was and is that the world faces “A Common Future.” This can be interpreted (admittedly somewhat speculatively) as a suggestion that the world political economy (along with worldwide various cultures) can be conceived as a system that generates reasons, even moral obligations, which imply that the better-off parts of the world should assist the worse-off, especially the worst-off. The Brundtland Report emphasizes assistance for the worst-off.

The prematurely hailed end of communism then left the more capitalist countries with often-alleged obligations to assist (or in some accounts, buy off or buy up) the worse-off communist countries, if the latter would accept such assistance or such a sale. We might ponder the situation of West Germany after re-unification, desiring but even (by its own lights) obligated to include the formerly communist East in its development plans. True enough, there were formerly national and cultural affinities in this case between the capitalist and formerly communist regions that made it plausible to have the attitude that

development after re-unification must include poorer regions. It is much more difficult to persuade societies that they have obligations to worse-off societies (even badly worse-off societies) where there is an absence of such affinities as existed in the German re-unification case. Within the European Union, at times struggling to foster attitudes favoring mutual aid among member states, it is often far more difficult to persuade better-off member states to provide substantial assistance to economically worse-off states (e.g., capitalist Switzerland with regard to formerly socialist/communist Poland, or more well-known, Germany with regard to Greece).

Where barriers of bigoted race-consciousness are a factor, as in South Africa, and pervasively but often more ideologically obscured elsewhere, the loss of Soviet support (after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of Russian communism) for the anti-apartheid revolutionaries (such as Nelson Mandela and Joe Slovo) did not, with the end of legal apartheid, result in an upwelling of sentiments among key players within the white minority to overcome huge economic inequalities rooted in part in racial and ethnic differences, which obviously persist. The lesser iconic figures beyond Mandela symbolize the changes from a movement allied with the Soviet Union for some purposes, as with Slovo's membership in the South African Communist Party, and his military training in the Soviet Union; Thabo Mbeki's neoliberalism; Jacob Zuma's authoritarian corruption; and Cyril Ramaphosa's post-transformation personal wealth derived from business.

In South Africa, land reform addressing racial injustice is one major continuing unresolved issue that can be regarded as combining social justice and environmentalist concerns, both said to be aspects of sustainable development. No apparent dynamic of global or domestic capitalist markets arose after the end of formal apartheid to boost movement significantly toward cross-racial equality. That is not at all to assume that Soviet influence, if it had persisted, would have contributed to better results; that we do not know. It does seem, nonetheless, that within the circumstances of a global political economy dominated by neo-liberalism, and given domestic South African property arrangements inherited from the apartheid era, formal legal equality and "democratic" elections have not been enough to overcome prior political/economic inequality and cultural/racial differences. Signs that Cyril Ramaphosa might move forward on land reform were met with recent criticisms from the current Trump administration in the U.S., despite Trump's tendency towards insistence on the value of national sovereignty. Apparently national sovereignty does not, for Trump, imply that South Africans should be left to address their

own major problems about land distribution and housing. Trump, of course, also exaggerated the problem of murders of white farmers in South Africa, thereby attempting to further inflame racial divisions in both South Africa and the U.S. The most recent phase of capitalist practice in the U.S. combines increasingly authoritarian capitalism in the political economy, along with sometimes concealed neoliberalism, with racism on the cultural front, and there have been attempts to export elements of all this in U.S. influence abroad.

9.

Trump's own erratic decision-making about economic policy, including his ad hoc decisions about tariffs, constitutes an odd phase in the global capitalist order. His policies could reasonably be construed as a thorough-going repudiation of the value system of sustainable development as expressed in the Brundtland Report and the 2015 SDGs. One might have thought that such incursions as Trump's into the "market" economy, incursions by a U.S. President, would be widely regarded as questionable by market fundamentalists. To some extent, among his followers, Trump's self-proclaimed savvy as a businessman (despite his track record of bankruptcies) arguably provides mass psychological and propagandistic cover amongst many Trump supporters about what might otherwise be regarded as governmental interference with free markets. Probably Trump's furthering of tax cuts for the wealthy and environmental protection deregulation, particularly his championing of fossil fuel industries against concerns by environmentally progressive elements, and his desire for governmental/corporate appropriation of public land for private economic exploitation, have reduced major anxieties or suspicions among his most influential supporters, in the donor class and among economically humbler-status folk, (had doubts much have ever arisen) that Trump is violating pieties about free market capitalism. There is money to be made by the fortunately situated under the circumstances of the Trump administration, and this overcomes the qualms that might have been greater among the well-off. Indeed, the ideology of free market capitalism moving along without governmental favors has always been illusory, and has probably been recognized as illusory by cynical profiteers. There is now a comparative absence (compared with the Cold War period) of communist alternatives abroad (with the possible exception of China, which now has its own version of a political economy that includes markets) that might seriously threaten capitalist hegemony within the U.S. Talk of "socialism" in the U.S. is often the

expression of a desire to hold onto or recover benefits for everyday people of an FDR New Deal type. The absence of the most threatening oppositional politics after the diminishment, end, or alteration of communism (with China, for example, at times becoming perceived as a troublesome trade partner in global market relations rather than a power threatening to infiltrate the U.S. system) allows the eccentric behavior of Trump, a kleptocratic, authoritarian would-be strongman, to represent the viewpoint of U.S. capitalism to an often bewildered assortment of liberal democratic and other world leaders and global institutions. However, there are also some current signs of what is beginning to be called a new Cold War between China and the U.S., manifested, e.g., in charges that China has been trying to infiltrate U.S. universities through its influence on educational programs.

How U.S. political economy and culture descended to the level of Trumpism is a long story, which many have been trying to write, but which is beyond our scope here. Trump deserves mention, however, since he has managed both to savage the environment and worsen economic inequality, and thus his program runs entirely counter even to comparatively moderate versions of sustainable development. At the same time, there are many elements of the U.S. system (even some for-profit corporations) that officially subscribe to sustainable development as a value system. This is so at a time when Trump is obviously a supporter of fossil fuels and a global warming denier.

Now there is no absolutely obvious reason, (causally or normatively construed), why global corporate capitalism would necessarily have to favor fossil fuels and climate change denial. No reason to be assigned without further explanation, that is, but rather there is the hugely consequential contingent fact of the strategic and influential position of the fossil fuel industry in the world economy. On September 9, 2018, even the Swedish national elections resulted in a major advance of an extreme-right party that is sympathetic to fossil fuel use. Not only is there much money concentrated in the global fossil fuel industry, decisions across borders by interests that are invested in fossil fuels are a potential rallying point for coordinated action (on matters beyond energy) that improves the prospects of those in the fossil fuel industry and its associated businesses. Obviously, all taken together, this is a very powerful force for environmental damage, damage that will unjustly affect differently various countries, regions, individuals, generations, and so on. There are plenty of unjustly distributed negative externalities here. Given the unjust and contra-environmentalist configuration of the global socio-economic order, it may be our

best collective hope that not only ethically motivated activism, but also self-interested resistance by some coalition of public entities and private corporate entities (and even some foundations such as the Rockefeller Brothers Fund) will counter the influence of the fossil-fuel industries and their associated business allies. There are some signs of this.

## 10.

Then too, with some disturbing parallels to Trumpism in the capitalist U.S., some of the countries that were once hailed as liberated in the transformation from communism to free market capitalism are now frequently denounced as illiberal democracies. A clear example is to be found in some of the so-called Visegrad countries, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. The clearest example of a self-avowed “illiberal democracy” is Viktor Orbán’s Hungary. However, contemporary Poland is often suspected (fairly or unfairly) of illiberal one-party tendencies. It is notable that Poland, the Czech Republic, etc., also have records as countries with major environmental problems. Within Poland, moreover, there is major economic inequality, e.g., manifested by the division between urban and rural areas, and so-called Poland A (better off economically) and Poland B (worse off economically). Global capitalism has not addressed this situation adequately (although the EU has provided some assistance to Poland) Thereby global capitalism is de facto encouraging the one-party-rule-tending “populist” nationalism decried by those more sympathetic to global capitalism than is (perhaps) the current ruling party in Poland. Arguably, by tolerating or worsening economic inequality, global neoliberal capitalism has contributed to widespread fears and insecurities in many places. These fears and insecurities are very probably part of what has inclined electorates in various troubled would-be democracies to support authoritarian leaders and parties. The authoritarians tend to make misleading promises of economic help to some insecure components of their populations. The authoritarians tend also to promise greater support to some features of “private” property systems and greater support to elected economic sectors that are under pressure. The authoritarians tend to appeal to the desires of many for the preservation of aspects of cultures that have often been dominant but which are threatened by potentially changing circumstances. Such a pattern fits the U.S. and Brazil, for example. By now, there are many examples of apparently authoritarian tendencies advancing in countries formerly saluted in Western media as models of developing liberal democracy combined with free market capitalism, cushioned to some extent by welfare state benefits; (authoritarian parties

gaining support even in Germany and Italy). This can, of course, be interpreted as a social justice problem, since democratic political arrangements can reasonably be regarded as an embodiment of social justice in the distribution of a good, political power. Further east, in the European land-mass, of course, is Russia, with its political authoritarianism, its oligarchs frequently having enriched themselves by seizing advantages during the decline of communism; and indebted to crony “capitalism,” its show of elections that affirm autocracy, and its fossil-fuel commitments as well as its ambitions for expansion and desire for greater global influence. Many of the authoritarian or authoritarian-tending countries have serious environmental problems. “Market economies,” including descendants of the Soviet Union and Soviet bloc national systems, albeit with major structural transformations themselves in their political economies, all the while often denominate themselves as free market democracies. As communism in its paradigmatic twentieth-century forms recedes into the past in many places, though taking on some new forms, it becomes more and more difficult to blame environmental problems on prior communism and its aftermath. “Capitalist democracies” increasingly own the problems, and in many places, the democratic part of the picture is also shaky under a combination of neoliberal or authoritarian capitalism (sometimes capitalism functions uneasily side-by-side with authoritarian nationalist tendencies). Indeed, it may be that the U.S. itself faces the danger of one-party rule by what Noam Chomsky has called an “insurgency” of what may be the most dangerous organization in human history, the Republican Party, now with a Trumpian face. There may result (if pessimism is borne out) a greater resemblance than is widely realized between the U.S. and the illiberal democracies in formerly communist-orbit countries. Some pessimistic and fearful but intelligent commentators (e.g., Paul Krugman) realize this. He has expressed a fear that the U.S. may become more like contemporary Poland.

## 11.

Then too, as mentioned briefly above, we must also consider the possibility that there is a new Cold War between latter-day “communism” (especially in China, which is a hard to classify combination of Marxist self-definition and market relations, now regarded as fundamentally “capitalist” by some observers) and Western capitalism in its current form, (which is a hard to classify combination of conflict-ridden liberal democratic and increasingly authoritarian/nationalist/quasi-theocratic regimes misleadingly called

“populist”). The conceptions of social justice at work in these domains (“Marxist” and “liberal democratic, linked with markets” or “authoritarian capitalist” as in parts of Eastern Europe) is hardly inspiring, with vast inequalities in wealth and/or societal power apparently becoming worse, on the social justice side, and spotty records at best on the environmentalist side. In the U.S., the growth of inequality has been a topic of concerned analysis and egalitarian-justice advocacy even by comparatively moderate though “progressive” commentators such as the economist and public intellectual Joseph Stiglitz, also a sometime subscriber to the ideals of sustainable development.

According to one U.S.-based apparently pro-Western-capitalism commentator on China, the academic political scientist Minxin Pei, China is threatened with loss in a new Cold War because of a variety of governance weaknesses (Pei 2018). Although both the U.S. and China are major contributors to global scope environmental problems, China (at the nation-state level) appears (even with backsliding) increasingly formidable as a world power and probably more committed than the current U.S. nationalist regime to explicit steps to further some key aspects of the environmentalism advocated by notable formulations of sustainable development. The Trump version of capitalist political economy, on the other hand, is notoriously neither committed to plausible values of social justice nor environmentalism. And Trump’s ideology is notably infected by cultural racism that seems to go far beyond politics and economics.

One example of the contrast between contemporary China and the U.S. about environmentalism can be illustrated by nation-state level attitudes towards the 2015 Paris Climate Accord. China remains signed on, whereas Trump, speaking for the U.S., wants to exit. (That would undo an understanding between Barack Obama and Xi Jinping about co-leading in the fight against climate change.) Many reasonable problems could be raised about the adequacy of the accord, and about the Accord’s supposed serious significance for sustainable development. Nonetheless, the difference in stance between China and the U.S. is of more than merely symbolic significance about commitment to sustainable development and multi-lateral decision-making, as well as deference to, and desire to further global environmental consciousness, while lifting large numbers of Chinese citizens out of poverty. This is not, however, to engage in apologetics for the authoritarianism of China’s regime.



**12.**

We might mention two lingering flaws in the psychology transmitted to some of us from the Cold War period, which did not end with the events usually described as the end of the Cold War. Both of these flaws have had consequences for the continuing role of sustainable development.

One flaw is the dichotomized conception of capitalism and communism, an aspect of a Manicheanism common during the Cold War. State planning and markets never were necessarily entirely at odds with one another. The supposed evils of governmental planning and regulation, e.g., even if pursued on grounds of environmental protection have been denounced repeatedly (though selectively) by some business interests. In fact, markets typically require both governmental and cultural norms, indeed, coercive law, to be markets. It requires a lot of legal architectonic to make multi-national corporations functional, for example. The very possibility of modern markets depends on the state and cultural norms. Propaganda aside, markets are as much about coercion as free choice.

A second flaw from the Cold War period that did not end with the Cold War is a tendency for those on the left (but not only the left) to frame their hopes for progressive change in terms of dramatic, even catastrophic events that might finally teach the world a lesson about environmentalism or socio-economic justice. The result of this shows up in Žižek, for example, in his discussion of the contradictions of capitalism as leading to apocalypse, “the end times,” and specifically in his focus on global warming and its huge threats of disaster. Another example would be Noam Chomsky in this respect, who stresses the threats of climate change and nuclear catastrophe.

**13.**

We would not at all challenge the idea that environmental problems pose a risk of major disasters, even the end of much life on the planet. However, in order to educate people about environmentalism, or social justice, we suspect apocalyptic warnings need to be supplemented by more variegated attention to environmental issues. In order to engage and motivate different individuals and population groups about a wider range of environmentalist issues and the devising of solutions to such issues, we need attention to shared matters of concern about the environment, for sure, but these will include both catastrophic possibilities or likelihoods, and other serious matters (positive possibilities or negative possibilities) about the environment.

There may be a parallel here with more justice-focused attitudes about the financial system, predictions of disaster, and other serious problems such as credit card debt or student debt. There is no magical universally appropriate solution about how to motivate and inform people so that they will care sufficiently to be activist about the environment or about distributive justice in the financial and economic system. But philosophy and psychology (and other social sciences) or some types of professional practice might do well to contribute to design of educational campaigns that go beyond (without discarding) warnings of disaster, and that reflect attitudinal and situational differences in different regions and localities and among different classes of people about perceived environmental challenges and economic injustices. Whether the resulting collective efforts are classified as sustainable development activism, or in some other (perhaps post-sustainability) terms, is perhaps less important than informing and motivating intelligent environmental and economic-justice activism, out of which a new understanding of sustainability, or a post-sustainability system of values (preserving the best of sustainability) might emerge.

Thus, the crisis about sustainable development that is depicted in this essay is not best understood as a crisis exclusively about an apocalypse. We do not deny the possibility of global apocalypse, either due to financial deregulation or deregulation of environmental protection measures. But we speculate that greater ingenuity should be devoted to inventing and pursuing strategies about how to change minds, and to promote activism in ways that can lead to progress about social justice and the environment (activism beyond averting catastrophe).

#### **14.**

In what follows, in conclusion, we explore the possibility that the global network of declarations in favor of sustainable development is not merely ideological obfuscation. The network may contain examples that are indeed rank hypocrisy. But in some cases, even then, the sustainable development value system may offer opportunities for inventing more promising situationally specific strategies to address environmental matters and economic justice problems, as well as combined environmental and economic justice issues.

Activism that focuses on preventing disasters need not be abandoned, but it can be formulated in more varied and more effective ways through supplementation with activism that is attentive to both a disaster focus and a more variegated environmental

justice focus (one that pays attention to the contexts of even obfuscating ideological affirmations of sustainable development by government, corporations, universities, etc.)

It has been noted by perceptive observers that disasters can be accommodated and even welcomed as potential sources of profit within a corporate market political economy. The rebuilding of communities after weather disasters, for example, or the devastation of war can be a source of gain for some that is sometimes part of a ghoulish cycle. Insurance policies, it has been noted, may generate incentives to adopt building practices that are unwise, to put it mildly. More generally, the prospect of disaster may offer incentives for bad social policies to be implemented in a system of arrangements that offers gains for profiteers who are major players in influencing the setting of political and economic goals.

Averting disasters, and not merely planning for adaptation to whatever disasters the global system will risk or ordain, (for example, disasters generated by anthropogenic global warming or reckless financial speculation), is certainly on the agenda for a critical sustainable development movement (or a more progressive replacement for sustainable development). But we all also need to deal collectively with much else, including the use of sustainable development rhetoric to conceal or distort various genuine problems about social justice and the environment. Both a more centralized concentration on catastrophes and a more decentralized attention to varied situations are needed for democratic activism.

## 15.

Perhaps the central contradiction that contributes to a crisis for sustainable development is this. As a value system, as represented in the Brundtland Report, albeit questionably and uncritically reformulated in the 2015 SDGs, with an absence of criticism of what is by 2015 the intensification of neoliberalism, sustainable development could reasonably be regarded as a plausible if rather overly general value system. However, even the Brundtland Report diplomatically glosses over major problems about the compatibility of its values with a global political economy increasingly dominated by global corporate capitalism.

In its phase as the major international values system unopposed and undisciplined by any truly threatening rival system for political economy and culture, marketized neoliberalism, as acted on by its enthusiasts, increasingly worsens economic inequality, supports politically undemocratic trends, and damages the environment.

The central conflict appears to have gotten worse between issuing of the Brundtland Report and the formulation of the 2015 SDGs. This is evidenced in the

alternating use of sustainable development values for praiseworthy purposes and for ideological falsification of the global state of affairs and trends. This can be illustrated by reference to a recent public meditation by Alan AtKisson, a Swedish former businessman and current Swedish civil servant (as he puts it). He depicts himself (no doubt sincerely) as a devotee of sustainable development over a thirty-year period, both as a businessman/consultant, and now as a civil servant in the Swedish government. He regards sustainable development as having been mainstreamed worldwide, with progressive results. A telltale sign of ideology is perhaps detectable in AtKisson's references to corporate social responsibility as part of the benign widespread influence of sustainable development thought and practice. He writes:

It took a few decades, but ultimately we—and I strongly emphasize we because sustainable development started as a small we that swelled into a global movement—succeeded. Sustainable development is the mainstream now. Variations from the global consensus on the need to fight climate change, end poverty, take care of ecosystems and advance the rights and equality of all people everywhere are widely seen as aberrations.

Unfortunately, there are still lots of aberrations. But they are no longer considered the 'norm.' The global adoption of the 2030 Agenda and 17 Sustainable Development Goals at the U.N., in 2015, achieved that decisively. (AtKisson 2018)

Either Chomsky, Pogge, et al. or AtKisson are closer to the truth. We the authors of this essay opt to agree with Chomsky, Pogge, et al. about the importance of integrating a critique of neoliberal ideology into the account of the current status of sustainable development.

## 16.

We conclude this paper with a suggestion for a program of research about and critique of sustainable development as an ideology and set of practices. Research and critique need to be combined with democratic activism. The many declarations of commitment to sustainable development around the world deserve analysis and critique, often (not always) as expressions of ideology in the bad sense. When we compare the declarations with real-world results, we will often be disturbed. But, we should ask, why is it deemed necessary

for many regimes and institutions to swear allegiance to sustainable development, while their actual decision-making seems demonstrably to betray the most attractive versions of sustainable development? We suggest that the reason for this is that there is some widespread sentiment that there is a global consensus that sustainable development includes core values (albeit vaguely and ambiguously expressed and internally sometimes inconsistent) necessary for acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the global system, dominated as it is increasingly by a version of global capitalism. Some significant weak points in the global system can be detected and better understood (and acted on for correction or replacement) by analyzing the distorted instances of support for sustainable development that are contradicted by actual practices and results. The weak points can illustrate more local and regional issues that can be publicized to build more popular activism in favor of sustainable development. That is a praiseworthy populism. Sometimes there will be a direct connection between more particularized and local issues with worldwide apocalyptic disaster politics. But often the issues that catalyze popular democratic engagement for environmentalism and social justice are more particularized than that, and need not be about catastrophe. The more particularized issues may sooner or later be connected in the public mind with apocalyptic matters such as environmental catastrophes resulting from global warming, or financial disasters akin to the 2008 financial system meltdown. But the crisis of sustainable development pointed to here is more multi-faceted than that, and what eventually will generate needed popular democratic resistance to the excesses of neoliberalism may take shape in unanticipated ways. It should, however, come to be better understood that without correction of (replacement of) neoliberalism, the crisis of sustainable development will only grow in seriousness and complexity. That is one of the most important lessons that well-designed activism can teach a well-informed and motivated global public.

#### **NOTE**

1. In a book co-authored with a Polish colleague, we co-authors of the current essay have examined sustainable development in a way that takes account of Polish trends as well as many other more globalized foci for development issues (Sankowski, Harris, and Hernik 2016).

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