

# HACKING AWAY AT SUSTAINABILITY:

## SCIENCE, IDEOLOGY AND CYNICAL BLOCKAGE

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### Abstract

In 2009 sustainability took some major hits. At the UN Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen, no agreement was reached over reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Nor was there any discussion about reductions that would keep climate change within “safe limits”. Add to this “climategate” where the hacked emails of climate scientists in the UK revealed problematic data showing declining global temperatures had been deleted to avoid fuelling skepticism, and sustainability appears a stalled project. However, this position has to be reconciled with sustainability being perhaps the most prominent key word of policy initiatives both sides of the Atlantic. We therefore have the paradox of growing emissions levels and a deadlock over agreements to control them, standing alongside the widespread adoption and support of sustainability initiatives. This paper seeks to explain this situation by arguing sustainability is necessarily an ideological project; something we must believe in doing, even in the context of events like “climategate”. By positioning sustainability as ideological, it is therefore necessary to confront the relationship between climate science and ideology, examine the status of ideology in today’s post-ideological times and consider the politics of climate change’s universal threat to human civilization. As the paper proceeds through these issues, it is suggested that stemming ecological crisis will likely

require (re)discovering a mode of politics not currently evident in sustainability debates.

*Key Words sustainability, ideology, cynicism, master signifier, post-politics, science*

### **Jaquear a la sustentabilidad: ciencia, ideología y bloqueo cínico**

#### **Resumen**

En 2009 la sustentabilidad sufrió grandes golpes. En la Cumbre Climática de la ONU en Copenhague no se llegó a un acuerdo sobre la reducción de emisiones de dióxido de carbono y gases equivalentes, ni tampoco se discutió sobre reducciones que podrían mantener al cambio climático dentro de “límites seguros”. Si a eso le agregamos el “climategate” (en el que emails de científicos del clima en el Reino Unido conteniendo información problemática que revelaba reducciones de temperatura a nivel global fueron jaqueados y borrados para evitar el escepticismo), la sustentabilidad parece ser un proyecto estancado. Sin embargo, a pesar de ello la sustentabilidad parece ser quizás la palabra clave más importante en las iniciativas políticas a ambos lados del Atlántico. Es decir entonces que nos enfrentamos a una paradoja entre los crecientes niveles de emisiones y el estancamiento de los acuerdos para controlarlas, por un lado, y la extensa adopción de iniciativas de sustentabilidad, por el otro. Este artículo intenta explicar esta situación argumentando que la sustentabilidad es necesariamente un proyecto

ideológico; es algo en lo que debemos creer cuando hacemos algo al respecto, incluso en contextos como el del “climategate”. Al entender a la sustentabilidad como ideológica, es necesario comprender la relación entre ciencia climática e ideología, evaluar el estatus de la ideología en los actuales tiempos post-ideológicos y considerar las políticas relativas a la amenaza universal a la civilización humana que implica el cambio climático. En el desarrollo del trabajo se sugiere que para parar la crisis ecológica seguramente se requiere (re)descubrir modos de hacer política que no se ven en los debates sobre sustentabilidad actuales.

*Palabras clave: climategate, crisis ecológica, emisiones, ideología, sustentabilidad.*

### **The crisis of “climategate”**

Just as climate change skepticism had begun to quell, alongside the departure of George W. Bush from office (Whatmore 2009), it reared its head again on November 17 2009. Climate Audit, a website dedicated to unpicking the science of climate change, had suddenly accessed the email correspondence of Professor Phil Jones director of the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia, UK. The emails, apparently hacked by someone located in Russia, contained over 3000 conversations between climate change scientists and over 1000 documents that were attached to various email messages. What the emails revealed, much to the joy of the authors and readers of Climate Audit, were the internal conversations and, importantly, shared doubts about the methods used by climate scientists to construct their models.

The hacked emails revealed a host of permitted transgressions. They showed that between 1996 and 2009 there was substantial debate between climate scientists over how to handle data they had collected that showed declines in global temperatures. Jones’ solution was, apparently, very straightforward: delete the problematic data. In his email conversations, he claimed this solution was better than releasing the data and potentially re-fuelling skepticism. To make the situation worse, his research team had made the decision to not maintain its original raw data sets, preferring instead to store cleaned data. As a result,

the entire research output of the unit was being called into question. If problematic data had simply been deleted, how could we trust the cleaned data if it could not be checked against the original set? Suddenly, a commonplace methodological choice had become front page news.

The reactions to what became dubbed climategate were predictable. For skeptics, such as the British Conservative peer Lord Lawson and US Senator Jim Inhofe, this leak was yet more evidence of a conspiracy conducted between scientists and left-wingers. Lawson has previously described sustainability as “the new red” and claimed there is a “the new religion of global warming... the Da Vinci Code of environmentalism. It is a great story and a best-seller. It contains a grain of truth and a mountain of nonsense.”<sup>1</sup> For those campaigning to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the hacked emails revealed an inconvenient truth about the difficult methodological choices made by climate change scientists. More fundamentally though, this case of exposed how reliant the sustainability movement remains on the problematic epistemological claims of science.

For Latour (1998: 208) the scandalous nature of climategate might reflect the necessity of a shift from doing science to doing research: “Science is certainty; Research is uncertainty. Science is supposed to be cold, straight and detached; Research is warm, involving and risky. Science puts an end to the vagaries of human disputes; Research fuels controversies by more controversies. Science produces objectivity by escaping as much as possible from the shackles of ideology, passions and emotions; Research feeds on all of those as so many handles to render familiar new objects of enquiry”. The founding myths of science, bound up as they are with modernity (Gaukroger 2007), cannot be maintained and, so Latour argues, we must embrace research as a collective project. This mirrors Haraway’s critique (1988: 580) where she argued: “Science has been about a search for translation, convertibility, mobility of meanings and universality”. Yet this universality relies on a particular claim to objectivity;

1. Lord Lawson claims climate change hysteria heralds a ‘new age of unreason’, Telegraph, April 6 2008

one whereby a discourse of rationality and method generates epistemological and ontological assurance.

What the hacked emails of Phil Jones and his collaborators revealed was an insight into that which is not included in scientific discourse: “They tell parables about objectivity and scientific method to students in the first years of their initiation, but no practitioner of the high scientific arts would be caught dead acting on the textbook versions” (Haraway 1988: 576). What are generally considered permitted transgressions within the confines of the scientific community become damning violations when revealed to the public. The response of fellow climatologists to the front page scandal was to rally support for their colleagues; writing collective letters to reassure a presumably concerned public. In addition, governments both sides of the Atlantic established independent inquiries to be assured that the data and advice they were acting upon was trustworthy. Reporting in March 2010, the UK House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee found the hacked data did not provide evidence of misconduct or undermine the consensus of climate change.

What this latest outburst of climate change skepticism revealed was an uncomfortable truth for many advocates of sustainability: that climate science was some way off providing incontrovertible evidence which might silence all doubters. Of course, for various poststructuralist and feminist scholars the fact the scandal exposed the fallibility of science is not surprising. However, this event is more revealing in other ways. It shows the necessary ideological basis of sustainability. To be sure, this is not to refute the fact there is overwhelming evidence of climate change. Asked to play the percentages, most would accept that the risks of not acting to reduce greenhouse gas emissions far outweigh the risks of doing nothing. But yet, within all the evidence, in Zizek’s terms, there is a indivisible remainder; that which intrudes on the vision presented by climate change science. In the case of climategate, it is the email that reveals the fallibility of a data set within an authoritative climate change model.

If sustainability represents a collective project to mitigate and limit climate change (although its usage has expanded to encompass much more), it must be understood as more than a response to a science showing changing global temperatures. Sustainability is fundamentally an ideological project for it represents a central Master Signifier around which we are supposed to conduct social practice. Yet its status as a Master Signifier must be understood within the context of a supposedly post-ideological age, where modernism and pragmatic-consensualism remain hegemonic. From this perspective it becomes clear why (a) a marginal group of climate change skeptics continue to undermine the effort to make our cities and communities sustainable and (b) there exists overwhelming support for sustainability initiatives in the context of business-as-usual.

### **Dirty data and ideology**

For Engels, ideology was false consciousness; a pivotal vehicle of bourgeois hegemony which meant workers would unwillingly recreate their own exploitation. It therefore relied on an un-knowing; the fact that workers did not truly know of their situation because of the prevailing ideological apparatus. Slavoj Zizek (2008) claims this interpretation of ideology can no longer stand since, for the most part, we know that, for example, capitalists exploit their workers; that our clothes are made in sweatshops; that our major political parties are beholden to their financial backers. Ideology is therefore something quite different: “The fundamental level of ideology [...] is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being post-ideological society” (Zizek 2008: 33). What largely defines contemporary ideology is therefore not a deceptive illusion, but a necessary (unconscious) fantasy that provides a sense of ordering; structuring a complex social reality. However, there remains misconception since we deny this fantasmatic structuring; we don’t believe in ideology and keep it at a distance through cynicism. Here, Zizek’s (2008: 33) critical point is that it is this very distance that maintains

contemporary ideology: “even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them”. Zizek therefore adopts Sloterdijk’s (1988) maxim that “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it” in order to capture the notion we (cynically) overlook the illusion that is (necessarily) structuring our reality.

Ideology is therefore present and understood as a fantasmatic field structured around a variety of floating signifiers (Laclau and Mouffe 1989): “non-bound, non-tied elements, ‘floating signifiers’, whose very identity is ‘open’, overdetermined by their articulation in a chain with other elements” (Zizek 2008: 95). It is therefore the struggle over pivotal empty signifiers that defines the hegemonic process; a process whereby “the hegemonic identity becomes something of the order of an empty signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness” (Laclau 2005: 71). The empty signifier, or in Lacan’s terms the Master Signifier, therefore provides a point de caption (i.e. nodal point), that “will totalize, include in its series of equivalences, [these] free floating elements (Zizek 2008: 96). The construction of ideology therefore proceeds from the quilting of a series of signifiers around the Master Signifier. As such, it is from the series of equivalences that the anointed signifier constructs a universalizing hegemony. For Laclau (2006: 114) this leaves ideology as “those discursive forms that construct a horizon of all possible representation within a certain context, which establish the limits of what is ‘sayable’...” It therefore performs a “closing operation” (ibid) around which an endless array of elements becomes coherent and offers a certain making-sense-of-the-world.

The necessity of ideology, as something which provides a quilting of free floating signifiers, is evidenced in terms such as people, democracy and freedom. All are required but none have definitive content. Rather, they are the very stakes of political struggle (Zizek 2008), with various groups seeking to quilt the signifier into their particular narrative discourse. This recognition leads us to a particularly important theoretical distinction. Laclau (2006) has recently stressed that the empty/Master signifier is a nominal, not a concept. This distinction is of importance since

if the Master Signifier were to be a concept, it could be subject to a Kantian intuitive refinement; with its conceptual efficiency improved, refined and fixed. In rejecting this, Laclau (2006: 109) stresses the radical contingent status of the Master Signifier: “the unity of the object has no other ground than the act of naming it”. Here, Laclau follows Saussure to argue the Master Signifier has a negative constitution, since it is not the particular content of the utterance that defines it, but rather its (unstable) equivalent links. As Zizek (2006) notes, this allows the same Master Signifier to remain employed (e.g. freedom, socialism, democracy) when its initial markers have disappeared.

However, the point must be stressed that this understanding of the Master Signifier does not mean ideology is either problematic or, by extension, now rejected (i.e. we can live in a post-ideological age). Rather, as Zizek (2008; 2010) has continually stressed, ideology remains necessary. For example, we rely on the notion that “society” (an ideological Universal) exists in order that we conduct any type of collective politics. Yet, there is always a necessary exception to this Universal notion. For Lacan this occurs since the Real is “nothing but this impossibility of its inscription” (Zizek 2008: 195), it is that which is not incorporated in the symbolic edifice. We find this very logic of always-present exclusion developed in Agamben’s (1998: 12) conception of “bare life”; that human life which “is included in the juridical order [ordinamento] solely in the form of its exclusion”. Ideology, as part of the symbolic, therefore represents a presumption and normalization, providing an ordering and sense of closure.

Here then, we see the Master Signifier as a necessary ideological element. Signifiers such as “society”, “freedom”, “democracy” serve to act as universals, where in fact they are always contingent (i.e. premised upon a particular set of quilted equivalences) and partial (i.e. there is always an exception). It is this very notion of the negative universal that leads Zizek to recognize the theological basis of ideology and its concomitant Master Signifiers. Using Lacan’s triad of imaginary-symbolic-real, Zizek (1997: 107)



situates ideology as belief (in the symbolic; the social embodied in the Big Other) and contrasts this to knowledge (Real):

“Belief is always minimally ‘reflective’, a ‘belief in the belief of the other’ [...], while knowledge is precisely not knowledge about the fact that there is another who knows. For this reason, I can believe through the other, but I cannot know through the other. That is to say: owing to the inherent reflectivity of belief, when another believes in my stead, I myself believe through him; knowledge is not reflective in the same way – that is, when the other is supposed to know, I do not know through him”

This distinction separates climate change science (as knowledge) and sustainability (as belief). Sustainability, as a Master Signifier in today’s planning and policy discourse, is an ideological construct that rests – necessarily – on belief, whereas debates and scandals about climate change science are (Real) intrusions into this symbolic edifice. In this sense, we can see emails about data deletion as traumatic entries of the Real; something which breaks, for a time, the social formula upon which we construct the everyday life world (is this not why Latour wants to shift from science to research, accepting the associated ontological insecurities?). It is therefore un-surprising that the response to the hacked emails of Phil Jones was a resounding rallying call from other scientists and governmental commissions.

**Sustainability is nothing. Sustainability is everything.**

The implication of reading sustainability as ideology is that to commit to a sustainable future involves a leap of faith; a decision to remain faithful to sustainability, even in the context of events such as climategate. In post-ideological times, this commitment is certainly never explicitly embraced. Rather, there is a reliance on the continued legitimacy perceived to emanate from the natural sciences. We might therefore be thoroughly lacking the feminist critique of Haraway and the post-structuralist critique of Latour, since a perceived objectivity and infallibility

is deemed present and necessary. The consequence is that a hacked email can undermine overwhelming evidence for anthropogenic climate change. If Latour wants this recognized as part of doing the dirty work of research, it must also be recognized that we are reliant on an ideological commitment to cover the concomitant gaps. We need to act, but must do so without the epistemological guarantees of science.

Urban (2008) illustrates the necessity of the Master Signifier to conduct social practice using the example of the psychotherapy group. For the group’s members, the therapeutic value of the exercise is delivered by the group dynamic. Each person arrives at the session to achieve the necessary therapeutic outcome acting upon the presumption that the group already exists; it is their reason for attendance. However, the group never exists as a positive entity: “If any member is foolish enough to attempt to define what ‘group’ is for the others, they should eventually experience the impossibility of doing so, as it will always fail in some fashion with other members, since what the Master-Signifier attempts to speak of is that very difference – that gap or void in the signifying order” (Urban 2008: 9). Whilst the group provides constructive purpose, it can therefore be understood as devoid of content, with any attempt at defining it resulting in a dissolution of its utility.

Is this not exactly how sustainability has operated as a Master Signifier in governmental and policy arenas? Under the triple-bottom-line (environmental/economic/social) conceptualization, any number of issues have become subject to sustainability. Any yet there remains strikingly little consensus of what sustainability actually is. For some, sustainability remains a narrow concern for the human impact on atmospheric gases whilst others have pushed sustainability into things such as friendship, housing, health and banking. In short, the Master Signifier of sustainability has brought together any number of actors into a collective project without definitive content. This is made strikingly evident by the diverse number of actors who have embraced sustainability. As Swyngedouw (2008) has asked, who is against sustainability? Such is the ideological purchase of the term that it has

brought together actors who would usually find little agreement. Old antagonisms are seemingly obscured and/or removed thanks to sustainability. How then to make sense of the fact that, given this agreement, our ecological system remains on a catastrophic path? If the Master Signifier is so widely adopted and, by definition, it covers over the gaps of climate science, does there seem to be so little action to stop a dystopic scenario?

The answer, for Žižek, is that nobody really takes ideology seriously. For Peter Sloterdijk (1988) ideology operates through cynicism, whereby ruling culture is confronted with irony and sarcasm; the grandstanding of politicians dismissed as spin and pure rhetoric. Nobody is therefore deemed as really taking political rhetoric and policy statements seriously. Sloterdijk sees this reaction as already being taken into account by the ruling culture. As Žižek (2008: 26) argues, this is a negation of the negation: “confronted with illegal enrichment, with robbery, the cynical reaction consists in saying that legal enrichment is a lot more effective and, moreover, protected by the law”.

In these terms, we can begin to see how sustainability, as a Master Signifier, has come to be so thoroughly accepted at the same time as the related principle concern, climatic change, continues to unabated. Sustainability is rolled-out everywhere, but this has little impact upon the very practices that need to be changed. Witness the recent attempt to make significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions in Copenhagen. Even with resounding support from many voting publics and the scientific community, no agreement was reached and, more damning, never was there a conversation about the type of emissions reductions that would, according to climate models, keep global warming within “safe” limits. Yet, at the same time, we continue to see sustainability initiatives rolled-out across the globe. Almost nothing is without the moniker.

And so we find ourselves in a huge contradiction. Sustainability is almost unanimously accepted as an important consideration in all socio-political circumstances at the same time as consumption

and emissions grow to unprecedented levels. This means that we embrace the notion of change at the same time as continuing to act as we always did. It means being for sustainability and, at the same time, continuing to drive the SUV to the stores, putting the AC on and running the dishwasher. It requires that we not take today’s most prominent Master Signifier seriously. This may, of course, have something to do with the particular qualities of this Master Signifier. Unlike many signifiers (e.g. democracy, socialism, nationalism), sustainability is particularly vague; its equivalences seemingly harder to trace. In its most common conceptualization, the triple-bottom-line/three-legged-stool, it is said to have environmental, social and economic dimensions. This stretches the term across literally all spheres of life. Add to this the absence of normative content that sustainability brings when expanded beyond the realm of natural environment and it appears to be perfect for a cynical age. The normative judgment on a sustainable planet might be clear (i.e. it should be able to support life indefinitely), but what does it mean to have a sustainable city or community?

### **What is the problem with sustainability?**

The current embrace of sustainability therefore involves a strange paradox. Its legitimacy is largely supported by warnings from the scientific community about climate change. However, the claims of the scientific community, and indeed their own legitimacy, are supported by an appeal to objectivity, rationality and method. These, as post-structuralist and feminist critiques have thoroughly pointed out, are appeals that cannot be sustained; particularly under the intense scrutiny of skeptics. And yet the necessity of ideology, and by definition sustainability as a now elemental part of the symbolic, rests upon its ability to cover these voids:

“Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself” an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks

some insupportable, real, impossible kernel” (Zizek 1994: 323)

Just as we have to presume “society” exists to conduct a politics (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), so we need to presume something about sustainability. Producing doubts about the validity of climate science engages in a certain presumption about how collective action is conducted; it is one that mirrors that of the objectivist scientific method and one that revels in a post-ideological fantasy. It asks for a guarantee that can never be delivered. So whilst the sustainability movement attempts to address a universal problem, that of catastrophic global climatic change, it remains in deadlock. The inability of science (or, for that matter, any discipline) to reveal the totality of our environment maintains the skeptics ground. In this sense, we continue in the illusion that we are in a post-ideological age.

We therefore face a double problematic. First, in acting out a post-ideological fantasy the sustainability movement is beholden to the claims of the sciences that can never be fulfilled, much to the benefit of climate change skeptics. Second, our commitment to ideological practice, with sustainability now being a significant part, is limited by cynicism; something that is fostered within ruling culture. And, of course, persistent bursts of skepticism provide fuel to this cycle of cynicism. And so the universal threat posed by ecological crisis to human kind appears to have little political leverage, particularly when compared to the action taken to sure up the economy after the collapse of Lehman Bros. (Zizek 2010).

It is on these grounds that Zizek challenges Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2009) notion that ecological crisis has a universal subject. For Chakrabarty climate change threatens the human species as a whole, with no escape for any subject position. Chakrabarty therefore asserts that it is this political dimension that makes sustainability so compelling: it embodies a universal political dimension that goes beyond the machinations of competing political ideologies. Zizek (2010: 333-4) is quick to point out the problematic:

“This is why we have to accept the paradox that, in the relation between the universal antagonism (the threatened parameters of the conditions of life) and the particular antagonism (the deadlock of capitalism), the key struggle is the particular one: one can solve the universal problem (of the survival of the human species) only by first resolving the particular deadlock of the capitalist mode of production... the key to the ecological crisis does not reside in ecology as such”

Zizek’s Hegelian point here is that if we accept the necessity of sustainability, it is the particularity of the politics that must be asserted, not the universality of the threat. It is the particular political economy that metabolizes the planet in a seemingly unrelenting and undeviating path that must become the problem. In doing so, the interests associated with the maintenance of the particular antagonism must be made the subject of politics.

The achievement of sustainability therefore faces two challenges. First it must become centrally concerned with the socio-economic mode of production; that particular issue that threatens the universal subject. This, of course, involves a political struggle that is not as palatable to the liberal consensual politics of today. Second it must be about a politics that can change social practice, since it is the acting out of an impotent sustainability that we mostly see today. The cynical labeling of various initiatives as sustainable simply leverages the above liberal feel-good politics and brings us no closer to confronting the problem of ecological disaster. The challenge of sustainability therefore requires nothing less than a rethinking of the political dimension. It is therefore worth leaving the last word to Badiou (2001: 75) and his attempt to resuscitate a politics that might deal with our socio-ecological antagonisms: “Every fidelity to an authentic event names the adversaries of its perseverance. Contrary to consensual ethics, which tries to avoid divisions, the ethic of truths is always more or less militant, combative.”

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