

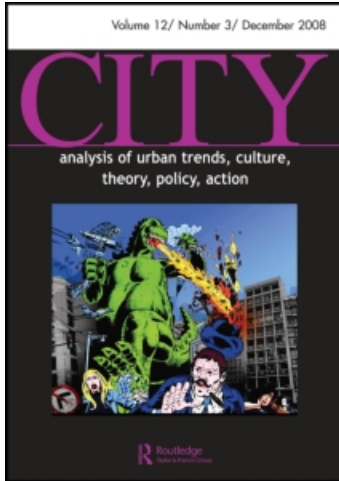
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Sustainability as ideological praxis

The acting out of planning's master-signifier

Mark Davidson

The rise and rise of sustainability in urban and social policy circles has transformed the discursive terrain of urban politics. In 2009, Gunder and Hillier argued sustainability is now urban planning's central empty signifier, offering an overarching narrative around which practice can be oriented. This paper takes up the notion of sustainability as an empty/master-signifier, arguing that the recognition of its nominal status is central to understanding how it operates to produce ideological foundation. Drawing upon a series of interviews and focus groups with urban and social policy makers and practitioners in Vancouver, Canada, Zizek's 1989 critique of the cynical functioning of contemporary ideology is used to interpret the city's engagement with sustainability. Focusing on 'social sustainability' it is argued that sustainability has provided a quilting point that has enabled new social and urban policy-related partnerships and organizational agendas to be developed. However, this coherence remains unstable and plagued by questions of signification due to the radical negativity of the master-signifier, where efforts at definition and agreement are haunted by the non-presence of sustainability. It is argued that this framing of sustainability as ideological conduit in Vancouver helps explain the co-presence of transformative rhetoric and business-as-usual. Using Zizek's critique of cynical reason in contemporary ideology, interview data is drawn upon to show how many practitioners seek to distance themselves from sustainability, but at the same time continue to act it out anyway. In conclusion, the sobering politics of Zizek's critique of contemporary ideology are considered in the light of growing urban problems.

Key words: sustainability, policy, master-signifier, ideology, Zizek, urban

'This appearance is *essential*: if it were to be destroyed—if somebody were *publicly* to pronounce the obvious truth that "the emperor is naked" (that nobody takes the ruling ideology seriously ...)—in a sense the whole system would fall apart.' (Zizek, 1989, p. 198)

Introduction

In the past decade, sustainability emerged as *the* key word in urban and social policy (e.g. Jenks *et al.*, 1996; Frey, 1999). Gunder (2006) foregrounds this rise of

sustainability by claiming it was necessitated by 'the decline of the welfare state's perceived ability to deliver public goods and the rise of neoliberal values, market deregulation, and public choice theory' (p. 208). The rise of sustainability can therefore be seen as reaction to emergent concerns (i.e. climate change) and institutional necessity in an era where state authority has been recast. This new 'transcendental ideal' (p. 209) has since become a catch-all, particularly under the Brundtland-inspired (WCED, 1987) triple-bottom-line approach to sustainability that separated—although still left interconnected—sustainability out into environmental, economic and social elements (see Elkington, 1994; Rogers and Ryan, 2001). Consequently, this has meant much of the public policy arena has been, or at least can be, subject to sustainability concerns.

Yet despite a widespread adoption there remains little agreement over what sustainability actually means (see Krueger and Agyeman, 2005). There is certainly an element of realpolitik to this lack of consensus (Davies, 2002). However, some have claimed that the concept's slippery nature is indeed inherent (Healey, 2007). In their discussion of planning's empty signifiers (Laclau, 2006), terms described as 'meaning everything and nothing—comfort terms—all things to all people' (Gunder and Hillier, 2009, p. 1), Gunder and Hillier (2009) argue that 'sustainable development is the now dominant spatial planning narrative' (p. 2). It is seen to provide a nodal point for practice, something around which action can be premeditated, but where little definitive content resides.

The immediate question posed by this assertion is how could a concept with little precise utility become the key idea around which policy is formulated? For Gunder and Hillier (2009) the answer lies in the empty signifier's ability to act 'as a foil to give the appearance of doing something about global warming and the environment, when in effect it is largely deployed to maintain the priority of economic growth for achievement of

global competitiveness' (p. 20). Here then, sustainability, as empty signifier, can be largely dismissed as a piece of sophistry; wielded to maintain the neoliberal status quo in the face of warnings of catastrophic climate change (Swyngedouw, 2007). This paper takes up this question of the role of sustainability as empty signifier in the politics and practice of public policy. It first examines the notion of the empty signifier, tracing through the theoretical implications of understanding sustainability through this lens. Following this, research conducted in Vancouver, Canada, that examined how policy makers and practitioners are dealing with the remaking of urban and social policy and policy-related practice around the concept of sustainability is drawn upon to mobilize the theoretical framework outlined.

Sustainability as empty signifier

In their exploration of how urban planning has continually coalesced practice around various empty signifiers, Gunder and Hillier (2009) claim 'sustainability acts as a highly valued identify-shaping concept for its adherents, especially spatial planners, even though they still appear to have great difficulty with defining and operationalising the concept concisely and comprehensively' (p. 140). This echoed Gunder's earlier argument (2006) that '[S]ustainability is often deployed simply as an ideological tool to anchor or quilt the discourse to us unquestionably as an unassailable object of desire and importance' (p. 214). Here, using Zizek's interpretation (1989) of Lacan's master-signifier, Gunder positions 'sustainability' as a *concept* that provides a guiding principle around which planning practice can be conducted.

The concept of sustainability, it is claimed (Gunder, 2006, p. 214; also see Portney, 2003), has replaced others, such as equality and/or social justice, which have previously been the ideological pivot for urban planning. Zizek (2006b, p. 116) describes this

pivot as the *point de capiton*, where the master-signifier operates to order and provide meaning for a disjunctured reality: “The elementary operation of the *point de capiton* should be sought in this “miraculous” turn, in this quid pro quo by means of which what was previously the very source of disarray becomes proof and testimony of a triumph.’ The *point de capiton* therefore brings order and perspective, funneling a diverse array of elements into a coherent stream and, as such, enables a making-sense-of-the-world. Yet, this functioning of the master-signifier is not simply deemed a retroactive piece of social construction, but rather, Žizek (1989) claims, by explicating the master-signifier (e.g. sustainability) we perform an inversion that causes the master-signifier to be ‘no longer a simple abbreviation that designates a series of markers but the name of the hidden ground of this series of markers that act as so many expressions-effect of this ground’ (2006b, p. 186). The consequence of this is that we no longer have a marker that designates certain qualities; for instance, that sustainability is concerned with lower emissions, more community trust and more resilient economies. Rather, the master-signifier becomes the cause itself, losing its *necessary* qualities. Žizek, characteristically, uses the following example of Socialism as master-signifier to express this symbolic designation of future acts:

‘And, since “Socialism” is now the Cause expressed in the series of phenomenal markers, one can ultimately say “What does it matter if all these markers disappear—they are not what our struggle is really about! The main thing is that we still have Socialism!”’ (2006b, p. 186)

Here, the primary ideological function of the master-signifier is therefore not a retroactive making-sense-of-the-world, but rather something which ‘turns disorder into order, into “new harmony”’ (Žizek, 2006b, p. 37). As Žizek (2006b) argues: “Therein lies the magic of a Master: although there is nothing new at the level of positive content, “nothing

is quite the same” after he pronounces his Word’ (p. 37). With regards to sustainability, its arrival in planning and policy circles is therefore seen to have changed normative emphasis, albeit in varied ways. As Markusen (2003) has argued, sustainability is a ‘fuzzy concept’ which can incorporate many different programs and, importantly, politics; that is, its designated qualities are not assured (see Hajer, 1995). However, some caution needs to be heeded in treating sustainability as simply another concept that has been inserted into urban thinking.

Laclau’s empty signifier (2006) can only be differentiated from Lacan’s master-signifier through Laclau’s insistence on a contingent theory of hegemony.¹ In most cases, the terms are therefore interchangeable. A full discussion of Laclau’s theory of hegemony is not immediately relevant here (Torfing, 1999), rather the point to be made is that Laclau insists that the empty signifier is not a concept, rather it has *nominal* status:

‘It is a *name* ... To put it in Lacanian terms: the unity of the object is only the retroactive effect of naming it ... If the various determining components of an object shared some essential features preceding the act of naming it, the act of naming would be ancillary to a conceptual mediation. But if those features are heterogeneous and, as a result, radically contingent, the unity of the object has no other ground than the act of naming it.’ (2006, p. 109)

The empty signifier does therefore not perform any conceptual subsumption since the ‘plurality of equivalent links under an empty signifier cannot be a conceptual operation’ (p. 109). The point is therefore that sustainability, as an empty signifier, does not operate as a ‘fuzzy concept’ (Markusen, 2003), but rather its slippery and unstable nature is integral to its essential negativity.

This distinction is of utmost importance. If a confused or fuzzy concept, sustainability can be subject to refinement—in a Kantian sense, discursive intuition to ensure that its conceptual integrity and labor are

improved—then we are dealing with a quite different problem to that associated with the empty signifier. Of course, there are numerous attempts to develop and refine sustainability (e.g. Redclift, 1992; Beckermann, 1994; Gatto, 1995), however, its identification as an empty signifier (Gunder and Hillier, 2009) signals to another dimension that requires more detailed consideration than is currently underway.

Nominal status and negative presence

By positioning the empty signifier as a name, Laclau signals to what Žižek (1989) identifies as its purpose in ideological space. The naming performed by the empty signifier is reflective, in that it provides a means by which other signifiers can represent. As such, this ‘... “quilting” performs the totalization by means of which this free floating of ideological elements is halted, fixed—that is to say, by means of which they become parts of the structured network of meaning’ (p. 87). This totalizing move, which is not achieved in the Kantian sense of conceptual sublimation, is the mechanism by which a multitude of divergent individuals can come to identify as a group—in Gunder’s discussion (2004), how planners can come to identify as engaged in a collective project.

There are significant implications with respect to this nominal quilting. Or, in Žižek’s terms (1989), the organization of signification around the void of the empty signifier constitutes the traumatic Thing, the *object a*. It is the tension introduced by requiring the master-signifier in order to stop an incessant sliding (i.e. the need for quilting) and the constitutive lack of the very same signifier. This is illustrated by Urban (2008) when he uses the analogy of the psychotherapy group to reveal this constitutive tension. He uses ‘group’ as an example of a master-signifier, something which explains how ‘a contingent multitude of individuals come to identify themselves as a cohesive group’ (p. 9); a ‘signifier that “quilts” all the other

signifiers into a unified whole ... It is not a signifier that is given in advance and that everyone has agreed to work with ...’ (p. 9). The group therefore ‘exists only insofar as its members take themselves to be members of this “group” and act accordingly’ (p. 9).

We can draw a direct parallel to how sustainability has been adopted in planning and policy discourse, in that we are only practicing sustainability in the sense that it has been agreed that sustainability is the driving principle. And it is here that the complications between the conceptual and nominal status of the empty signifier are important:

‘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.’ (p. 9)

The master-signifier is therefore not a confused conceptual problem that might be subject to improvement/development, but rather a place of exclusion. A consequence of this is that symbolization, the signifying gesture, is always found inadequate, as Žižek (2006b) argues:

‘The problem resides in the fact that symbolization ultimately always fails, that it never succeeds in fully “covering” the Real, that it always involves some unsettled, unredeemed symbolic debt ... reality is never directly “itself”, it presents itself only via its incomplete-failed symbolization.’ (p. 241)

The inherent instability of representation and meaning are therefore fixed, albeit by a master-signifier that has no positive content. In a dialectical movement, this fixity is subject to continued renegotiation, where the master-signifier is consistently reasserted to stop the dissolution of symbolic code:

‘... the signification of the floating elements within a paradigmatic chain of equivalence is a consequence of their reference to a certain

symbolic code [...] As such, the conception of nodal points reveals the secret of metaphors: their capacity to unify a certain discourse by partially fixing the identity of its moments.' (Torfing, 1999, p. 99)

This fixing function of the master-signifier has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Žižek (1989) has argued that the re-assertive action of the master-signifier has become transformed. He argues the master-signifier has become dispensed off; its ideological function thought to be no longer required in a post-ideological era. However, Žižek's central point is that it is not the case that the master-signifier has become less required, or that we live in less ideological times. Rather, his premise is that, although we require it, we have fewer adherences to the master-signifier; that we operate at a distance from it.

Presence of the real and cynical distance

Whilst the master-signifier provides a quilting point, an ordering dictate for the chain of equivalences, as a signifier without signified (Žižek, 1989) it is imbued with tension. Resulting from its negative content, the master-signifier is constantly subject to disturbances. For Lacan, these disturbances resulted from the 'entry of the Real', that part of the Imaginary-Symbolic-Real triad that exists pre-symbolic:

'The Real is therefore simultaneously both the hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization *and* a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency ... the Real is the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization stumbles ... this is precisely what defines the notion of a traumatic event: a point of failure of symbolization, but at the same time never given in its positivity—it can be constructed only backwards, from its structural effects ... the traumatic event is ultimately just a fantasy-construct filling out a certain void in a symbolic structure.' (Žižek, 1989, pp. 190–191)

The Real is therefore that which stands beyond signification, but as something that has no positive content: 'Lacan's whole point is that the Real is *nothing but* this impossibility of its inscription' (p. 195). The impossibility of the symbolic to capture totality is therefore represented in the Real:

'That is why the real object is a sublime object in a strict Lacanian sense—an object which is just an embodiment of the lack in the Other, in the symbolic order. The sublime object is an object which cannot be approached too closely: if we get too near it, it loses its sublime features and becomes an ordinary vulgar object.' (p. 192)

The Real therefore represents a traumatic void. And it is this void which ideology is constructed to cover.

For Žižek ideology therefore represents a necessary social fantasy; a requirement that is made present by the haunting presence of the Real. Commenting on Laclau and Mouffe's reading of hegemony and the constitutive impossibility of a central antagonism, Žižek states: 'The function of ideological fantasy is to mask this inconsistency, the fact that "Society doesn't exist", and thus to compensate us for the failed identification' (p. 142). And it is this connection between a constitutive lack (the Real) and the resulting attempts of ideology to mask this void that constitutes the experience of *jouissance*: the 'enjoyment'² generated by the circulating attempt to fill this void space; to achieve the impossible accounting of the Real. It is at this point that we then again require the master-signifier as that intervention in the symbolic that ceases the free floating signification; that which stops the endless slippage around the void space. However, a paradoxical situation arises here, whereby a successful master-signifier—that successful ideological project that fixes meaning—has the implication of limiting *jouissance*. And this is the basis of Žižek's critique of what he labels today's cynical society, where ideology is supposedly

rejected leading to the pure pursuit of *jouissance*.

This cynicism therefore leads to a distancing from ideology. Drawing on Sloterdijk (1988), Žizek argues a cynical distance from ideology means political praxis takes on a peculiar *modus operandi*. As Sharpe (2004) explains:

‘... subjects are endlessly adroit at knowingly pointing out the failings of her/his political leaders, and/or the system-today, bookstores’ shelves are full of exposes of the “true” motives behind this or that policy decision (oil, money, big business, etc.). But unlike conservative theorists, who see such cynicism as a sign of a crisis of legitimate authority as such, Žizek instead stresses the material fact that the vast majority of today’s subjects continue to act as if they did not know what they say they know. This cynicism, that is, is for Žizek an example of a political phenomenon—the abiding legitimacy of liberal institutions—appearing, dialectically, “in the mode of its opposite”.’ (p. 112)

Cynical distance therefore limits a questioning of political failings that all know are present. A consequence of this paradox is the necessary resort to *jouissance* requires an externalizing of social problems: ‘All such sources of internal crisis can rather be re-signified in advance as contingent to the regime-hailing from the perverse malignity or evil of the foe’ (Sharpe, 2004, p. 115).

Reading from the master-signifier’s nominal status

The implications of reading the empty signifier as a void are multiple (Laclau, 2006; also see Zerilli, 2004), so here I want to concentrate on two particular issues. First, if we reject the empty signifier as a concept and recognize the quilting function of naming (Laclau, 2006) we require a different account of practice—here with reference to sustainability—than the current conceptual reworking narrative

(Robinson, 2004). Second, and related, we need an account of how signifiers like sustainability maintain their hegemony, or indeed lose it. In the next section of the paper, I draw upon research conducted in Vancouver, Canada, that examined how various policy-related actors were engaging with ‘sustainability’ and, in particular, ‘social sustainability’ as a first-step derivative of sustainability. In examining urban social policy concerns, the discussion will rotate between using the terms sustainability and social sustainability simply because many policy makers and practitioners did so. Put differently, whilst a particular notion of social sustainability has been developed in Vancouver, as one sub-division of tripartite sustainability in order to make social ‘things’ sustainable, the two terms are often interchangeable when discussing (social) sustainability in the context of urban social policy.

The research consisted of a series of interviews and focus groups conducted in 2008 with various governmental and non-governmental actors working with the notion of (social) sustainability in urban and social policy across the Vancouver metropolitan region. Recorded interviews and focus groups were transcribed and coded, with a particular focus upon identifying how (social) sustainability was defined, employed in practice and reflected on. In conceptualizing sustainability as a master-signifier, the intention is to illustrate the political tensions embedded within its operation. In doing so, it is worth noting that Žizek’s conceptualizations of the master-signifier, particularly with respect to Lacan’s notion of the Real, takes many forms and has many different foci (see Butler, 2005). I therefore want to focus here upon an examination of how the roll-out of (social) sustainability within the context of urban social policy in Vancouver has been managed in practice. The intent is upon demonstrating how, despite the productive functions provided by sustainability, many of the problems faced in its implementation and development reflect Žizek’s critique of ideology.

Vancouver: the sustainable city?

Over the past 10 years, the municipality of the City of Vancouver has aggressively positioned sustainability at the forefront of its planning agenda. This has been in part stimulated by the Greater Vancouver Regional District's (GVRD; renamed Metro Vancouver in 2007) sustainability agenda, the Sustainable Region Initiative (SRI). As an elected metropolitan authority of over 2.2 million people, Metro Vancouver is made up of 21 member municipalities and its board (as of 2009) consists of 37 members drawn from these municipalities and First Nation representatives. The primary responsibilities of the authority center on public utilities (e.g. water, sewage treatment, recycling) and managing regional growth. Since 2002, the GVRD has made sustainability its strategic priority, largely defining its role in this effort as a coordinator and facilitator.

Introduced in 2002, the SRI is a wide-ranging agenda that has sought to bring together governmental and non-governmental actors, along with increased levels of citizen participation, in order to generate the changes required to make the metropolitan region sustainable. The SRI (GVRD, 2006) explicitly states that it is responding to the Brundtland Report in terms of developing a multi-dimensional understanding of sustainability. It also recognized the complications of this position, by stating that different 'groups tend to view sustainability through their own unique perspectives' (p. 8) and, therefore, the SRI has attempted 'to provide a common point-of-reference' (p. 8). A major priority for the GVRD has therefore been to provide a 'sustainability lens' (p. 10) from which coordinated action across its member municipalities can be taken.

In developing a lens across the three elements of sustainability that can be understood collectively the GVRD established the Social Issues Subcommittee (SIS) to develop a definition of social sustainability (see Figure 1). The primary goal was to provide an understanding of sustainability across all

policy areas (i.e. environmental, economic and social) and, in particular, develop an understanding of sustainability that was directly concerned with social issues. Finalized at a regional forum in June 2002, social sustainability was thus defined as:

'For a community to function and be sustainable, the basic needs of its residents must be met. A socially sustainable community must have the ability to maintain and build on its own resources and have the resiliency to prevent and/or address problems in the future.' (City of Vancouver, 2005, p. 3)

This capacity-building-based approach was further divided into individual (e.g. skills, education, health) and community levels (e.g. relationships, networks). Equipped with this definition, the GVRD has since urged its participant municipalities to adopt this lens in order to rethink their social policy programs.

At the time of writing the only municipality to adopt a working definition of social sustainability using the GVRD's recommendation is the City of Vancouver. In interviews with policy makers in the Vancouver region this was thought indicative of two features of local government in British Columbia. Firstly, and most importantly for those interviewed, many municipalities were very reluctant to engage in social programs given (a) their lack of financial capabilities in the context of neoliberal provincial and federal government roll-backs and (b) the fear that, if municipal governments accepted this challenge, social welfare responsibilities would be further devolved from the provincial government. The second factor relates to the exceptional status of the City of Vancouver, a municipality of nearly 600,000 people, due to the Vancouver Charter. In short (see Punter, 2003), the Charter acts as a city constitution, granted in 1953, that allows the municipality much greater fiscal and planning powers than its neighbors; a privilege made more significant by the city's recent economic prosperity (Punter, 2003).

October 2001—GVRD launches the ‘Sustainable Region Initiative’

April 2002—City of Vancouver adopts a definition of sustainability

June 2002—GVRD hosts a forum on ‘social sustainability’ and introduces a broad definition to sit alongside its wider sustainability initiative

June 2004—City of Vancouver reports that its quality of life indicators fall below those of other Canadian cities

September 2004—GVRD publishes a refined definition of social sustainability. This features multiple components and identifies a broad range of policy concerns relating to the social dimensions of sustainability

September 2005—City of Vancouver endorses the reworking of the City’s Social Development Plan (pending) around the notion of ‘social sustainability’ given ‘the complexity and range of social issues is growing’ and the fact the City’s programs are ‘not systematically coordinated or aligned within the City’s framework of sustainability’ (City of Vancouver, 2005)

May 2007—City of Vancouver approves the three component–four principle conceptualization of social sustainability

Figure 1 The emergence of social sustainability in Vancouver.

In the City of Vancouver’s acceptance of the GVRD’s sustainability lens (City of Vancouver, 2005) it was felt necessary to further ‘expand on the [GVRD’s] definition’ in order to ‘provide a more detailed context for the City’s work’ (p. 3). This involved two steps. First, three more detailed components of social sustainability were outlined:

‘1) basic needs such as housing and sufficient income that must be met before capacity can develop; 2) individual or human capacity or opportunity for learning and self development; and 3) social or community capacity for the development of community organizations, networks that foster interaction’. (p. 4)

Following this, four guiding principles were identified for application with regards to the above components: (1) equity; (2) social inclusion and interaction; (3) security; and (4) adaptability. Whilst adopting the GVRD’s general definition, the City of Vancouver therefore felt it necessary to further develop a more detailed definition

in order that it is able to guide planning activities.

From the GVRD’s overarching attempt to introduce a sustainability lens across policy arenas, the City of Vancouver has therefore finalized this process by developing a multi-component, multi-principle definition of social sustainability. In terms of adopting sustainability as planning’s master-signifier, the City therefore weds the signifier to a number of more familiar terms (i.e. drawing equivalences). This has allowed, particularly in the figure-head sustainability development at South East False Creek,³ for issues such as housing, construction regulations, energy production and community centers to become quilted into a sustainability narrative. Sustainability therefore does provide a framing device; however, the constitutive lack of this signifier, despite the City’s attempt to make it more concrete, has resulted in a number of emergent tensions. The next sections of the paper draw upon interviews with actors involved in the development and implementation of (social)

sustainability policy in the Vancouver region. Interpreting sustainability as master-signifier, the paper stresses how the importance of sustainability, at least in terms of social policy, is concerned more with its acting out (Zizek, 1989), rather than its ability to ensure a consistent designation.

Sustainability as quilting point

The introduction of sustainability into the social policy arena has produced a number of impacts upon practice. First, sustainability has brought together a group of divergent practitioners via the notion that all are, in some way, involved in sustainability. This operation of the master-signifier has subsequently meant that many practitioners feel a new coherence has been brought about by sustainability. And although many view this coherence with ambivalence, particularly with reference to local capabilities (see above), it has resulted in an acknowledgement of collective practice. Furthermore, this has stimulated a number of new cooperative initiatives and partnerships. Related to this, it was also suggested that these new partnerships had caused increased recognition of the requirement for renewed advocacy efforts; particularly within non-governmental organizations with close ties to government (i.e. they have a reliance on competitive government funding or shared service provision and therefore have tended to withdraw from political engagement).

The GVRD's coordinated effort to introduce a sustainability lens into social policy and social welfare practice was viewed as largely successful by many interviewed. At one nation-wide non-governmental social welfare organization that had been centrally involved in the GVRD's SRI efforts, they described this program as an attempt at 'sensitizing people to the kinds of indicators and characteristics of the city which might make it more or less sustainable' (Interview No. 11). With respect to social sustainability in particular, it was this effort by the GVRD

that forged a shared concern across the region. As a bureaucrat at the City of Vancouver explained:

'social sustainability as a concept seems to pick up steam in the GVRD [...] our definition of social sustainability came out of [...] that whole process; really drilling down to the social element of the three or four legged stool. And after much work they ended coming up with a definition.'
(Interview No. 17)

It was through this effort to develop and install social sustainability as part of the wider SRI initiative that the GVRD can be viewed as generating coordinated action around the master-signifier. The result of this consultation program, according to interviewees, has been a growing coherence of policy agendas across various governmental and non-governmental actors in the Vancouver region. However, this is not to say that practice has subsequently been transformed. Indeed, institutional barriers (e.g. fiscal regimes and legislative exceptions) were viewed as vitally important in explaining why some municipalities have not been able, or have not chosen, to take their participation beyond the GVRD's initial consultation. For many municipalities, restructuring practice and service provision according to a shared understanding of social sustainability has been deemed beyond their remit. As a partner in the GVRD's discussions stated: 'some of the municipalities were saying we have no responsibility for social issues, so why are we talking about social sustainability and kept it at a distance for a long time' (Interview No. 9). As a result, the only municipal government to adopt the GVRD's definition of social sustainability has been the City of Vancouver: 'We adopted it, and it breaks things down ... and so that's been the philosophical driver. And from this definition of social sustainability, the social development plan is attempting to make actionable this definition ...' (Interview No. 16).

While the SRI has forged a relatively coherent understanding of sustainability,

policy makers and bureaucrats interviewed outside of the City of Vancouver claimed it 'had had little impact on our minimal social programs' (Interview No. 1) and that 'we're still waiting to see whether it means more money, if the [more] talk means more funding' (Interview No. 10). This stated many non-governmental organizations have been actively using sustainability, and in some cases social sustainability in particular, as a driver to enhance cooperative ventures and identify non-traditional partnerships. A social planner for an international community-based organization working across the Vancouver metropolitan region described how the incorporation of sustainability had made themselves and other organizations 'think through a range of initiatives that they might want to try and foster and also a range of partners and collaborators that they need to put in place' (Interview No. 21). They went on to state: 'if you share a common framework that social sustainability can help provide then at least you can bring your other hats with you and in theory that should make collaboration less onerous ...' The introduction of the master-signifier is here seen to have stimulated new associations and some embryonic initiatives. However, the absence of positive content presented a constant barrier to association: 'It is because the kinds of people who are brought around that table have themselves a very diverse set of agendas and in trying to merge those or find areas of overlap they reinvent urban sustainability just in that process' (Interview No. 21).

Yet, the same lack of positive content that brought different parties together—that is, that all could be engaged in sustainability initiatives—also generated a process of continual rethinking. Within collaborative social planning efforts, sustainability was claimed by one policy maker to 'have provided an opportunity to think outside-of-the box' and 'rethink the ways in which things relate to other things' (Interview No. 22). At one non-profit community organization, this had converted into a figurative

mapping out of social policy concerns and partners, where new relations and potential partnerships have literally been sketched out: 'what I've done is use sustainability, linking our social program to other issues in the economic and environmental legs of sustainability ... Across our various involvements, this meso-thinking provides an overarching thinking approach' (Interview No. 4). Here conversations begun in the context of the GVRD's SRI had translated into new working practices; stimulating innovations in program planning.

For practitioners in both the governmental and non-governmental sectors, it was precisely this mode of thought and its emphasis on cooperation and the inter-connected nature of (social) sustainability issues that had, in addition to changing working practices, led to a reinvigorated interest—albeit one usually viewed with trepidation—in advocacy and political engagement. It was argued that this change has led to a 're-visioning of what is possible and who should be involved' (Interview No. 11) in social policy. Related to this, another practitioner identified how 'sustainability thinking' had meant 'people can see the implications of their practices more' (Interview No. 9). Yet, given sustainability's status as a (nominal) master-signifier it is not the particular content of it that can be said to have stimulated such changes. Rather, it is the quilting of a newly introduced signifier that is responsible (see Gunder, 2004). And it is this quilting, the drawing of equivalences, which produces a set of tensions within the policy-making and planning processes.

Proximity to the void

The nominal status of the empty signifier signals to the lack which defines it (Žižek, 1989). As a result, it is absent of particular content and defined through its relations to a set of signified and, as such, it 'retroactively reorders itself as pure, self-relating negativity' (Urban, 2008, p. 15). The implication of this is that any attempt to precisely define the

master-signifier would ultimately fail. We might therefore all agree that we think sustainability is important and it should be a major consideration in urban and social planning, however, any attempt to agree upon what it actually means would be doomed to fail since it only exists as a relation to other signifieds. What therefore makes the Vancouver case interesting is that here there has been a ‘successful’ attempt by the City of Vancouver to define what sustainability, and social sustainability in particular, is.

The first thing to note with regards to the definition of social sustainability developed by the GVRD and adopted by the City of Vancouver is that it immediately reflects the construction of the master-signifier as designed by Lacan: ‘there is no signified master of truth, since any signification depends on a subsequent signifier. Signification essentially shifts along the signifying chain; its metonymy accounts for the impossibility of all the truth being said’ (Miller, 2009). In short, the defining of social sustainability has taken the form of formalizing a chain of equivalence; a set of signifieds that constitute the negative space of social sustainability. In practice, this has generated a host of tensions within the policy-making and planning process in Vancouver and, in doing so, has reflected how contemporary ideologies—in this case in the form of the anointed master-signifier of sustainability—are operating.

Whilst the definition of social sustainability developed in Vancouver gives it more tangibility by, for example, making it about equality and therefore, via established debates and measures (Davidson, 2009), most practitioners argued that it had helped very little in shaping policy and/or programs. Within the City of Vancouver, one planner stated that they found the definition little more than ‘rhetorical filling-in’ and that ‘so much of this rhetoric element is increasingly hollow ... it sounds like a philosophical conundrum’ (Interview No. 6). As such, the City’s working definition was viewed not as an incisive shift, but that ‘it is an affirmation of existing activities [rather] than a guiding

principle’ (Interview No. 6). Such difficulties were also identified in the non-governmental sector. A senior planner centrally involved both in developing the GVRD’s definition and implementing a series of social programs framed by sustainability describes what was thought to be its limited application:

‘... we are essentially creating a typology that is organized in a hierarchical fashion. Where sustainability is the overarching concept, which implies continuity of a certain thing ... and if we then start unpacking these other three terms, we find deep seated discontent to the structures ... at the core of each three we’ve got issues ... why do we talk about sustaining these things ... there is a bit of an illogical fit with these constructs within this rubric. Sustainability with respect to social work, is best used in a limited sense to refer only to the kind of long term planning that needs to take place for these issues to have a solution.’ (Interview No. 13)

Here, the interviewee describes how sustainability could only really be grasped as an emphasis on the longer term, with its unpacked elements and component parts offering them little in practice.

When questioned on why, in light of such a perspective, it remained an important presence most interviewees highlighted how adopting sustainability rhetoric was often closely related to chasing funding possibilities. Put simply, interviewees both in and outside of local government often claimed to be ‘doing’ sustainability in order to secure governmental support. For those within government bureaucracy, sustainability was described as a ‘diffused semantic whitewash’ (Interview No. 17) and that although it was being intricately incorporated in social planning in order that social planning will be able to ‘ask for more resources, for more consultation’ (Interview No. 17). Outside of government, the pragmatics of winning resources was related more explicitly to the framing of social sustainability. In the following quote, a strategic planner in a non-governmental social work organization

relates a declining narrative of social justice to the rise of social sustainability discourse in both British Columbia and the Vancouver metropolitan region:

‘... in order for your concerns about social justice to gain attention and recognition within the terms of neoliberal policy makers and decision makers it needs to be discharged from the radical advocacy orientation from which it draws its roots and take on a more shinier, less volatile construction so that it is something that for people who don’t have those radical roots can engage with in a more friendly manner, and see the logic of the models that can be constructed around a socially sustainable infrastructure.’
(Interview No. 13)

Such criticisms presented by those employing and, indeed, developing social sustainability programs signal to both the flexibility of the term (i.e. its continual retroactively circulating reordering) and its hegemonic presence.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985 [2001], p. xii) have argued that in order to have hegemony ‘the requirement is that elements whose own nature does not predetermine them to enter into one type of arrangement rather than another, nevertheless coalesce, as a result of an external or articulating practice’. The contingent demands of a privileged dimension are therefore seen to order and structure, which in turn allows for a particular distribution of resources. In terms of the insertion of sustainability within Vancouver’s social policy arena, such a hegemonic demand can be determined, particularly in reference to the contingent disciplining of other potential master-signifiers. But the intriguing aspect of this disciplining hegemony is the distance upon which many practitioners and advocates operate from it.

Cynical distance

Whilst it is not surprising to find disagreement over the utility of sustainability thinking, it is striking to find a significant degree

of cynicism to this framing held by those most responsible for developing it. One senior policy strategist commented that ‘there is an absurdity to the whole thing’ and that ‘it does not adequately capture the fact that people who haven’t the requisite means to live a dignified life are in no position to even consider sustainability’ (Interview No. 5). Whilst the defining of social sustainability remained problematic for many, this was not viewed without cynicism. Indeed, a degree of cynicism can be seen to be required in order that a sustainability program that demands, for example, needs-based programs or equity be implemented across the region’s government and non-government institutions.

Zizek (1989) uses Marx’s notion of false consciousness—‘they do not know it, but they are doing it’—as the starting point for thinking about ideology. It is here where we see a distortion of reality, an illusion interceding to skew understanding. However, drawing upon Peter Sloterdijk’s notion (1988) that ideology now works in a way that ‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it’ Zizek argues a significant shift has taken place. Drawing on Sloterdijk’s distinguishing between cynicism and kynicism, the latter is viewed as a sarcastic response to authority, one that provides a mockingly subversive distance. The twist introduced by Zizek is that rather than undermining authority through a mode of cynical dissent, this form of cynicism is already taken into account by authority:

‘Cynicism is the answer of the ruling culture to this cynical subversion: it recognizes, it takes into account, the particular interest behind the ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but it still finds reasons to retain the mask ... This cynicism is therefore a kind of perverted “negation of the negation” of the official ideology: confronted with illegal enrichment, with robbery, the cynical reaction consists in saying that legal enrichment is a lot more effective and, moreover, protected by law.’ (Zizek, 1989, pp. 29–30)

The consequence of this cynical reason is a failure of traditional ideological critique. It is not the old revealing of the absurdity of ideology, since this is already accounted for. This leads Zizek to claim 'cynical reason, with all its ironic detachment, leaves untouched the fundamental level of ideological fantasy, the level on which ideology structures that social reality itself' (1989, p. 30).

In terms of sustainability, a cynical subject might recognize that sustainability does not represent a panacea for urban and social planning and that it is usually manipulated in order to assure no significant changes to the status quo occurs (see Gunder, 2006), but they carry on working towards, fighting for and implementing a sustainability agenda. It is in this *acting* out that ideology manages to recreate itself in a 'post-ideological' age (Zizek, 1989).

Whilst far from a caricature of the cynical subject, a significant degree of cynical acting out is evident in Vancouver's engagement with social sustainability. However, it often does not simply present itself as pure cynicism. Rather, often a cynical distance is accompanied by a sincere supporting of sustainability; a belief in the signifier's transformative capacity. Ironic detachment can therefore sit beside sincere commitment. For example, an executive officer of a major social organization in Vancouver who has been a figure-head for the city's social sustainability agenda claimed that 'they [social organization] have been centrally involved in promoting and implementing social sustainability programs' and that 'there have been some real gains made, particularly in the [Downtown] Eastside' (Interview No. 8). However, despite this promotion and engagement, the same interviewee went on to comment when asked if the introduction of social sustainability had changed policy and/or programs:

'I don't think there is [change], though there have been attempts to generate that. Certainly you will see our name there, and we've been happy to lend our name to it ...

and we've participated in that. Happy to do it, great! But we'd have been doing this anyway, so it didn't [erm] inspire us to do something differently.'

In spite of an official embrace and engagement with social sustainability, the interviewee quickly dismissed the transformative aspect. Social sustainability was great, but not to be taken seriously, primarily because they had been acting it out all along.

This cynical embrace and twinned claim that sustainability is already practiced was repeated elsewhere. At a large private foundation that had been responsible for rolling out a city report card that included references to social sustainability, a senior manager commented: 'we don't have an organizational definition of sustainability, so let me start there ... I think [...] that being said [I think] we're increasingly using the language of sustainability' (Focus group No. 4, member 3). They followed this narration of discursive adoption by saying: 'So in our mission statement we are making lasting impacts, so that is a sustainable kind of view. Or you could say we, the issues that come up are sustainability issues or issues the foundation has dealt with over time' (Focus group No. 4, member 3). Again this take-up and embrace, whilst being integral to the acting out of the foundation's practice, was viewed with tremendous cynicism:

'When I think that whole, um, you know ... being a world class city and the striving for that and the link to the Olympics ... and having the events that drives our vision of, you know, being economically sustainable. I think [this] does bump up against that notion that social sustainability ... to the extent that I think it's very easy to say the issue, in the case of homelessness, is something else. I mean that's a slightly easier conversation to say then that it is actually about poverty and inequality ...' (Focus group No. 4, member 1)

Engagement with social sustainability, even by its central proponents in the GVRD and

City of Vancouver, was therefore consistently paired with a cynical distance.

Some interviewees equated this cynicism to the 'real' politics of the city, seeing the rhetoric (or rather ideological) veneer as a mask. A consultant and director of a non-profit working in the lower mainland commented:

'... all of this happens, and it is very political, and it does not give a shit about social sustainability, it is about social justice. So I think the political activity of activists is only taking place under the rubric of social justice. And under the rubric of social sustainability you get NGO think-tanks like us, funders like [anonymous] and academics and bureaucrat wonks getting around a table for mutual learning and talking about ad nauseam about the complexities inherent within all these issues, right, so it is an interesting set of conditions ...' (Interview No. 14)

Centrally here, the interviewee was self-referential, mocking the authority's attempt at social sustainability whilst at the same time being responsible through their acquiescent participation. Whilst tremendously cynical, this policy consultant and bureaucrat was still acting out sustainability; making it a part of policies and programs.

Conclusion

This paper has offered an interpretation of Vancouver's engagement with social sustainability through the related reading of Laclau's empty signifier and Žižek's reading of Lacan's master-signifier. In doing so, it has sort to position the recent engagement with sustainability in urban and social policy within a wider commentary on contemporary political ideology. Taking Gunder's claim (2004) that sustainability represents the latest in a collection of empty signifiers that have brought coherence to the discipline of urban planning, it was argued that Laclau's distinction (2006) between the empty signifier as

concept and nominal is centrally important. This distinction signals to Lacan's understanding of the master-signifier as void and, consequently, something incapable of conceptual meditation. The symbolic failure of the master-signifier and the resulting instability of chains of equivalence are, for Žižek (1989), key components of omnipresent ideology and related attempts to maintain hegemony.

In theorizing sustainability as a master-signifier the paper then drew upon research that examined how sustainability has been used, with a focus on the devolved quilted guise of social sustainability, to transform urban and social policies and programs. Through interpreting sustainability as quilting point, it was argued that both social policy and praxis have been changed. Following this, the negativity of the master-signifier was illustrated through a narration of the tensions faced in its application. Here attempts at conceptual refinement and mediation were found to generate many problems, but that these same problems offered little challenge to sustainability's hegemonic status. Then finally, this interpretation of sustainability was placed within the context of Žižek's critique of contemporary ideology through drawing upon the cynical commentaries of those practicing sustainability.

In terms of policy practice this interpretation offers a sobering conclusion. In short, it demonstrates that revealing the failure of sustainability to act as a transformative signifier is inadequate where this failure is already accounted for in its implementation and acting out. As a result, the failure of (social) sustainability to make any meaningful impact upon issues of homelessness, housing affordability or social welfare is already taken into account. It is perhaps unsurprising then that Žižek finds some agreement with Alain Badiou's understanding of politics as event to move beyond this constellation that meets cynicism with cynicism. The obvious incapacity of the master-signifier will not do since this is already accounted for in the (cynical) symbolic: 'What Badiou is aiming

at, against this postmodern *doxa*, is precisely the resuscitation of the *politics of (universal) Truth* in today's conditions of global contingency ... it is a flash of another dimension transcending the positivity of Being' (Zizek, 2000, p. 132). Opposed to a continual acting out, there must therefore be a rejection of the sustainability choices as now posed. We need another mode of politics—not conceptual development—to address those social (environmental and economic) problems that we are all too aware of. Such a challenge is, of course great; as Zizek commented in a *New Yorker*⁴ interview: 'Now we talk all the time about the end of the world, but it is much easier for us to imagine the end of the world than a small change in the political system.'

Notes

- 1 Laclau (2006) states: 'Seen from a certain angle, this is the production of an *empty signifier*: it signifies a totality which is literally impossible. Seen from another angle, this is a hegemonic operation (or the construction of a Master signifier in the Lacanian sense): a certain particularity transforms its own body in the representation of an incommensurable totality' (p. 107).
- 2 Although *jouissance* is usually translated as 'enjoyment' Zizek (2006a) describes it as having an 'excessive, properly traumatic character: we are not dealing with simple pleasures, but with a violent intrusion that brings more pain than pleasure' (p. 79).
- 3 South East False Creek is an 80 acre brownfield redevelopment that served as the athletes' village at the 2010 Winter Olympics. Originally proposed as a \$65 million mixed-use, mixed-tenure development, with onsite housing divided into three different tenures: market, affordable and social. However, it has subsequently been re-designed as a private commercial and residential development in the context of well-documented burgeoning Olympic-related expenses (estimated above \$110 million).
- 4 Interview appeared in *The New Yorker*, 5 May 2003, p. 38.

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