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Social sustainability: a potential for politics?

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Over the past decade, social sustainability has progressively permeated metropolitan politics as part of a wider sustainability agenda. In doing so, "the social" has reappeared from within a neoliberal context that has ideologically had preference for the individual (Harvey, D., 2005. *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press). This paper explores the politics bound up in this recent embrace of social sustainability. It claims a key political distinction lies between a policy emphasis on either the "social" or "sustainability". Through a consideration of the social, it is argued a potential site of progressive metropolitan politics can emerge, although the context of sustainability brings with it particular challenges. In conclusion, the paper considers how social sustainability debate at the metropolitan scale might be made to reflect a site of politics (Badiou, A., 2002. *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil (Wo Es War)*. London: Verso; Zizek, S., 2006. Against the populist temptation, *Critical Inquiry*, 32 (3), 551–574).

Keywords: social sustainability; urban; policy; politics; democracy

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Introduction

In December 2006, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg launched the city-wide planning initiative, PLANYC 2030, by "challenging New Yorkers to generate ideas for achieving 10 key goals for the city's sustainable future". In Sydney, Australia, Mayor Clover Moore has undertaken a similar project, revealing the *Sustainable Sydney 2030* programme: "Sydney needs a new strategic plan, underpinned by a visionary approach and focused on sustainability" (City of Sydney 2008, p. 8). Both these initiatives are examples of how, in little more than 20 years since the Brundtland Report, sustainability has gone from being a global-scale environmental debate to urban policy normative. As a multitude of metropolitan governments have acknowledged the need for cities to become more sustainable, many have found themselves requiring a formalised understanding of sustainability. The most commonly adopted has been the triple-bottom-line or three-pillar model, particularly in the framework developed by management scholars (Elkington 1994, Florida and Davison 2001) who have attempted to rework accounting procedures in order to incorporate Brundtland-related concerns within existing modes of capitalist production (Keil 2007). As such, this can be viewed as an attempt to expand and quantify accepted notions of the external costs of production within the existing political economy (Rothbard 1979). This stated, some have argued that tri-partite sustainability models can potentially

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open up debate over forms of economic and social organisation that could challenge hegemonic neoliberalism (Krueger and Agyeman 2005).

Within the three-pillar model (environment, economy and society), the social pillar has been largely neglected as a wider debate has prioritised environmental (i.e. climate change) and economic (i.e. expanding industrial capitalism) issues (Littig and Griessler 2005). This paper contributes to the filling of this void through an attempt to tease out the potential politics bound up in urban policy moves to make cities socially sustainable. It argues that whilst the concept of social sustainability offers a potentially vibrant field of political debate – through the opportunity to engage with "the social" question, what Badiou labels "the thought of all" (Hallward 2003) – the framing of it against other pillars and the particular implementation approach adopted offer drastically different political possibilities. In conclusion, the paper considers the role of social sustainability within a wholesale sustainability movement that has been labelled an epitome of the post-political (Swyngedouw 2007).

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The social pillar

Littig and Griessler (2005) identify two ways to conceptualise sustainability: one-pillar and three-pillar models. In one-pillar models, questions of sustainability are predominantly concerned with how the "ecological systems and resources necessary for economic and social life" (p. 66) are to be maintained to meet the needs of future generations. Sustainability is thus predominantly about ecological sustainability, concerned with the requirement for a more environmentally sensitive way of life. Clearly, as the Brundtland Report stated, this interpretation need not necessarily be devoid of social or economic issues. Rather, the one-pillar model relates more to the position that if social and economic practices do not impact upon problematised ecological processes they fall outside of the sustainability remit. The three-pillar model rejects this distinction by developing independent social and economic goals (Littig and Griessler 2005). Furthermore, as sustainability frameworks have been developed in different academic and policy contexts over recent years, various additional categories and sub-categories have been grafted onto this basic tri-partite distinction (Pfahl 2005).

As various aspects of sustainability have been developed, the question of how each relates to the other has become pronounced. Littig and Greissler (2005) note that the grouping of ecological, economic and social concerns under the sustainability banner has not meant any agreement has emerged about the relations between them, or how each is to be individually or collectively examined, measured, etc. For example, the speedy production of affordable housing to ensure social sustainability may not, given the current production costs, fiscal incentives, planning policy and mortgage financing, etc., align with the desire to have "green" housing (Berke and Conroy 2000). This problem is made worse when the normative goals of each pillar are left undefined. This is particularly the case for social sustainability, where "a clear theoretical concept of social sustainability is still missing" (Littig and Greissler 2005, p. 68). Quite what constitutes the social pillar and, consequently, how it relates to wider policy issues is, therefore, often unclear. In terms of the impact of other pillars, two oscillating conceptualisations which impact upon the social pillar can be identified.

The first results from the normative weight of environmental problems whereby social and economic change is driven by ecological requirements. Versions of this position include Daly and Cobb's (1994) *For the Common Good* in which they argue changes to national spending, economic organisation (i.e. from corporate industrial production to smaller-scale worker-based management) and social values (i.e. notions of wealth, consumption and stewardship) all require transformation given the ecological predicament. This critique

was echoed by Plumwood (2002) where the rational philosophy of Western society was placed firmly at the centre of the narrative of environmental destruction:

> These rational patterns of thought and organisation – monological, rationalist, hyper-capitalist, colonising and centric – seem at first to be ghosts, shadowy, insubstantial figures, mere phantoms of the real world of political action. But as we scrutinise them more closely we can learn to recognise their very real and material traces. . . Their fingerprints are to be found in the multiple crisis of natural limits that now confront us everywhere. . . (pp. 14–15)

These examples withstanding, we should make the distinction between (a) "environmental problems" defining social debate and (b) "environmental politics" being shaped by wider social/political agendas. For example, Capek (1993, p. 8) claims the framing of the environmental justice movement has been highly influenced by a wide set of political agendas, including the civil rights movement: "environmental justice is premised on the notion that the rights of toxic contamination victims have been systematically usurped by more powerful social actors, and that 'justice' resides in the return of these rights". In terms of this discussion, we are, therefore, primarily concerned with how the framing of environmental problems might – or not – influence constructed understandings of the social pillar.

The second influence upon constructions of the social pillar has been to make it largely [as far as this is possible (Harvey 1996)] independent of ecological concerns. This position has become particularly common within urban studies debate. In what so far has been the most extended discussion of social sustainability, Stren and Polese's (2000) define social sustainability as:

> *development (and/or growth) that is compatible with the harmonious evolution of civil society, fostering an environment conducive to the compatible cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups while at the same time encouraging social integration, with improvements in the quality of life for* all *segments of the population*. (pp. 16–17 – emphasis in original)

Here, reference to environment relates to the social, not the ecological, and sustainability is about urban social relations, not human–environment relations. McKenzie (2004, p. 12) has since echoed this perspective, albeit more broadly, by defining social sustainability as: "a life-enhancing condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition". Sustainability, as a normative principle, is, therefore, defined as something that can/should be applied beyond the natural environment.

If this second approach is adopted and social sustainability is to become a largely independent structuring facet of policy, it is necessary to construct the concept. Put simply, social sustainability means very little by itself. As Marcuse (1998, p. 106) has argued: "Sustainability as a goal in itself, if we are to take the term's ordinary meaning, is the preservation of the status quo. It would, taken literally, involve making only those changes that are required to maintain that status". Clearly then, we can say little about what a sustainable city, or society, would look like simply through applying "sustainability". It, therefore, becomes necessary to examine just what principles are associated with policies aimed at generating social sustainability. In the following sections, the politics[1] bound up with two different approaches to constructing social sustainability are examined.

Constructing *social* sustainability

If we ask the question "what society do we want to sustain?" we enter a field of politics that engages a broad set of decisions requiring deep reflexive engagement. Indeed, it opens up a

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space for engagement with some of the socio-political precepts that Zizek (1999), drawing on Ranciere, now claims have become absent in the post-political era.[2] The question generates a void to be filled. It does not presuppose Fukuyama's "end of history", but rather asks us to affirm or challenge the normative models by which we supposedly act/govern. It opens up a space for what Mouffe (2000) might call the consensus of disagreement, a discussion around/containing the long-term basing points of social/collective existence.[3]

Of course, within a neoliberal consensus (Harvey 2005) and post-political context (Ranciere 2007) it would be expected that attempts by metropolitan or national governments to fill the empty conceptual space of social sustainability have avoided "the social" (Badiou 2003) and focused upon the sustainability question. For example, in the UK (Raco 2007), Canada (Frisken *et al.* 2000) and Australia (McKenzie 2004) there has been a consistent concern with making deprived communities more socially sustainable (i.e. less reliant of social welfare), opposed to questioning the social relations (potentially) bound up in the sustainability question. A notable exception to this has been the City of Vancouver where, in 2002, city councillors requested staff develop a definition of social sustainability that contained guiding principles.

Following the 2002 request, in 2005 the City of Vancouver adopted a definition of social sustainability based upon a formulation developed by the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD). The GVRD (2004, p. 2) had argued: "Social sustainability is 'one of the three legs of the sustainability stool' . . . 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". The components of the definition subsequently developed and adopted by the City of Vancouver were three-fold: "(i) basic needs such as housing and sufficient income that must be met before capacity can develop, (ii) individual or human capacity or opportunity for learning and self development, and (iii) social or community capacity for the development of community organisations, networks that foster interaction" (City of Vancouver 2005, p. 3). To guide sustainability action, the City also adopted four guiding principles: (i) equity, (ii) social inclusion and interaction, (iii) (economic) security and (iv) adaptability (Figure 1).

The impact of such a definition has become evident in public debate surrounding the flagship Olympic village development of Southeast False Creek (Figure 2). Initial plans for the Olympic village had pushed forward a social sustainability agenda, in large part through designating over 60% of housing provision for low and middle incomes. However, under a centre-right mayor and, more recently, property market deflation these commitments have been reduced. As a consequence, the politics engaged by the City's adopted definition of social sustainability have been demonstrated. For example, The Pivot Legal Society, a not-for-profit law firm operating in the Downtown Eastside, has argued: "it is now safe to question whether self-regulating commitments to social sustainability are a realistic approach to ensuring that marginalised residents of Olympic or mega-event host cities experience positive benefits, rather than negative impacts of these types of events" (Eby 2007, p. 13). Debate has, therefore, not taken place over policy formation, but rather over implementation.

Beyond Vancouver, there are few examples of where the question of social sustainability has been accompanied by a founding of (contestable) social normatives. More often, the concern has been with making problematised social spaces more sustainable (Raco 2007) and/or making the objects of social planning more sustainable. An example of the latter is the City of Sydney's *Sustainable Sydney 2030* planning programme. Here, an engagement with defining "the social" has become completely absent from policy-making. In 2007,

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1. **Equity** - when individuals have access to sufficient resources to participate fully in their community and have opportunities for personal development and advancement and there is a fair distribution of resources among communities to facilitate full participation and collaboration...

2. **Social inclusion and interaction** - both the right and the opportunity to participate in and enjoy all aspects of community life and interact with other community members...

3. **Security** - individuals and communities have economic security and have confidence that they live in safe, supportive and healthy environments...

4. **Adaptability** - resiliency for both individuals and communities and the ability to respond appropriately and creatively to change. Adaptability is a process of building upon what already exists, and learning from and building upon experiences from both within and outside the community...

Figure 1. The City of Vancouver's guiding principles of social sustainability.
Source: City of Vancouver 2005.

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newly elected mayor Clover Moore instigated a comprehensive planning consultation process to drive forward a new vision for the City. With the aid of private consultants, the City initially adopted a triple-bottom-line approach to sustainability; briefing documents on the economic, environmental and social sustainability were commissioned. However, upon formulating the final draft plan, the commissioned "social sustainability" briefing was dropped. As a consequence, social policy commitments throughout the final plan became muted.

Social planning elements of the *2030* vision have been incorporated into a "Connected" thematic (Figure 3). In the major policy initiatives of *2030* ("Five Big Moves"), the City targets transport and accessibility as the main drivers of change under the "Connected"

Figure 2. Construction ongoing at Southeast False Creek, January 2008.
Source: Author.

banner. Whilst explicit engagement with economic and environmental sustainability remains and social sustainability has been removed, Mayor Clover Moore has maintained some semblance (Pfahl 2005) of triple-bottom-line rhetoric: "Sustainable Sydney 2030 is the culmination of the most comprehensive consultation ever undertaken on the future of our city. Overwhelmingly people told us that they want a city that is sustainable – environmentally, economically, socially and culturally". (Mayor of Sydney 2008).

Unlike Vancouver, Sydney's *2030* vision has not provided a political terrain around the concept of social sustainability in which social policy commitments can be challenged (e.g. Eby 2007). Indeed, Sydney reflects the wider context where there has been little questioning of a collective social within metropolitan politics (Badiou 2003) and where more technocratic issues (e.g. reconfiguring accessibility) have been dominant (Zizek 1998). This widespread absence of a social dialogue is concerned with two wider challenges facing any type of progressive urban politics. The first relates to a lack of engagement with the geographical imaginary of place-based politics (Massey 2007) and the second with questions of social consciousness in the contemporary (Zizek 1989, 2005).

Questions about what constitutes the urban political space in an era of globalisation and mass communication have increasingly been engaged with (Allen *et al.* 1998);

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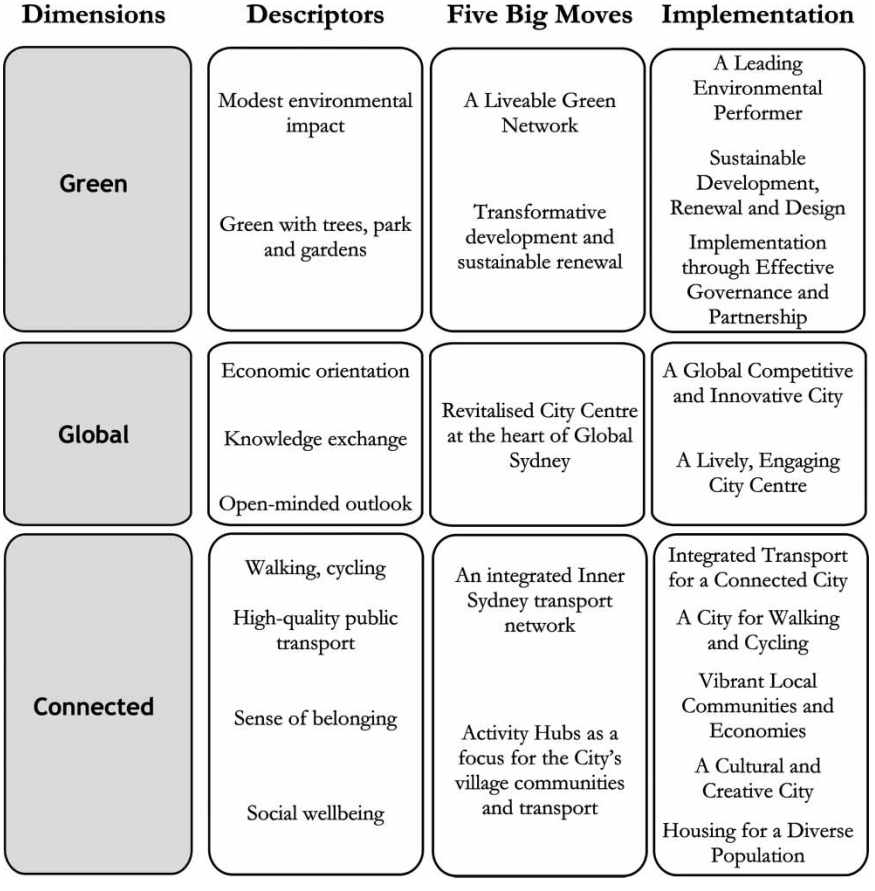

Figure 3. The policy "dimensions" of the *Sustainable Sydney 2030* Plan.

particularly as socio-geographical inequities have been advanced under neoliberalism (Harvey 2005). In a recent discussion of (re)constructing a progressive urban politics, Massey (2007) has argued that in order for a progressive urban politics to emerge, the political imagination of the city and its electorate has to be changed. In particular, relations and responsibilities beyond city boundaries have to become just as significant as those within it: "Actions in one place affect other places. Places are not only the recipients of the effects of global forces, they are – in cases such as London most certainly – the origin and propagator of them too, and this raises the question of responsibility, and specifically responsibility beyond place" (p. 15). Massey, therefore, calls for an extroverted politics of place: "... a localism turned inside out, and one that has to be struggled over internally" (p. 208). Here then, our view of the social is broadened, perhaps even globalised. Massey, therefore, identifies a mystical (Zizek 2006) problematic of place-based particularism that enables cities, such as London and New York, to accumulate vast wealth without responsibility for poverty and inequality elsewhere. In doing so, she calls for place-based politics to be recast since the absence of such socio-geographical imaginary depoliticises much of the urban political arena. However, Massey's (2007) call cannot simply be about the extension of urban political issues;[4] it must also become concerned with a realignment of the urban polity's political consciousness.

The relationship between ideology and consciousness has a long tradition of debate within the Marxist theory (e.g. Althusser 1971, Gramsci 1971). This debate has been revisited by Zizek (1989, 1999) who, drawing upon Lacan, has attempted to explain contemporary political subjectivity. Challenging notions of "false consciousness" (Lukács 1971), Zizek (1989, p. 28) claims that Marx's notion that "they do not know it, but they are doing it" (*Sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es*) cannot be held today. Instead, he argues that today's political ideology operates as a cynical subjectivity, where subjects know an ideological mask exists upon social reality, but whereby they nevertheless still accept/insist on the mask. In this sense, Marx's dictum becomes: "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it" (Zizek 1989, p. 29). Within this "enlightened false consciousness" (Sloterdijk 1987), there can be no formation/realisation of political subjectivity (i.e. the realisation of global and exploitative social relations), since it already exists below the agency of acquiescence and cynicism. Zizek goes onto claim that those wielding power meet this cynicism with yet more cynicism, a negation of the negation. While maintaining the importance of ideology in creating political community (i.e. ideology as Master Signifier and consequent source of political agency), Zizek claims that stimulating political subjectivity (i.e. creating a politics of "place") is not simply a matter of unveiling presence and/or ethical importance. Rather, change for Zizek (1996) entails disruption of what is currently allowed under entrenched political regimes, challenging socio-political parameters (in Lacanian terms: "touching the Real"). Practical invention and the changing of political institutions/practice is, therefore, a central part of Zizek's politics (Badiou 2002).

The point here is that the (politicised) construction of social sustainability is often challenged not only by realpolik moves to avoid politicisation, but also by the contemporary socio-political context where moves to engage progressive politics (including any new geo-political imaginary) are hindered by cynical/post-political subjectivities (Zizek 1996). Constructions (i.e. geographies) and understandings (i.e. consciousness) of the social will, therefore, inevitably frame what it is to be sustained. Without a critical examination of the social (Badiou 2002) in terms of metropolitan political relations and political subjectivities, it is, therefore, possible that policy initiatives aimed at social

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sustainability simply sustain the prevalent inequitable political relations and/or uneven development geographies (Harvey 2005). And after all, who is against sustainability?

Constructing social *sustainability*

If urban policies designed to generate social sustainability are largely concerned with making social things more sustainable, it is necessary to consider what making something sustainable actually means. Stren and Polese's (2000) identify what they believe to be six main areas of local urban governance concerned with social sustainability: governance, social and cultural policies, social infrastructure and public services, urban land and housing, urban transport and accessibility and employment, economic revitalisation and the building of inclusive public spaces. The field of social sustainability is further spread by Seguin and Germain (2000) who, when examining whether social sustainability is a local or state government concern, identify a range of matters affecting the cities social sustainability status: the localised effects of national policies, health and education, infrastructure and housing, local urban management and historical factors.

One is, therefore, left with the impression that sustainability is something that is simply there to be applied to existing areas of urban and social policy, and indeed that sustainability is a concept that can be applied across divergent areas of state. For example, the City of Sydney's *Sustainable Sydney 2030* vision includes chapters on (economic) competitiveness, environment, transport, walking and cycling, city centre, local communities, culture and creativity, housing, urban development and renewal and governance. Seemingly all will be subject to sustainability treatment: "Sustainable development is not just about the physical environment, but about the economy, society and cultures as well, and how addressing each, with bold ideas and good governance, will result in better outcomes for current and future communities" (City of Sydney 2008, p. 8). It, therefore, becomes necessary to critically evaluate what normatives are embedded within current policies.

Stren and Polese (2000) offer little guidance on how policy might be reformulated in order to become sustainable, other than in reference to the themes of harmony and cohesiveness. However, the usage of these two principles is illustrative for it highlights another set of issues that emerge in the context of where there is an absence of a discussion of social ethics. Although environmental sustainability has some quite clear objectives (Littig and Griessler 2005), for example, the maintenance of an ecosystem capable of retaining current levels and geographies of the earth's population, the equivalent social objectives are less obvious (Badiou 2002). As a consequence, it would appear there is the risk that social policy objectives are being driven by principles brought from certain ecological thesis that do not necessary contain demands for equitable or just outcomes.

Before questioning whether certain ecological principles are sound when transferred into social policy it is worth emphasising that the distinctions between these ontological categories are far from clear. As Harvey (1996) explains: "... all socio-political projects are ecological projects and vice versa... All critical examinations of the relation to nature are simultaneously critical examinations of society" (p. 174). This understanding of the dialectical relations between nature and society signals to the fact that ecological and social sustainability, no matter how independently they be perceived, are never unrelated. This stated, the ways in which questions of nature and society are approached are distinguishable. For example, there is, crudely, a clear divide between those who perceive nature to be external to the social world (i.e. realist) and therefore able to be subject to objective, positivist research and those (i.e. constructivist) who see nature as intricately bound-up and constitutive of the social (Haraway 1991). Whilst the social and

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ecological worlds may well be inseparable (Harvey 1996), the philosophical positions we use to make sense of them need not be.

There is, of course, extensive debate on the relations between ecological and social practice (Castree 2005). In particular, critical constructivist critiques have identified how nature has been increasingly remade through commodification (Castree and Braun 1998). However, the relations between ecological and social sustainability also need to be read in the other direction. In this sense, we have to be aware how social constructions of nature framed in debate about ecological sustainability are reflected back upon debate focused on social issues. This is also made all the more important since the quest for (ecological) sustainability has taken on such normative weight[5] (Swyngedouw 2007).

The potential transmission of ecological thinking into the social (sustainability) policy arena is illustrated by contrasting recent debate over the state of nature (Harvey 1996, Botkin 2001) with that on sustainable democracies (Baehler 2007). With reference to the natural environment, sustainability debate has become characterised by calls to return nature to its state of equilibrium, its natural balance. This represents a significant reprise of the Enlightenment's domination of nature project, where Descartes and Bacon proposed that humanity direct nature for its own desires (Vogel 1996). Yet, as the snowballing impact of capitalist production has moved ever closer to the centre of climate change debate, this position has become harder to hold. Importantly, it is now acknowledged that human activity has (at least) contributed to climatic change that may have unexpected, accumulating and disastrous consequences. Nature is, therefore, viewed as being pushed outside of its inherent equilibrium. However, such views are not unequivocally held. Biologist Botkin (2001) has challenged the societal notions of nature as based upon a static, balanced state of being, and proposed instead the idea that the natural world has consistently been in a state of imbalance: "We have tended to view nature as a Kodachrome still-life. . . but nature is a moving picture show" (Botkin 1992, p. 6). My point here is not to enter into a debate over the epistemology of nature, but rather to highlight how notions of nature remain tied to particular ontology. As such, calls for sustainability, made generally or with specific reference to particular pillars, can attach themselves to certain ontological and consequently epistemological positions – most notably notions about "equilibrium", "balance" and "stability".

In terms of social sustainability, it is possible to identify how a particular epistemology of nature might transpose itself. Baehler (2007) recently claimed De Tocqueville's famous problematic of democracy's two-edged sword is a concern for social sustainability. In De Tocqueville's account of nineteenth-century American democracy, he claimed that a contradiction lies at the heart of this political framework, namely that the liberating egalitarian politics of the fledging democracy came accompanied by the risk that majority politics might lead to undesirable uniformity, mediocrity and ultimately servitude.[6] Liberal democracies are, therefore, viewed to be walking a tight rope; they are required to balance out the contradictory tendencies in this political arrangement. For Baehler then: "we might venture to define social and political (or 'nationhood') sustainability as the ability of a society to resist internal forces of decay while also maintaining and reproducing the background social, cultural, and institutional conditions necessary for healthy democratic social relations to flourish" (p. 27). Social sustainability, therefore, becomes a practice of maintenance, the establishment of social arrangements that enable democratic politics to remain "in balance".[7]

Such perspectives have to be considered carefully. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) have drawn attention to the fact that the radical democratic ideals introduced by De Tocqueville have been subject to political reworking since they first appeared. Notably, they highlight the efforts of keystone neoliberals Hayek and Friedman: According to Hayek, "democracy

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(is) essentially a means, a utilitarian device for safeguarding internal peace and individual freedoms" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 172, citing Hayek 1944). For Hayek and Friedman, democracy functions to sustain the liberties of individuals, not organise any sense of social being. In criticising the hegemonic bloc that has emerged on the back of neoliberal thought, Laclau and Mouffe call for the balance of liberal democracy to be severely disrupted[8]: "*The task of the Left therefore cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy*" (p. 176 – emphasis in original). Here then, a radically different view of a sustainable society can be interpreted from Baehler's (2007). Opposed to being premised upon balance it is viewed as endlessly open:

> The fundamental obstacle in this task is the one to which we have been drawing attention [. . .]: essentialist apriorism, the conviction that the social is sutured at some point, from which it is possible to fix the meaning of any event independently of any articulated practice. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 177)

Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) perspective can, therefore, be used to reimagine a sustainable society as one where social movements, forms of democracy and the foundations of political action are constantly reworked. In radicalising democracy, they draw on Gramsci to "redimension the revolutionary act itself" (p. 178) and dismiss the historicist idea of political action as a chain of events. Here then, a sustainable form of democracy is not imbued with balance or equilibrium (Ranciere 2007): "This moment of tension, of openness, which gives the social its essentially incomplete and precarious character, is what every project for radical democracy should set out to institutionalize" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 190). This example highlights the potential problematic posed by putting sustainability into the social. Emerging from environmental roots, debates about sustainability have brought with them a host of ontological and epistemological baggage that is now interacting with other elements in the three-pillar model. And whilst conceptualisations of nature and a sustainable environment continue to be debated, discussion of how these understandings might also shape the ways in which we think about social (and economic) sustainability issues has been largely absent.

Conclusion: a politics in the social

Swyngedouw (2007, pp. 35–38) has recently criticised the mainstream sustainability movement as populist and post-political (Zizek 1999, Ranciere 2007) stating that before socio-environmental relations can be transformed, a radical repoliticisation of the economy is required. While this critique may certainly hold true, this paper has argued that debate around social sustainability may offer a potential site of politics. It has pointed to the politics embedded within the project of developing socially sustainable cities, particularly where the requirement of defining the social is always present in the form of the question: "what type of society do we want to sustain?" Within this question there exists latent political potential, for it demands social ethics to be placed at the forefront of debate. Whereas sustainability may not be a political project *per se*, within current metropolitan policy-making where social sustainability is being engaged with, their exists a place for politics to exist:

> . . .without a vision about what could be a different way of organizing social relations, one which restores the centrality of politics over the tyranny of market forces, those movements will remain of defensive nature. If one is to build a chain of equivalences among democratic

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> struggles, one needs to establish a frontier and define an adversary, but this is not enough. One also needs to know what one is fighting, what kind of society one wants to establish. . . (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. xix)

Badiou (2002) claims the Western political project based upon human rights is ultimately flawed since true politics defies the certain normative universality that this project suggests is possible. For Badiou, a true politics demands thought: "There is certainly a 'doing' *[faire]* of politics, but it is immediately the pure and simple experience of a thought, its localization. It cannot be distinguished from it" (Badiou 1997, cited in Hallward 2003, p. 224). It is, therefore, the collective act of political and ethical decision-making that is politics. This is exactly the location – the requirement of some universal project applicable to all (Badiou 2002) – that Zizek (2006, p. 574) finds political potential in.

When metropolitan governments commit to (social) sustainability the test for democratic urban politics is, therefore, not necessarily opening up a space of politics, but placing a social politics at the centre of debate, asserting the social and rejecting the potentially depoliticising act of applying sustainability. This means avoiding the normative weight of problematic stasis elements of environmental debate. It also means ensuring the political "social" framing of social sustainability is acted upon; therefore necessitating that those who respond with the cynicism of post-political rhetoric are challenged – in "the political" (Mouffe 1995) – under a functioning set of political institutions that enable the "the social" to exist. Of course, in demanding a social politics, we can question the requirement of sustainability at all. This stated, the policy visioning of sustainable cities currently underway in cities such as Vancouver and Sydney certainly offers a place of political opportunity and action. For those seeking a just, socially sustainable urban future the task may therefore require an engagement with policy-making, opposed to staying beyond this formal realm (Badiou 2002). But this must necessarily be at the point of policy conception, for it is at this stage that institutional politics and its policy-making can ask: what do we want to sustain?

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Notes

1. I intentionally leave "politics" undefined here, recognising that significant disagreement exists around the issue of what constitutes "politics". My engagement is broadly concerned with what Laclau and Mouffe (2001, p. 153) have called politics "as a practice of creation, reproduction and transformation of social relations". However, it should be recognised that Badiou (2002) certainly rejects this understanding.
2. Zizek (1998, p. 70) claims the post-politics era is one where: "the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties who compete for power is replaced by a collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists . . .) and liberal multiculturalists, via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus".
3. It is important to note here that disagreement (i.e. adversarial politics) does not define Mouffe's democratic politics. Rather, Mouffe (1995) argues consensus ("politics") – the act of establishing order – and conflict ("the political") – antagonistic positions – must be sustained in tension; there is a requirement that some form of "radical negativity" (Zizek 1998) persists in this mode of anti-essentialist democracy.
4. It is possible here to link Massey's (2007) call to politicise extra-local urban social relations with Ranciere's (2004) thoughts on globalisation and human rights where "rights that appear to be useless in their place are sent abroad, along with medicine and clothes, to people deprived of medicine, clothes, and rights" (p. 307).
5. This stated the seeming persuasiveness of arguments for (ecological) sustainability does not necessarily correlate with consistent public support for related reform.

6. Notably, and with reference to Zizek's (1989) claims regarding social consciousness, De Tocqueville (1956) argued that the threat of despotism "would be more extensive and more mild; it would degrade men without tormenting them" (p. 302) and "servitude of the regular, quiet, and gentle kind [. . .] might be combined more easily than is commonly believed with some of the outward forms of freedom, and that it might even establish itself under the wing of the sovereignty of the people" (p. 304).
7. Here the same principles of harmony and balance that Stren and Polese (2000) adopt are invoked to elucidate sustainability.
8. Mouffe (2000) has subsequently gone onto develop the notions of "antagonistic pluralism" and "the democratic paradox" to critique rationalising understandings of democracy (i.e. aggregative and deliberative types).

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