

## **Social Sustainability, Politics and Governance**

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### **Introduction**

Does social sustainability carry any political meaning? The answer to this question is not obvious. Since the 1990s, sustainability has proven a rallying call for policy makers and activists of many stripes. Emerging alongside a growing scientific concern with climate change, sustainability has transformed contemporary political and policy thought. As such, it is unlikely to go away any time soon. As the triple-bottom-line (TBL) conceptualization of sustainability (Elkington, 1997) has gained widespread acceptance, public debates have become more focused upon developing programs for sustainability's constitutive elements. If we evaluate the effectiveness of the concept of sustainability in terms of popularity – including TBL variants – it appears to have been a highly effective idea that is commonly used to think about various forms of change.

Yet, we can claim that sustainability has utterly failed. Although it has changed the way people think about environmental, social and economic issues, it is often charged with only marginally

influencing material processes (e.g. Swyngedouw, 2007). If we measure the success of sustainability agendas against the initial premise – that we need to create a more sustainable environmental relationship between Planet Earth and humans (United Nations, 1987) – perhaps all we can claim to have done is heighten our awareness about unprecedented climatic trauma (Crutzen, 2006). Of course, sustainability is only a concept and it is unrealistic to expect that an idea alone can transform complex human-environment relationships. We may simply need more time for action to be stimulated by new ways of thinking.

Others see the situation differently. Some now consider sustainability an archetypal element of what is referred to as the “post-political” (Swyngedouw, 2010). The primary charge made against sustainability is that it has failed to mobilize necessary political change and perpetuated the status quo. It has generated a situation whereby everyone is for sustainability, but few have mobilized change (ibid.). This combination of widespread agreement and absence of social change is the opposite of “politics” for Jacques Rancière (1999). Politics, in the Rancière (1999) formulation, is premised upon the production of disagreement. Politics involve the pitting of one world against another. Politics are about a certain type of demand that transforms the world from which the demand emanates. It is here that sustainability is open to critique. One has only to compare language used by Greenpeace<sup>1</sup> and British Petroleum<sup>2</sup> to see problem: both are strong advocates of sustainability, thus showing that the concept does not seem to realize the disagreements that clearly exist between the two parties.

Without clear political content (i.e. disagreement), the utility of the (social) sustainability concept might well be in doubt. In theoretical terms, we might be witnessing the end of

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/sustainable-agriculture/issues/>

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/sustainability.html>

sustainability as an organizing concept. This is not to say that the word sustainability will simply disappear. The immediate associational discursive power of sustainability – that is its ideological operation (Laclau, 2006; Žižek, 1989) – will remain important. Its appeal to notions of environmental stability, inter-generational equity, long-term solutions and holistic thinking will ensure it remains an important political and policy idea. Rather I am arguing that these types of associational meanings are coming under increasing pressure, to the extent that sustainability may be a concept now used in largely cynical ways.

In this chapter, I therefore want to define and examine the political meaning of social sustainability. I begin by examining some of the different iterations of social sustainability that have been developed across academic literatures. This is not intended as a comprehensive review of the existing uses of social sustainability. Rather the goal is to highlight some of the political implications of existing definitions and develop a critical interpretation of usage variance itself. By identifying the multiple and varied usage of “social sustainability”, the chapter sets up the problem of how a seemingly fuzzy concept comes to operate in a highly popular and influential manner. I answer this by arguing that social sustainability is an empty signifier (Davidson, 2010a). From this perspective, we can then understand why (social) sustainability seems so widely accepted but often lacks accompanying transformative action. Sustainability might therefore be an exemplary concept of what Slavoj Žižek (2011) calls “the end times”. However, I want to argue that this need not be the case. Sustainability and, in particular, social sustainability, needs to become more closely linked with the idea of democracy. Whether in the mould of Rancière’s (1999) radical tradition or Dewey’s (1989) pragmatism, social sustainability needs to become political in direct reference to democratic equality.

## **Defining the Political Meaning of Social Sustainability**

A broad societal embrace of social sustainability stems from the recognition that environmental sustainability cannot be divorced from broader processes (United Nations, 1987). Most famously, the 1987 Brundtland Commission report rejected the idea that socio-environmental problems can be neatly separated:

“Until recently, the planet was a large world in which human activities and their effects were neatly compartmentalized within nations, within sectors (energy, agriculture, trade), and within broad areas of concern (environment, economics, social). These compartments have begun to dissolve. This applies in particular to the various global 'crises' that have seized public concern, particularly over the past decade. These are not separate crises: an environmental crisis, a development crisis, an energy crisis. They are all one.” (United Nations, 1987: 10)

The concept of sustainability that emerged from this period is one that insisted on interconnections and a rejection of silo thinking. The TBL conceptualizations of sustainability (Elkington, 1997) that subsequently developed have generated a heightened awareness that ecological problems cannot be solved without an insistence on economic and social sustainability. Yet despite the obvious benefits of interconnected concepts like TBL sustainability, it does not remove the need to define just what the constituent elements of the TBL approach are. Unfortunately, or perhaps by necessity, these efforts to define the constitutive elements of TBL sustainability – environmental, economic and social (and sometimes cultural) – often result in some decoupling of the constituting elements.

There is now an extensive literature that attempts to define social sustainability (Dempsey et al. 2011). In their examination of social sustainability, Stren and Polese (2000) developed an understanding of social sustainability that can stand independently of any concern with the environmental and economic components of the TBL:

“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” (16-17 – emphasis in original).

In this formulation, social sustainability concerns harmony, cohabitation, diversity, integration and distributional justice. The vision presented is progressive, setting up a sustainable society as one that respects difference, enables social mixing, and delivers growing prosperity to all. When placed in the context of cities, Yiftachel and Hedgcock’s (1993: 139-140) search for a definition comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that a socially sustainable city is one that involves interaction and development across all groups.

Stren and Polese’s (2000) definition helps to demonstrate some of the conceptual separation that occurs when the constituent elements of the TBL are individually defined. Unlike environmental sustainability, where normative or political judgements can be avoided by an appeal to global climate degradation (United Nations, 1987; Swyngedouw, 2010), social sustainability seems to move quickly into normative territory. Furthermore, social sustainability lacks the apparent meaning of environmental sustainability. Public understandings of environmental sustainability are often connected to climate change science (Brulle et al. 2012; Crutzen, 2006). As such, the concept of environmental sustainability carries as great deal of implicit content. For example, it

is easily assumed that environmental sustainability policies work towards making our environmental conditions compatible with the foreseeable inhabitation of Earth by humans. The political content of the concept is muted by appeals to issues such as extinction and inter-generational equity. The same implicit content often cannot be identified with social sustainability (see Maloutas, 2003; Marcuse, 1998).

Definitions of social sustainability therefore tend to be weaker compared to the TBL counterparts. For example, from his excellent review of the social sustainability literature, McKenzie (2004: 12) developed the following conceptualization: “a life-enhancing condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition.” While straightforward enough, the definition begs the question of what is “life enhancing”, and what might a life-enhancing condition for one community mean for another? Any number of justice theories might be applied to this problem, from Aristotle’s “good life” through to John Rawls’ (1999) disinterested liberalism. Maloutas (2003) is therefore correct to argue that social sustainability tends to lack any consistent normative message. Consequently, Maloutas (2003) has argued that social sustainability tends to be subservient to other TBL components. Environmental sustainability initiatives, he argues, are often stripped down to social programming goals in order that the environmental reforms can be implemented. Political calculation can therefore trump any commitment to TBL sustainability. Due to this political expediency, Maloutas (2003: 168) goes onto argue that the normative content of social sustainability usually takes a conservative form. While some theorists and politicians might take the idea of “life enhancing” to suggest radical social reform, what usually happens is that appeals to less prescriptive ideas like inclusion and cohesion are preferred.

Definitions of social sustainability might therefore be restrained by the environmental component of TBL sustainability. Yiftachel and Hedgcock (1993) took just this approach. They argued that “the concept of urban social sustainability conceives the city as a backdrop for lasting and meaningful social relations that meet the social needs of present and future generations” (ibid. p. 140). Borrowing from environmental debates and the associated concern of inter-generational equity, this formulation looks at social sustainability as a social quality. Indeed, one can imagine the construction of certain empirical tests that project out social trends to forecast some kind of unsustainable breaking point. Think, for example, of Thomas Piketty’s (2013) headline grabbing work on the relationship between capitalist wealth creation and social inequality. Using Yiftachel and Hedgcock’s (1993) definition, we might transform Piketty’s now famous graphs of widening inequality into a social sustainability concern: continuing inequality trends do not permit the meeting of future social needs, hence the situation is socially unsustainable.

Here we can begin to see how the recent concern with social sustainability might relate to more longstanding political debates. Bahler (2007) argues that social sustainability is usually a concept that just reworks longstanding social problems. These are the types of problems that democracy emerged as a solution to: “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” (Bahler, 2007: 27). Whether or not a democratic social arrangement and associated institutions would survive was, of course, a central concern of 19<sup>th</sup> century political commentators like de Tocqueville (see Bahler, 2007). Although the term social sustainability was not used by 19<sup>th</sup> century political commentators, it is clear that de

Tocqueville's commentary on the early American democratic experiment is motivated, in large part, by the question of whether or not it would persist. de Tocqueville saw early American appeals of equality and democratic government to be powerful enough to persist, however he became concerned with whether the situation in emergence, popular representative democracy, would be worth sustaining. de Tocqueville's 1840 comments predicted a sustainable but undesirable situation:

“It does not break men's will, but softens, bends, and guides it; it seldom enjoins, but often inhibits, action; it does not destroy anything, but prevents much being born; it is not at all tyrannical, but it hinders, restrains, enervates, stifles, and stultifies so much that in the end each nation is no more than a flock of timid and hardworking animals with the government as its shepherd.”

By placing our concern with social sustainability within this context, some of the contradictions of the term become more apparent. Most theorists of social sustainability have argued that sustainable societies embrace equality, integration and distributional justice. All fair enough, but what underpins our commitment to these values, and why? Reading de Tocqueville into this discussion makes us aware that the idea of social sustainability brings us very close to the original questions of political philosophy: What is the good life? What is a good society? And as de Tocqueville's own investigations of Jefferson's emerging democratic experiment demonstrated, just because a society might be attempting to achieve noble goals does not mean it is, by definition, sustainable. We can therefore find ourselves in a circular inquiry: When we aim to make our society sustainable, we make it a requirement to identify what type of society we want. Yet when we do this, there is no guarantee that we come closer to knowing if it is



sustainable or worth sustaining. It is therefore necessary to think more about what kind of conceptual work we need social sustainability to perform.

### **Conceptualizing Social Sustainability as an Empty Signifier**

The academic literature's uncertainty (Dempsey et al. 2011) about the concept of social sustainability is not mirrored in the policy world. Here the idea of social sustainability is widespread, and many policy programs are formulated around the concept (Davidson, 2010b). This appears to be a strange situation. Perhaps we are faced with multiple versions of social sustainability that will, eventually, become a coherent concept? Or perhaps social sustainability is yet another "fuzzy concept" that varies dramatically depending on the context where it is applied? In this section I suggest that social sustainability – as part of sustainability more generally – operates as an empty signifier (Davidson, 2010a; Laclau, 2007). An empty signifier is a term that performs an organizing duty within a social discourse (i.e. ideology) but lacks any definitive content itself. For Barthes (1957[2011]), the empty signifier is without any certain signified. It is purely pivot point, something used to orientate a set of other concepts (Gunder, 2004).

Where social problems that might have previously been framed by "social injustice", "inequality" or "deviance", for example, they now find themselves organized around the idea of sustainability. As an empty signifier, social sustainability can function to turn disordered thoughts into coherent understanding (see Žižek, 2006a). There are many conceptual implications involved in understanding (social) sustainability in this way (see Davidson, 2010a).

Here I want to highlight just one. This relates to what political philosopher Ernesto Laclau (2007) called the nominal status of empty signifiers.

Empty signifiers like social sustainability are distinguished from other concepts by the fact they have a nominal status:

“It is a name... 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” (Laclau, 2006: 109)

Laclau (2006) is here arguing that many of the ideas with which we organize our collective understandings are nothing but names. These names are distinguished from concepts because they bring with them certain organizing principles. If (social) sustainability were therefore a fuzzy concept (Markusen, 2003), you would be able to see certain types of understanding within various manifestations. This creates the opportunity for refinement. For example, you could take multiple understandings and/or applications of social sustainability and seek to produce a less fuzzy concept over time (ibid.). In contrast, an empty signifier is much more unstable and can therefore carry with it radically different meanings. Although this nominal, empty status might first appear to be a damning weakness, philosophers such as Laclau and Žižek (1989) have attempted to demonstrate how empty signifiers perform foundational ideological functions.

The nominal purpose of the empty signifier is reflective, performing a kind of stoppage in the prevailing ideology. One can think of this in terms of the multiple possible meanings of most concepts. If all meanings were constantly in flux, the ideology would not perform any useful

social function. Empty signifiers therefore act to quilt the free-floating ideological elements, making them into a “structured network of meaning” (Žižek, 1989: 87). Coherence is therefore delivered by naming, not a sublimation of meaning by an ordering concept. In the former way, a mastering concept would deliver meaning to its secondary concepts. A nominal, empty signifier functions in the opposite manner, having no immediate conceptual export. Rather meaning and understanding are generated by the way the act of naming itself organizes secondary concepts into relations, enabling meaningful content to flow back to the nominal.

Throughout his philosophical works, Žižek (1989) has attempted to demonstrate the implications of this understanding of empty signifiers and ideology. A core part of this effort has been informed by the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan. Žižek argues that empty signifiers are voids, names with no inherent content. In respect to this discussion, we can say social policies are often organized around the idea of social sustainability, but that the idea of social sustainability itself has little positive content. One unavoidable issue with this arrangement is that the void of the nominal takes on a traumatic quality. Borrowing from psychoanalysis, Žižek argues that the importance of the naming process is always clear: it brings coherence. However, if we probe too much into what the name itself contains, then a traumatic experience can occur. This can be illustrated with a couple of examples.

First, imagine a psychotherapy group (see Urban, 2008). The whole purpose of this type of therapy is that a group setting enables certain kinds of healing to occur. Everyone therefore shows up at the therapy session assuming a “group” is there, and that they will interact with the group in a way that is therapeutic. However, the group does not exist in any positive sense. Rather a group of individuals comes together all assuming something with the qualities of a group exists in order to access the therapy. The group only exists in so much as the individual

members assume it exists. If members of the group started to try and understand what the “group” is, they would likely find themselves with different understandings, potentially demonstrating there is nothing that can be substantially described as “the group”. Hence, a disorienting trauma may ensue, and the therapy breaks down. Yet, key to this example, is that despite “the group” being nothing in a positive sense, it still functions as a constructive therapeutic device.

Transfer this same understanding to the second example. Here we are in a policy making process where a group of people are attempting to deliver more socially sustainable outcomes. Everyone is agreed on the idea, or at least is being paid to develop socially sustainable policies, and they start by examining various areas of policy: housing, unemployment benefit, vocational training, and so on. They adopt a particular understanding of social sustainability based on something like McKenzie’s (2004) life enhancing condition. But then someone starts to question what the idea of social sustainability actually means? Is it about sustaining the existing society, or building a sustainable society? What is sustainable anyway, and does sustainability mean unnecessarily preserving certain social processes? Given social sustainability is itself empty of definitive content, and only able to be defined by a set of unstable relational concepts, we end up in a similarly traumatic process to the first example. The web of meaning we have used to orientate our social and individual actions can begin to dissolve, generating disorienting trauma.

Žižek (2006) describes this as the empty signifier always ultimately failing. The concepts that we collectively use to organize our social actions are therefore always on the edge of collapse.

Drawing from post-structuralist linguistic theory (Torfing, 2009), Žižek’s theorization is important for understanding of social sustainability because it recognizes the necessity of empty signifiers in our ideological makeup, but also describes their untameable constitution. They are

both indispensable and inherently problematic. We should therefore recognize that social sustainability definitions are multiple and that they all rely on the induction of secondary concepts. We should also recognize that any attempt to produce a master conceptualization of social sustainability is probably doomed from the start. This would be, for Žižek, the dream of a post-ideological time. So, where do we go from here?

### **Social Sustainability in a Time of Crisis**

Understanding social sustainability as an empty term does not mean it is useless. Most of the terms we use to coordinate social action – equality, justice, community – have a similar constitution (Laclau, 2006; 2007). What we must do is critically examine how useful a particular construct, such as social sustainability, is at any one time. This position is familiar for any reader of the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey (1925). Dewey (1925), although coming from a different philosophical position than Laclau or Žižek, argued against the idea that we could secure transcendental concepts to anchor human action. Setting up his post-foundational position, Dewey argued that we must always revisit how our intellectual frameworks measure up as interpretative devices:

“It warns us that all intellectual terms are the products of discrimination and classification, and that we must, as philosophers, go back to the primitive situations of life that antecede and generate these reflective interpretations, so that we re-live former processes of interpretation in a wary manner, with eyes constantly upon the things to which they refer. Thus empiricism is the truly critical method; it puts us knowingly and

cautiously through steps which were first taken uncritically, and exposed to all kinds of adventitious influence” (REF)

Dewey (1925) is arguing for a critical, reflective and empirically informed method of conceptual development. He argued we must always be careful not to use our conceptual schemes in a dogmatic or unreflective manner, otherwise we risk using abstractions that distort and degrade our engagements with the world. To somewhat over-simplify, Dewey wanted philosophy to continually ask how useful it was to the achievement of human ends. If we return to social sustainability, a recognition of its empty signifier status need not trap us in some nihilistic or relativist position. Instead, we can interrogate how useful the concept social sustainability is at this moment in time.

We can start this task by folding the current discussion of social sustainability back into a broader concern with sustainability. For philosophers like Žižek (2006), the idea of systemic crisis is linked to a host of deep, interlocked contradictions, specifically environmental change, biogenetics, intellectual property and new social apartheid. These contradictions stand out for Žižek (2006) since their resolution remains outside of the current coordinates of liberal democratic capitalism. Nancy Fraser (2015) has offered a similar critique of our current social condition, arguing that financialized capitalism is undergoing an unprecedented legitimization crisis. Fraser (2015) is here borrowing from Jurgen Habermas’ (1975) theory of legitimation crisis. Habermas (1975) argued that the intermittent crises of capitalist economies tend to be shifted into the political sphere. Rather than resolving a crisis of economic accumulation, the problem is therefore moved around, causing a host of state restructuring problems. Fraser (2015) has argued that we now face a situation where crises are not being displaced. Rather we are undergoing a set of concurrent crises in the economic, political and social spheres. A route out of

the economic crisis is therefore much more difficult, and so on. Such a situation demands types of thinking that can produce radical and remedial social change.

Fraser's (2015) thesis gives us pause to assess what role the concepts of sustainability (in general) and social sustainability (specifically) play today. When sustainability emerged in the 1980s, it was an empty signifier commonly related to notions of climate stability, safe limits and homeostasis (Elkington, 1997; United Nations, 1987). Sustainability literature at the time was principally concerned about climate change, with many accounts thinking that climatic balance might be restored (ibid.). Today's literature reads differently (Crutzen, 2006). Now we are faced with questions of climate uncertainty, instability, mass extinctions, long-term refugee crises, the Anthropocene and planetary exodus. Unwittingly or not, expectations have shifted about our climatic future. As time goes by, the future we are willing to live with and pass onto our kids has changed. Descriptions of the Anthropocene symbolize a new type of thinking about human-environment relations that should make us reflect on whether sustainability concepts remain relevant today.

As we enter the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2006), we are certainly moving into uncharted territories. Due to an oligarchic global political structure and the failure of our democratic institutions, we now require a radical embrace of the new climatic period (Žižek, 2011). Within the climate science community, there appears broad agreement that there is no going back. We now have two options, neither of which relate to the ideas of return, balance or predictable futures; all central associations of sustainability. Our two choices seem to be a passive move into an unpredictable climatic condition – something that moves us beyond any appeal to resilience – or a radical re-imagining of human-environmental relations whereby things such as geo-engineered remedial solutions are used to manage the planetary system as a human technology

(Wigley, 2006). The latter constitutes nothing less than a rethinking of human civilization and its relationship to Planet Earth. It also involves taking on a degree of environmental responsibility that so far has evaded the capacity of our political institutions.

Of course, we have also to relate this environmental debate with the social and economic spheres if we are to assess the total future relevance of sustainability. Here I think we find a similar story of crisis and the need for radical solutions that challenge the efficacy of sustainability thinking.

In the social sphere, we see Victorian-level socio-economic divides (Piketty, 2013) and tribalistic forms of politics (Rancière, 1999) that, by definition, deny any type of universal emancipatory dimension. This is the post-political condition where different groups compete over certain resources without any recourse to universally-accepted forms of political reason (Swyngedouw, 2010). Within societies that proclaim themselves to be democratic, this universal dimension is meant to be inscribed in the equality presumption:

“Such justice only begins wherever uses stop being parceled out, wherever profits and losses stop being weighed. Justice as the basis of community has not yet come into play wherever the sole concern is with preventing individuals who live together from doing each other reciprocal wrongs and with reestablishing the balance of profits and losses whenever they do so. It only begins when what is at issue is what citizens have *in common* and when the main concern is with the way the forms of exercising and of controlling the exercising of this common capacity are divided up.” (Rancière, 1999; 4-5)

A concern with what is in common is, of course, difficult to identify today. As Peter Sloterdijk (2011) has extensively described, our societies are characterized by bubbles; lives lived in separation where the idea of tolerance takes the form of a demand against harassment. “Let me



be, and do not come too close” is the radical injunction of multicultural tolerance, according to Žižek et al. (2004).

The post-political moment is therefore paradoxical. Our societies are legitimated by an appeal to democratic equality, and yet this is manifest in a fractured and divided socio-political landscape where the normative assessment of social difference is resisted on psychological and political basis. The converse of this is situation is, of course, that the emergence of the political demand that harasses – “you must change your life” – is too easily dismissed as another round of tribalistic conflict.

Things do not look much better in the economic sphere. As Nancy Fraser (2015) argues, financialized capitalism has transmitted crises across all spheres. The consequent inability for capitalism to displace and temporarily resolve its legitimation crisis therefore appears lacking. One consequence has been the creation of a political landscape where governance appears devoid of government. States appear unable to do much to reconstruct economic processes into less unstable and more equitable forms. If Fraser (2015) is correct, the implications of capitalism’s failure to displace its legitimation crisis are profound. With productivity gains hard to find in developed economies, lagging growth undermining the social model that has been erected over the past 40 years, and states appearing inept despite reforms with an overtly non-democratic form, the bargain between capitalism and liberal democracy looks to be breaking down (Brown, 2003). Questions of sustaining our economy, or even building a sustainable form of capitalism, appear to have become potentially superseded by our shared radical challenges.

This rather grim picture presents significant challenges to sustainability scholars. In part, this is due to the crisis scene that has emerged within the broad-based embrace of sustainability. It is not that sustainability thinking has been lacking, but rather that its appeals seem to have faded in

comparison to more powerful processes. If we are to confront the unfolding crisis, do we therefore double-down on sustainability, pursuing the idea as a mechanism to deliver the manifold promises of the TBL approach? I fear not. As we move across the interlocking crisis of the present moment, I think we will likely require a reorganization of our ideological engagement. Sustainability will remain an important idea, but the powerful associational meaning of the idea must be supplemented with a commitment to democracy. The idea of sustainability has not enabled us to make the necessary political distinctions. To put it in Carl Schmitt's terms, sustainability has become an idea that does not demark them and us, that distinction that is the lifeblood of politics (Mouffe, 2005). My proposal is therefore that social sustainability becomes an idea that is subservient to an ancient idea: democracy (Rancière, 1999). Social sustainability must denote the ancient concern of all democrats: how do we sustain and achieve the democratic condition despite countervailing forces?

### **Towards a Democratic Social Sustainability**

The proposition is that making social sustainability a useful concept (Dewey, 1925) requires linking it more explicitly with democracy. Put differently, the only legitimate form of social order to maintain/sustain is democratic (see Rancière, 1999). Here I do not mean the ballot box and elections, but rather with what Jacques Rancière (2006) describes as the logic of democracy: equality. Rancière (2006: 45) claims that: "If politics means anything, it means something that is added to all these governments of paternity, age, wealth, force and science". Democratic politics are founded on a "primary limitation of the forms of authority that govern the social body" (ibid.: 45). With the absence of a title to govern, all forms of authority must be assessed with regards to political claims, that is, disagreements over the equal status of peoples. This is why Rancière

finds the notion of “consensus democracy” a “conjunction of contradictory terms” (Rancière, 1999: 95). The problem of social sustainability must therefore be brought into dialogue with the only legitimate mode of social ordering to become effective. It must adopt what Rancière describes as the core of politics: “Every politics is democratic in this precise sense: not in the sense of a set of institutions, but in the sense of forms of expression that confront the logic of equality with the logic of the police order” (101). A commitment to democratic politics, in Rancière’s (1999) sense, will have many impacts on understandings of social sustainability. I want to conclude by discussing two implications of a democratic commitment relating to the associated meaning and conceptual linkages of social sustainability.

First, a commitment to democratic theorizing will strip away connotations of balance and stasis from social sustainability and replace them with the necessity that equality is inscribed on the forever-emerging (i.e. not balanced) social form. The democratic political operation is not a demand for equality, but rather a demand premised on the equality of each with all. If governmental authority does not affirm the equality of all, then it, by definition, becomes illegitimate. Politics therefore consistently lodges one world against another; the existing order assessed against the commitment to equality. Democratic politics consists of those actions that reject existing identifications through a process of political subjectification. For Rancière (1999) democracy is therefore an ongoing process, and this form of politics is defined by the emergence and the democratic evaluation of (political) disagreements.

The power of this approach lies in its ability to insert the universal dimension of politics into particular struggles. Whereas sustainability attempts offer an all-encompassing understanding of complex, interwoven processes, a concern with democracy can only be mobilized within the particular. That is, we can only assess the status of equality within the context of particular

claims (Davidson and Iveson, 2015). As we come to live in an epoch of multiple, interlocking crises, sustainability has emerged as a response that seeks to provide an overarching approach. Rancière's (1999) formulation of democratic politics can make us question this top-down orientation. In the social sphere, change will necessarily require an assessment of disagreements. If we move to the particular, each case of disagreement, we begin to examine how a commitment to democracy changes our perspective on a host of social issues. In each particular social struggle, we can ask two questions: "Are things sustainable?" and "Are things democratic?". Without an affirmative answer on the latter, the goal of making something sustainable becomes nonsensical.

The final implication of the coupling of democracy and social sustainability I want to cover here concerns the broader relationship between social sustainability and the TBL. The TBL approach to sustainability carries with it significant import from environmental issues. Given the empty signifier status of all the constituting elements, there is inevitably an influence on the content of social sustainability by the other parts of the TBL. For example, powerful environmental sustainability ideas such as ecological balance and ecosystem stability can easily transfer into ideas of neighbourhood stability and social conservatism. However, we must be cautious of unwittingly accepting this type of conceptual influence (see Dewey, 1925). It may be that although the popularity of social sustainability emerged from the power of the TBL approach, a search for the utility of social sustainability demonstrates the need to distinguish between the sustainability concepts. Put simply, the idea of democracy – as change and disagreement – may often be overshadowed by the demands of other TBL elements. Our commitment to the TBL theorization should therefore be subject to the same tests of any concept: is it useful to the

situation we are encountering? Without this type of reflection, we have a well-meaning commitment to sustainability thinking that is ineffective in practice (Dewey, 1925).

In this chapter, I have argued that (a) there are multiple definitions of social sustainability, (b) that social sustainability is an empty signifier, (c) that we must assess social sustainability based on its utility, (d) that the utility of (social) sustainability is brought into question during our times of crises, (e) and that we can regain its utility with a serious engagement with the idea of democracy. Each of these steps in the argument is undertaken to find a way out of the current situation: a demand for more sustainable futures in the context of limited action. With respect to social sustainability, this might involve (i) rethinking how we approach notions of social change and (ii) critically interrogating the ways in which the TBL couching of social sustainability creates potentially counter-productive modes of thought. In summary, there is a great deal of empirical and conceptual needed. Yet conceptual development alone will not suffice. We must also turn our attention to those democratic institutions that are meant to enable our democratic commitments. It is in these institutions that we can find a route to a socially sustainable society that we might want to live in. As the social condition tells us, there is much work to be done.

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