

# The ideology of sustainability and the globalization of a future

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## Abstract

Through its moving frontiers, the ideology of sustainability prescribes or challenges orderings in the imaginary of societies. Accordingly, sustainability leads to obvious struggles between different systems of representations worldwide, and temporal orderliness is at the core of these battles. In this article, I focus on the future. Domesticating the future by sustainability is a central element, in particular, of the cultural confrontation between the ‘West and the Rest’. Moreover, the ideology of sustainability proves to be self-contradictory: on one side promotes cultural diversity, but on the other side operates only under a singular and homogeneous construct of the future.

## Keywords

Sustainability, future, development, imaginaries, representations

## Introduction

Environmentalists demand sustainable ecosystems. Aid institutions demand sustainable development. Citizens demand sustainable lifestyles. Urban populations demand sustainable cities. Workers demand sustainable jobs. Entrepreneurs demand sustainable empowerment. Customers demand sustainable products. Students demand sustainable careers. A particular set of demands are being made by many, and increasingly have taken root everywhere: from urban to rural settings, from consumers to producers, from professors to students, from young activists to experienced

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entrepreneurs. Sustainability and its parental concept 'sustainable development' are being demanded in almost all the spheres of social life, taking a prominent position in the ordering of the world. What sense can we make of these demands?

It is often said, but it needs emphasizing here, that demanding sustainability was officially introduced into world affairs with the famous World Commission on Environment and Development's declaration of 1987, called *Our Common Future*. Accordingly, 'sustainable development' was declared to be 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 43). Still, the clarification of what constituted 'the needs of the present' remained uncertain. The idea of sustainability was not new in 1987. However, *Our Common Future* represented the first high-profile attempt at conceptualizing it. Also known as the 'Brundland Report', this declaration was instrumental in injecting into the mainstream a new type of social responsiveness anchored in a powerful imaginary: the future. As such, it brought out a new ideology of time, leading to a global politics of potentialities.

The association of sustainability with the future goes beyond conjecture and deals empirically with the future itself, which means with its representations. As the anthropology of time shows us, collective representations of the future 'are both *derived from* society and also *dictate to* society' (Gell, 1996: 4). That is to say, the future is inaccessible except as a representation, an imaginary defined in the present (Bourdieu, 1963: 61–62) driving and deriving from societies. In this view, the future is a social construct and a way of organizing knowledge: it is about creating rather than describing 'reality'. So the obvious questions that arise from these are: what representations and imaginaries about the future are being projected that support sustainable interventions? How are these representations and imaginaries being produced and reproduced, and how are they changing or reinforcing systems of choices and social organization in the present? What are the forces behind the globalization of (the idea of) the 'common future'? And, more importantly, who are the ones working in such representations and imaginaries that, in turn, legitimize sustainable development interventions?

The calls for sustainability resonate with the rise of new understandings, which means that sustainability confers social power by conferring knowledge. Demanding a sustainable future for the planet legitimizes the ideology of sustainability to provide the world with representations, values,

knowledges, goals and conducts in and for the present. Hence, most societies have progressively become idealized by a global elite in reference to such authoritative principles. Where I want to focus, however, is in what has been labelled as the 'South'. While it is evident that my engagement in the 'South' comes from my fieldwork in the buffer zone of a trans-frontier conservation area in Mozambique,<sup>1</sup> in Southern Africa, my interest is also grounded in a more theoretical perspective. Generally speaking, this article explores the processes of moralizing policies of intervention through the globalization of representations, namely, of the future.

The ongoing universalization of sustainability is conquering new territories through an intense battle taking place in the field of representations. This should be no surprise, but rather the obvious outcome of forms used by the contemporary politics of domination. More than military conquests, economic dominance or colonial physical occupation, modern global power essentially takes the form of representation. As we will see, sustainability emerged from a world elite aspiring to be a representational universalizing authority and, despite its rhetoric of democratization and local participation, it has been maintained as an elite domain. In particular, the construction and globalization of a 'common future' operates side by side with neoliberalism's moving frontiers; a geographical progression that offers far bigger rewards to those at the top of their game, be they technical consultants, development experts or fund managers. As such, the implementation of sustainable development programmes in the 'South' serves mostly, directly or indirectly, to reinforce the power, knowledge and leadership of a dominating regime over historically subjugated societies.

Before coming to the crux of the matter, let me clarify that it is not my intention in this article to oppose the idea of what anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1979: 140) characterized as the 'inappropriate, infelicitous, and maladaptive' global impact of fast industrialization and growing consumerism, particularly on the environment. Rather, I attempt to deconstruct some of the politics of opportunity that such an idea camouflages. In this sense, I am concerned with ideology, not cognition. The aim here is to bring anthropological sensibility to a domain not scrutinized in this way; that is, the politics of temporality implicit in sustainability and 'ecological morality' (Hache and Latour, 2010). As I will try to demonstrate, in the face of the transnational advocacy of participatory regimes – in which local peoples are stimulated to participate in broader development schemes – the spread of sustainable planning throughout the world has generated conflicts between different cultural interpretations of the future. This, in turn, contradicts and impedes the prosecution of sustainability as it has been

morally and rhetorically advocated worldwide: that is, through the incantation of cultural diversity. Therefore, sustainability will be approached here through its commitment to constructing and homogenizing time, space and consciousness.

## The determination of the future

In the late 1980s, prominent ecologist Robert McIntosh (1987: 321) began an article as follows: 'Ecologists are in a period of retrenchment, soul searching, "extraordinary introspection"'. His words were indicative of the emergence of a new movement. Richard Norgaard (1988: 613), among others, clarified it shortly after: 'sustainability is becoming the clarification of a new age'. But what, precisely, is sustainability?

As is common with many other authoritative categories of modernity, the term 'sustainability' is diffuse. To identify all its ramifications is an interminable task. Basically, sustainability is not only about resources, it embraces a wide range of meanings, values, symbols, imaginaries, definitions and implications. A review of its use shows relevant differences in emphasis. Some link it with the natural environment, while others with technology; some spot urban development, while others emphasize rural development; some associate it with processes of change, while others with continuity; some refer to it as an empty cliché of policymakers, while others as a normative reasoning of morality; some declare it as a set of flexible discourses, while others as a pragmatic tool; some say it derives from an exaggerated ecological panic of the 'West', while others consider it the proper response to global environmental change. From this, it is no surprise that 'sustainability has always lacked conceptual clarity' (Butcher, 2003: 27). Empirically, this has been demonstrated by many anthropologists. For example, in relation to the Penan population in Brunei, J. Peter Brosius (2008: 376) said: 'Whatever their disagreements, Northern NGOs, the Malaysian government, and the International Tropical Timber Organization had in common the fact that none was sure what "sustainability" meant'.

Still, regardless of its meanings and unmeaning, sustainability is an omnipresent 'globally circulating social category' (Tsing, 2008: 393) that conducts social ways of perceiving and induces forms of seeing. As is mentioned in an ample body of literature, categories and other languages of knowing do create objects and subjects within a particular regime of political, social and economic power. In this sense, categories, such as 'sustainability', do more than 'misunderstand social reality; they also shape it' (Ferguson, 2006: 7). More important still, they generate a moral domain according to which (some) peoples have to live. This is important to keep in

mind because, as it is explicit in the historic declaration's title – *Our Common Future* –, and despite its inconsistencies, most of the existing perspectives on and aspirations of sustainability seem to share two shaping aspects: globalism and temporality.

On 17 August 2009, the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, made a speech at the Forum on Climate Change and Sustainable Development in Asia and Africa, where he said: 'Never has the imperative of acting together been so clear. Our future will depend, quite literally, on how well we come together in common cause'.<sup>2</sup> Future and global togetherness have become key ideas in the sustainable ordering of the world. Following from this, in accordance with a global political realm that rhetorically moralizes the future of the planet as a global common good, the ideology of sustainability is progressively institutionalizing a new social reality for the present.

The cultivation of the ideals that support the globalization of such a reality is mostly done through a language of universal morality, or what Melanie Wiber and Bertram Turner (2010) called 'moral talk'. That is, doing sustainability is largely based on a transnational discourse that resorts to universalizing conceptions of ethics. These, in turn, serve as symbols of intellectual and moral authority used for policymaking, defining the rightness or wrongness of actions. Finally, such a moralization empowers the 'ecological modernization' (Hajer, 1997) and technocratization of the world's future along with most of the products, services and peoples associated with it. Under the umbrella of doing good, sustainability thus gains the power to form and reform social practices. It establishes norms, restructures and reorganizes human activities in accordance with certain processes and imaginaries, while at the same time excluding others. And it is in such a way that the dominant transnational discourses of sustainability legitimize and justify present interventions in the service of power.

Take the example of the Earth Charter, which announces itself 'as a global consensus statement on the meaning of sustainability':<sup>3</sup>

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.<sup>4</sup>

This text is the introductory paragraph of the preamble of the Earth Charter. It has five sentences: three contain the word 'future' and, in the other two sentences, one contains the words 'common destiny' and the other 'We must join together to bring forth'. The content is thus about a time to come, approaching it as a global homogeneous representational unit and set in global moral character. The declaration adverts for future bipolar possibilities: 'great peril and[/or] great promise'. The first is in line with end-of-the-world themes that have proliferated in popular culture mostly since the 1980s, which are highly imbedded in sustainability discourses. These narratives of the future's crisis and imagining end-times institutionalize the problem. But the future is also simultaneously represented as a 'great promise'; that is, there is a solution for the projections of future disaster. It is within this optimal vision that the Charter proceeds by announcing the 'principles for a sustainable way of life as a common standard by which the conduct of all... is to be guided and assessed'. Sixteen principles are then declared towards an idealized solution for the problem placed in the future. 'To fulfill this promise', the Charter says, 'we must commit ourselves to adopt and promote the values and objectives of the Charter'.<sup>5</sup>

Put plainly then, the idealization of a future for the planet by the Earth Charter serves to authorize the imposition of a system of values and conducts – represented as the solution – over all the societies in the world. Sustainability and its inherent project regarding the future are used by the Charter as a moral rhetoric tool for social, political and economic globalizing regimentation.

Obviously, sustainability and the vision of a 'common future' in the post-Brundland period are not only used by the Earth Charter in the endeavour to globalize values and conducts. Many other supranational institutions use them for constituting themselves as a problem-solving authoritative model and, in turn, to compete for and acquire legitimacy in the production of a socio-ecological order at the global level. In a recent UNESCO publication, for example, it is stated: 'we [the entire world] have to learn our way towards more sustainable futures' (Tilbury, 2010: 146). This UNESCO instruction leads to an obvious question: how do we learn and who will teach us that lesson? The answer comes from the offices of the United Nations. In December 2002, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 57/254 to put in place the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), and designated UNESCO to lead it. According to UNESCO's website, the DESD, 'for which UNESCO is the lead agency, seeks to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning'.<sup>6</sup> All in all, UNESCO not only promotes the idea that 'we [the entire world] have to

learn' a way towards an idealized and singular future, but also, in the same way, takes to itself the task or, to be more exact, the job of guiding the world in that.

UNESCO's attempt to globalize a set of 'principles, practices and values of sustainable development' based on the perils and promises of the future could not be more clear, as is directly suggested in the declaration officially adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. Accordingly, the primary goal of the DESD is to 'encourage Governments to consider . . . the inclusion . . . of measures to implement the Decade (in which UNESCO is the leading agency) in their . . . national development plans' (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 59/237). Everything considered, UNESCO is formally invested with increased authority to monitor and to be a reference for sustainable development worldwide. It is formally authorized to intervene in the name of the future. A future, however, constructed through particular systems and categories of knowledge that inform it as common to all societies on the planet. A future produced as a universal responsibility. A future that arose from the background of a dominant position. A future based upon a predictable evolutionary process. A future that asks for expert intervention. A future that is being globalized as a common-sense categorical truth. In sum, a future that turned into a concept charged with global power. All this suggests that the future in sustainability is a rather strategic representation of institutional-normative constrains, which ultimately is used to govern in the present.

One of Foucault's (1980) most influential theses is that what has become truth is an effect of power, which in turn enforces social order. The Foucauldian 'truth' encompasses dominant forms of knowledge, moralities and representations that, consequently, affect our sense of reality: the real is made political. Along these lines, in the era of sustainability, the ideas of development and progress are morally eligible only if linked with sustainable principles. The diffusion of this truth provides the conceptual categories and interpretive frameworks within which development policy must operate, across different environments, cultures, societies and belief systems. As such, the new representations of the ideal global future and the dependencies that such representations generate can be explained by virtue of their relationship to systems of global power. Following this Foucauldian line of thought, the globalization of any particular vision of the future, as it is happening through the ideology of sustainability, is also about the silencing of other conceptualizations of futures and non-futures. In this perspective, one might ask how it is that a singular representation of the future brought by sustainability has come to be globally claimed – a global truth – and what subjectivities are produced in this becoming.



More simply, the universalization of a future is directly associated with the activity of global institutions empowered, or seeking to be empowered, to 'show us the way'. Besides UNESCO, clear examples of these are the World Economic Forum (WEF), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), European Union Sustainable Development Strategy (EU SDS) and World Wildlife Fund (WWF). In practice, this means the ascension of an authoritative elite. Those social researchers, environmentalists, economists, 'developers', politicians and consultants who constitute such an imperial apparatus – working in and for these global institutions, producing and reproducing the 'truth' of the sustainable future – become references in contexts where previously they were not: they have ascended to the position of experts who can domesticate and monopolize the world's future. Once the future becomes constructed as technical, conspicuously through the setting of indicators and statistics, then it can be appropriated and colonized. With this comes the legitimacy of the experts ('planners', to use the *Developmentalese* language) for administrating and intervening in the social conduct of the peoples (the 'planees') in and for the present. Examples of this can be found in current conservation policies in Madagascar (e.g. Sodikoff, 2009), protected area programmes all over the world (e.g. West et al., 2006), buffer zone projects in Madagascar, Tanzania and Cameroon (e.g. Neumann, 1997: 564–565), community-based tourism arrangements in Mozambique (e.g. Baptista, 2010, 2011, 2012), and in many other interventions carried out in the name of a sustainable future. Hence, increasing sustainability awareness runs in tandem with the ascension role of global knowledge production and expertise about the future.

But the institutionalization of sustainability needs and the performance of sustainability expertise are far from being solely a characteristic of the 'South', as the previous examples might lead one to think. In Wales, for example, the National Assembly has the duty of promoting sustainable development in the exercise of its functions. According to Jim Poole, since 2000, the Sustainable Development Scheme of the National Assembly for Wales has had to 'work with experts and stakeholders, by calling on expertise and experience wherever it is available to us, including through establishment of a Sustainable Development Forum or panel made up of experts' (Poole, 2006: 2). This commitment to the sustainability paradigm and to its experts is linked to a broader European policy. A decade ago the famous 'White Paper' addressed the modernization of European governance in which the 'decisions taken at regional and local levels should be coherent with a broader set of principles that would underpin more sustainable and balanced territorial development within the Union' (EU, 2001: 13). This was reinforced more recently, among others, by the European Council report of 2009, where sustainable development



categorically 'constitute[d] the overarching policy framework for all policies and strategies' (EU, 2009: 8), which should apply to all levels of government, from local to global. What all this means in practice is that sustainability has achieved global legitimacy in the form of a righteous doctrine.

### **'Think globally, act locally'**

First coined by environmental scientist Rene Dubos, the phrase that gives the title of this section has served as a slogan flag in supporting sustainability claims worldwide. Its rapid appropriation by the sustainability movement may inform us about something conspicuous, yet important to emphasize here: moral globalization. By evoking the local determinism in the trans-local future (e.g. associating community land use practices in the North of Angola, namely, deforestation in the Mayombe rainforest, with future effects in global warming) and reducing all this to a moral/technical matter, the ideology of sustainability legitimizes, or, better, pushes, global interventions at the local level. As David Hughes (2005: 157) noted: 'Northern environmentalists extend their "global reach" when they describe a [local] problem of deforestation or pollution as planetary'. However, within the knowledge production and set of ethics advanced by sustainability, some places and societies are institutionalized as more decisive for the future of the planet (meaning targets for sustainable intervention) than others. In other words, some spaces are open to sustainable development, while in other spaces it is restricted; some assessments are limited in targeted localities, while the same assessments are privileged in other localities (e.g. the displacement of local populations in the name of conservation parks in Southern Africa versus major urban deforestation in the suburbs of Washington DC). Finally, all these global selective dynamics driving sustainable intervention are, ironically, morally authorized through the universalization of a key idea: we all share a common future.

Underlying this interdependent conceptualization of the future is, however, the structuring of global socio-spatial patterns of marginalization that occurs as sustainability conquers its legitimacy for intervention. Whose thoughts are incorporated into global sustainability thinking, and which local sites are targeted? Is a town in Mozambique globally more relevant and urgent for sustainable intervention than any neighbourhood in Moscow? And, if so, whose thoughts are directing such interventions? These questions are related to the processes of institutionalization of peoples and places for 'Sustainability Action Plans'. Take an example from my own work in Mozambique.

In October 2008, I met a Mozambican who told me that he was responsible for the implementation of public electricity in the district of Mozambique where I was doing fieldwork for my studies in anthropology. He is from Maputo, the capital of the country, but he had been living for eight years in the town of Tihovene, in the district of Massingir. This area has a special character. It is in the buffer zone of a cross-border bioregion that is intended to span three countries: South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. After we met for the first time, we often came across each other in Tihovene. As our encounters became more frequent, he started engaging in broader political issues with me. One night at the cargo container that had been transformed into a tavern – locally known as the Red Container Bar – he criticized the way the region was being developed. He said: ‘This is a farce. All these donations for conservation and sustainability [*“sustentabilizar”*, in the original Portuguese] in this area are absurd’ (11 October 2008). I asked him why. At the exact time of my question, the lights in the town and, consequently, of the Red Container Bar went out. ‘Does sustainability resolve this?’, he opportunely replied to me, as if the evidence was there before my eyes. He continued with the answer to his own question:

No, it doesn’t. Sustainability and conservation for what? I know, I know: ‘For saving the future’, as the foreigners say. But what future? Our future? The future of the people living here? Nããã... Whatever that is, is not for us. Our future can’t wait.

After a couple of more sips of his beer, he concluded his reasoning: ‘What we need is industry, as you have; something to resolve our problems of the future now, not tomorrow!’

His critical position reflects what many political ecologists have been criticizing as well: ‘the tendency to cast the political/economic periphery (Africa, tropical Asia and America, arid Australia) in the role of a “natural” world contrasted with the “ravaged” human landscapes of core areas (Europe and the United States)’ (Robbins, 2007: 151). The Tihovene case, where he lives, serves to expose ‘the relations of power between First World conservationists and rural African communities which are embodied within the new approach to conservation’ (Neumann, 1997: 565). The issue here is essentially one of cultural dominance and control, as much as geo-economics. But this episode, among many others that happened during my presence in Mozambique, also informs something more specific, namely, a particular perception of the future: the future as ‘now, not tomorrow’. Revealingly enough, such a local perception contrasts with global sustainability perspectives, as is well expressed by the North American World Future Society’s

institutional slogan ‘Tomorrow is built today’,<sup>7</sup> or by the title of the dogmatic UNESCO publication of 2010: ‘Tomorrow Today: Learning to Build a Sustainable Future’.

Having said that, and before proceeding on the basis of this episode, I want to clarify an important aspect. Although the event at the Red Container Bar converges with much of the residents’ impressions about the ‘sustabilization’ of the area, there are obviously other multifarious reactions, non-reactions, appropriations and practices regarding the sustainability plans. Actually, the ways these are performed by the residents are directly related to the logic operating behind the emergence of new local elites, which are far beyond the scope of this article. The local perspective brought here is one among many others in the district of Massingir in Mozambique. Nonetheless, it is also fair to say that it is a dominant one, shared mostly by the literate population living in the area.

Most of all, the episode demonstrates contrasting perspectives of the future, intertwined with present conditions and aspirations. The divergence of the representations of the future illustrated here shows the conflict of interests derived from the aspiration of short-term gains – brought by a context of scarcity – as opposed to a global long-term vision – brought by a post-industrial context of abundance – from where the ‘foreigners’, as the Tihovene resident said, and the idea of a sustainable common future come from. Precisely, it is this and other divergences of representations of the future, specifically happening in contexts of sustainable development and community participation in the ‘South’, that I want to push further in the next section. Why, how and what different versions of the future make the uncovering of the politics of sustainability?

### **Local participation and the cult(ure) of foreseen**

Echoes of discourses on sustainable development and participation strongly coloured the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in June 1992. Since then, ‘participation of all concerned citizens [was institutionalized worldwide as]... essential to achieve sustainable development’ (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992: Principle 10 and 20), and became strongly grounded as the basis for social and political practices towards the future. However, what might be placed in its origin as a revolutionary statement has evolved into a mainstream development and political discourse. Indeed, calls to include local participation as part of a comprehensive and global strategy of sustainability are now ubiquitous, with organizations ranging from the World Bank to local NGOs offering endorsements. Above all, this rhetoric

goal advocates for the integration of 'local systems of knowledge and practices' (as it is commonly said among ecologists and development professionals) into broader 'Western' sustainability knowledge.

However, while local knowledges and participation are increasingly on the sustainable agenda, there are more reports of forced relocations, curtailment of resources access, abuses of power by conservation authorities, and increased government surveillance, than of successful integrations of local peoples into conservation and sustainable management (Neumann, 1997: 564). Why, then, are concepts such as 'participatory rural appraisal', 'local integration', 'local participation' or even 'local empowerment' persistently so embedded in sustainable development discourses?

Put plainly, such concepts carry with them moral intentions that, in turn, might expertly allow the hiding of other agendas. Participation in such terms is informally restricted and regulated by an elite of funders, experts and governors; it is intertwined with resource systems and social orderings. From this perspective, the enveloping of local communities in rhetoric of participation might be viewed more as a process of moral domestication, attempting to influence peoples to engage in systems of governmentality, than a social reflex of cooperation. Community participation in sustainability discourses is a vocabulary for political opportunity, rather than a tangible policy principle in guiding public decision-making. Better to resort to Majid Rahnema (1992: 182):

The attempt to empower people through the projects is always an attempt, however benevolent, to reshape the personhood of the participants. It is in this sense that we argue that "empowerment" [as "integration" or "participation"] is[/are] tantamount to what Foucault calls subjection'.

Specifically, in contexts of sustainability, the terms 'local integration' and 'local participation' are extremely limited and frequently based on assumptions that local societies share the same aspiration and imaginary about their or, as sustainability experts advocate, 'our future'. Local participation in sustainability thinking and, in turn, in policymaking operates under the assumption of reciprocal engagement along mutually compatible paths of temporalization and, in particular, of futuring. However, a growing body of ethnographic studies contradicts such a vision, and demonstrates that collective representations of time, including the future, differ markedly in different cultural and historical contexts (Gell, 1996: 325).

By approaching a case in the Zambezi Valley, in Zimbabwe, Penny Bernard and Sibongiseni Kumalo (2004: 121) exemplified how 'mediums and diviners are drawing upon a worldview that is based on a fundamentally different paradigm from that of sustainable development'. Among

other arguments, this was attributed by the authors to 'their ability to condense time', particularly, 'by maintaining a connection with the past... [from which] a sense of stability arises' (Bernard and Kumalo, 2004: 124). This perspective contradicts sustainability and modern temporalities, as perhaps best known by Bruno Latour's (1993: 57, in Dawdy, 2010: 762) work: 'the chief oddity of the moderns [is] the idea of a time that passes irreversibly and annuls the entire past in its wake'. Underlined in the conclusions of Jocelyn Chua's (2011) study in the South Indian state of Kerala is the idea of the temporalization of the future by Malayali children and most of their parents as an immediate matter. The author approached the suicidal tendencies of children in the region, and concluded that this phenomenon has 'more to do with anxieties about compromised futures than about the demographic contours of suicide itself' (Chua, 2011: 112). Chua related the immediacy's character in the local perspectives of the future with the late advent of 'Conspicuous consumption in contemporary Kerala [which] is therefore understood to produce a particular kind of [non-future] temporal subject' (Chua, 2011: 115) that motivates immediate gratification. What this means is that the future loses its role as a point of self-reference. In this way, the imagined possibilities inherent in long-term perspectives of the future are converted into ambitions for the present, leading to the blurring of the very conception of future. Much more straightforward, Michael Panoff (1969: 165) resorted to linguistics to advance the hypothesis that the Maenge people in Papua New Guinea 'feel more concerned about their past than about their future'. The author supported this theory by saying that 'their language contains no word rendering the notion of future, while it has four or five denoting past' (Panoff, 1969: 165). Whatever its validity may be, Panoff's research fortifies what Pierre Bourdieu (1997/2000: 212) stressed more recently: temporalities vary according to different social fields, and different temporalizations construct different subjectivities. Finally, a review of the literature about the Aboriginal Australians' values (e.g. Broome, 1994; Clarke, 2003; Donaldson, 1996; Tonkinson, 1993) also shows the critical differences in time perception compared to sustainability temporal orders. The Aboriginal Australian people are mentioned as governing themselves around a subjective and cyclical time, contrary to the more linear and progressive time represented in sustainability discourses. The circular notion of time encourages an attachment to the past, in the sense that it is continually relived in the present. It dissolves the distinction between past and present into the 'everywhen' and regards the future as a secondary matter (Stanner, 1969). In other words, in contrast with sustainability and even many religions, such as Christianity, which encourage peoples to live the present in accordance to a future salvation, Aboriginal Australian societies tend not to orient daily life in the prospect of future reward.

It might be worth taking Christianity a bit further because this can tell us much about, perhaps surprisingly, the ideology of sustainability. Here, I can invoke an example of ‘the evolution of the future tense in Romance languages . . . which developed from the Latin spoken in late Roman times and during the Dark Ages’ (Gell, 1996: 128). Briefly put, Latin had a future paradigm for verbs, as modern Romance languages also have; however, there is no direct line of descent between them. Historically, during the development of Romance languages, the Latin future tense fell into disuse and was replaced by an auxiliary verb construction for expressing futurity (Gell, 1996: 128). Authors such as Eugenio Coseriu (1958) and Suzanne Fleischman (1982) argued that the determining factor in this change came from the impacts on the Roman Empire of Christianity. The abstract Latin future could not accommodate the new ethical orientation of Christian Europe. As Alfred Gell pointed out: ‘the “old” future was external to the agentive “self”, [while] the “new” future was . . . charged with personal responsibility (for salvation) and moral obligation’ (Gell, 1996: 129).

The parallels that such a vision has with the contemporary representations of the future disseminated by sustainability discourses is undeniable. As in Christianity, the logic behind sustainability lies in their capacity to articulate a vision and set of practices for future salvation. One could go further. In a way, this means to promote social order by residing in the potentialities and dangers anchored in an imaginary. The ‘idea of “having” the future, as a modal field of “present” possibilities and opportunities’ (Gell, 1996: 129), said Gell in regard to Christianity, suggests that the future is a moral weapon used for determining human conducts and decisions in and for the present. Particularly in antiquity, those who claimed the future for human guidance were generally called priests, now they are mostly sustainability experts. Having pondered all these, the obvious conclusion that emerges is that, in both Christianity and sustainability, the future is converted into an effective powerful tool of social control.

Indeed, a growing body of literature confirms the hypothesis that exercising power in societies derives, among others, from taking control over time. For example, Rickie Burman’s (1981) approach to the conceptualization and organization of time in Simbo, Solomon Islands, provides a valuable case study of this. As the author noted, ‘the formal calendar of Simbo [called *pepapopu*] was in the exclusive possession of one man’, simply named the ‘keeper of the calendar’ (Burman, 1981: 257). On a practical level, the *pepapopu* ‘provided a means of planning and coordinating future activities’ (Burman, 1981: 259). This knowledge of the future was, in turn, ‘available to the *bangara* [the local chiefs] of the different districts by agreement with the keeper of the calendar’ (Burman, 1981: 259). One of Burman’s main

points was that ‘the *bangara*’s near exclusive access to . . . formal calendrical time contributed to his economic success and his consequent accumulation of “symbolic capital” (Burman, 1981: 265–266). Governing time knowledge is presented here as intricately connected with exercising social power, while providing the means for social order. But Burman was also concerned with processes of social change. In this regard, he argued that the modern decline of the *bangara*’s social power ‘has been filled by the Church and its agents’ (Burman, 1981: 264). Again, the politics of time were intimately connected with social dominance. The author exemplified it by saying:

The year begins no longer with the offering of smoked *nari* nuts, but with a midnight church service on 31 December. High-points are provided by Good Friday and Easter . . . and Christmas . . . . This [new] calendar indicates that a new power is structuring both the passage of time and a new set of sacred symbols. (Burman, 1981: 264)

The new codification of time brought by Christian churches in Simbo thus reflected and legitimated the institution of new social orders, making and unmaking new power arrangements.

In sum, experiences of time and practices of temporalities, as Bourdieu (1997/2000) stated, are intimately tied to power relations. In this regard, the future is a powerful tool for institutional-normative constraints in the present, thus involving what Barbara Adam and Chris Groves (2007) called the ‘present future’. Contrasting with spiritual arguments for the valuation of time – whether considered the domain of gods, goddesses, ancestors or any other transcendental force – the future in sustainability is not predestined or dissociated from human intervention. On the contrary, within the sustainability framework, human actions and decisions in the present are morally placed at the core of the future. Due to their capital effects for ‘our common future’, such actions and, particularly, decisions in the present become a field of expertise intervention. All this legitimizes the imposition of science and accountability over local social systems, and authorizes sustainability to provide its people, products and services to meet the imaginary and needs it has generated. Instead of incorporating other representations of the future than its own, the predictive-oriented sustainability approach colonizes the future in the hands of ‘the experts’, thus remaining located in the historical tradition of religious priests.

Sustainability is ‘a concept charged with power’ (Mowforth and Munt, 1998/2009: 20) which does manipulate social, political, ecological and economic processes in order to indicate or impose a certain normative path for development and governmentality; thereby exercising and reinforcing the authority of a dominant global knowledge over local ones. In the era of



sustainability, the future is converted into a matter of human expertise, and, as such, it is used as a global resource opportunity for the present.

## **Technocratic future in the conquest of certainty**

The 1985 film *Back to the Future* directed by Robert Zemeckis has the status of Western cult movie. It had enormous success at the box office and is one of the more endearing and enduring films of the 1980s. In the film, the teenager Marty McFly, played by Michael J. Fox, is accidentally sent back in time from 1985 to 1955. He then has to deal with the impacts of his presence (in 1955) in order not to compromise the future (year 1985), putting even his own existence at risk. While entertaining, and very successful at that, the film transmits a deeper, but clear, message to the masses. A message that later has become the basis for a dominant global appeal: act towards an idealized common future. Implicit is the recognition that the future can and must be planned and worked from the present, otherwise our existence is in danger.

Likewise, the production and circulation of sustainability lie in a specific politics of temporality, in which the conceptualization of a future is the key. The future is represented as fragile matter that must be morally and technically worked, secured and strategized in the name of the health of coming generations. As such, the future is open and highly contingent upon human actions, and therefore globally projected into the present for its vulnerabilities to human decisions and agency. Like the attempts by Marty in *Back to the Future* to help couple his future parents while inhabiting the past, sustainability appears as a new institution of rightful measures towards a common idealized project of the future.

Although the future is declared in sustainability discourses as a common matter, it is, however, only foreseen by a few. In the film, Marty knew how the future was and thus the dangers if the right actions were not taken. This gave him the power to identify the rightness and wrongness of actions in the present. The same seems to happen with the experts of sustainability. Particularly under the vision that ‘it’s all connected’ – meaning ‘think globally, act locally’ – futuring for societies has become a legitimate task for sustainable developers. ‘When they write or speak’, Hughes (2005: 158) said, ‘conservationists use “should”, “would”, and other markers of this mood’ to ‘impute current existence to a desired future’. This legitimacy comes mostly from the privileging of technical knowledge that circulates in already dominant development and academic institutions, from where most of the sustainability experts come. The emphasis on providing and trading ‘scientific products for future scenarios’, as it is commonly mentioned by the natural scientists in the corridors of funding institutions,

relates closely to the technocratization of governance and, by extension, sustainability. The environmental and social world is now more than ever interpreted through numbers, scientific indicators, statistics, charts and comparable data provided by experts. Although contrary to the prevailing development rhetoric, the fact that sustainability policy increasingly relies on technical sophistication makes the involvement of non-experts in decision-making more and more difficult. In practice, what I am trying to say is that the technical knowledge that informs the behaviours of residents in villages in Mozambique as important to the future global climate (e.g. cutting trees) subjects these same local peoples to the technical knowledge that they do not have.

In such a way, the technocratization of the future comes to be a discourse of opportunity, not so much for the production of new possible futures, but for the neo-colonisation (firstly, on representations) that legitimizes. That is, sustainable interventions, particularly in rural contexts in the 'South', 'tend to represent a continuity with rather than a cleavage from past practices' (Neumann, 1997: 560). As Edward Said observed, contemporary power is creative. It is mostly 'about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings' (Said, 1994: 7), and it essentially takes the form of representation. In this way, living in a setting in which representations of time are implemented and driven by cultural others is to disempower local reasoning for governing their lives.

As pointed out by many political ecologists, especially in regard to large-scale scientific investigations, 'the knowledges of scientific practitioners and other "experts" are embedded in cultural norms, social relationships, and value-laden judgments' (Robbins, 2007: 120). Most of such knowledge systems and their representational outcomes are, in effect, 'used by experts to secure employment, control resources, and justify extraction and enclosure' (Robbins, 2007: 120). The globalization of such systems of knowledge and the representations that accompany them have the obvious capacity to structure our understandings of, and legitimize proposals aimed at assuring, a 'common future'. Such a representation of the future is, ultimately, a political and powerful matter.

In sum, as shown in the episode in Mozambique, those peoples vulnerable to feeling the subjugation of the future as advocated by sustainability experts are also taught to inhabit in restraint and to suppress aspirations of fast industrialization. In the era of sustainability, desiring for 'industry, as you have', as I was told at the Red Container Bar, is defined as a morally illegitimate pretension for the peoples in rural Africa: they have to wait for other imaginary potentials consented to by an imposed common future. This is both the outcome and cause of the mapping of bioregions for intervention, which, hence, come under the power of a global elite of expertise,

who informs appropriate and inappropriate conduct, as well as illegible and legible aspirations. Bourdieu, once again, reminded us about something that is worth mentioning: 'The all-powerful is he who does not wait but makes others wait' (Bourdieu, 1997/2000: 228). Seen in this light, the colonization of local futures with representations of global dangers serves to maintain or even increment global inequalities by positioning the life of others on hold and, therefore, under the authoritative power of sustainability morals. And it is under such a subjection of imaginaries that the life of the others who do not share the same practices and representations of the future – meaning, global problems and solutions – is legitimately governed by a globalizing dictatorship of significations. On the face of it, the future has become popularly acknowledged as a common matter not because of any ontological reason, but because of a global politics of constituting the real.

## Conclusion

In his early writings on the Nuer people, Evans-Pritchard addressed what had already been advanced by Durkheim's 'The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life': 'Perceptions of time... are hence socially determined' (Evans-Pritchard, 1939: 209). Not only in anthropology, but in social sciences in general, representations of past, present and future times became acknowledged as contextual, based upon social, cultural and environmental events. A language that promotes the universalization of a perception of time as the 'truth', in Foucauldian terms, is no longer acceptable: there are *n* kinds of futures. However, following from such a secure ground, I have shown in this article how the dominant knowledge of sustainability contradicts this theory and directs (imposes, to be more precise) a single way of conceptualizing future reality worldwide.

In transnational sustainability discourses, the future operates as a globalizing representation of a universalized thing in itself; a 'total social fact' (Mauss, 1950/1990) that is globally homogenized, assessed and worked on through human expertise. This is mostly done through resorting to technoscientific accounts of environmental and societal conditions and changes. However, as many political ecologists have persuasively pointed out, 'and as is revealed in histories of science, the very categories of scientific investigation are the same order of "social objects" as the false commonsensical notions of the lay population' (Robbins, 2007: 115). Knowledges, methods and experiences do indeed produce different structures of representations. Along these lines, the dominant framework that supports global sustainable interventions negates the incorporation of different versions of the future, as of those societies that do interpret it as cyclical, or in which the very

perception of the long term is contested. Moreover, despite the use of the language of participatory development and cultural diversity, the sustainability framework contains the version of a singular common future with which it attempts to exercise global institutional authority.

In this sense, sustainability is based on a very basic contradiction: on one side, it requires community participation and advocates for the diversity of perceptions and beliefs – the often-stated ‘traditional knowledges’ – but on the other side, it operates under a singular perception and belief about the future: ‘our common future’. This ethnocentric politics of temporality fails to recognize the unwillingness of cultures to abandon different representations of the future in order to be incorporated into a system that promotes sustainability ideals. What is foreground by the sustainability proposal is, thus, the incongruity of claims for participation and diversity along with the reluctance to adopt other representations of the future than its own.

Regardless of all that, transnational sustainability discourses do prescribe a particular morality. Or, putting in another way, sustainability produces legitimacy because it supplies a motto that carries moral outcomes. The idea that we all share a common future that is in danger if the proper measures are not taken operates as a moral force for ordering human actions and, in turn, to legitimize interventions on local development by supranational organizations. The relevance I hope to have raised here is that this moralization of global interventions leads to a process of subordinating peoples and places to a ‘Western’ politics of technocracy, which, in turn, obtains its hegemony through the government of imaginaries and representations.

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## **Notes**

1. I made several exploratory trips in this region in 2006 and 2007. During this period, I was in Mozambique for a total of more than three months. Later, I stayed in the village of Canhane, in the district of Massingir in Mozambique, between January and June 2008, and between September and December 2008. The fieldwork in 2008 was part of my PhD research exploring the commodification of morality in tourism, funded by the Graduate School Society and Culture in Motion in Halle, Germany.
2. Available at: <http://www.africacimatesolution.org/news.php?id=5090> (accessed 28 January 2011).

3. Available at: <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/History.html> (accessed 14 January 2011).
4. Available at: <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html> (accessed 14 January 2011).
5. Available at: <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html> (accessed 16 January 2011).
6. Available at: [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=47100&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=47100&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) (accessed 27 September 2012).
7. Available at: <http://www.wfs.org> (accessed 21 January 2011).

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