

SUSTAINABILITY: FROM ‘TERMINALLY NICE’ TO ‘NICE AND ROUGH’¹

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I’ve pondered whether to stop describing our vortex of dilemmas as a crisis of sustainability. “Sustainable growth” and its derivative “smart growth” have been a successful riposte to Meadows, et al.’s 1972 **The Limits to Growth**² that has sapped vigor and anticipation from sustainability. Unquestionably, then, there is much to be said for jettisoning the entire notion of “sustainability.” But what can replace it? English’s massive vocabulary has no ear-catching and conceptually suitable synonym. I have decided not to abandon “sustainability” for this and two additional reasons:

- (1) the concept is firmly planted in the nation’s collective consciousness (more on this below), and
- (2) it can be recaptured to synthesize the unfolding multi-dimensional (human systems and biophysical) maelstrom we are entering and help us discover ways to create a genuinely viable world.

With rare exceptions, the history and recent proliferation of sustainability programs in businesses, foundations, government and educational institutions suffers from what Michael Pollan calls terminal niceness. I think Pollan means that these programs exist to perpetuate the political/economic status quo, not to save humanity, the natural environment and the biosphere. In my view, such programs are terminally nice because they are in a thought straightjacket that does not allow them to:

- (1) link sustainability to the worsening dysfunctions of the political and socioeconomic order;
- (2) grasp that the economy is a subset of the biosphere;
- (3) understand and seriously if at all address resource depletion, especially energy and how it is connected to population growth and the potential for system collapse;
- (4) rely on “market solutions” as if:
 - they work and are equitable, and
 - you can place a cost-benefit dollar value on nature’s esthetics, systems and processes;
- (5) realize that humans cannot control nature and obviate the laws of thermodynamics;
- (6) treat resource consumption, especially energy, as matters of efficiency and conservation, and never call for reductions in social and technological complexity, which is anathema to perpetual growth; and

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² Meadows, Donella, et al. *The Limits to Growth*. New York: Universe Books. 1972.

(7) recognize the impossibility of continuous economic expansion on a finite planet.

This leaves them incapable of responding to what E.O. Wilson³ calls the "bottleneck" of ecological predicaments, William Catton⁴, Reg Henry⁵ and others describe as ecological overshoot, and Meadows, et al.¹ call reaching the limits to growth. Therefore, they have only one response to the current economic crisis: carry on as if growth will restart. Put differently, sustainable growth is terminally nice because it is incapable of transcending the culturally dominant episteme/paradigm of growth and progress.

The counter to the hegemony of terminally nice sustainability is a "nice and rough" version. (Tina Turner said: "*We never, ever do anything nice and easy. We always do it nice and rough.*") I try to co-opt "make nice and rough" the virtues of sustainable growth because, first, as previously noted, it implicitly concedes that at some level and to some degree industrial society is not viable. In the same vein, sustainable growth is often conceptualized as the "triple bottom line" of people, planet and profit; evidence abounds that this is a spurious trichotomy and critiquing it is easier as each day passes. (And we should not forget that many caught up in terminal niceness are not morally hopeless, just intellectually indoctrinated.) Second, the phrase "that's not sustainable" has become ubiquitous, indicating that once trusted institutions are faltering and no longer seen as failsafe or serving the public interest. This leads people to question the ability and also the motives and willingness of government and/or the market to offer any semblance of socially just long-term solutions. This in turn directs them to worry about their and their loved ones futures and life chances. For instance, recent surveys and articles have explicitly cast doubt on the viability of the American Dream the premiere myth, Foucault might say, of self-discipline and internalized social control.

When I speak about public health and medicine, I begin by pointing out how the larger institutions controlling health systems are unsustainable most people now concede this is at the least a possibility. Then I differentiate my view of sustainability from sustainable growth. I note that our economy and medicine and public health is premised upon perpetual physical expansion. I tell them that peak oil signals the era of cheap and abundant energy that facilitated continual physical expansion of economic activity is now ending. I then inform them that in my view the realization of industrial society of its total subordination to the laws of the biosphere and thermodynamics will be as shattering and liberating as was the discovery of the microbe-"germs" in the 19th century. This is my foundation for presenting a "nice and rough" version of sustainability.

³ Wilson, E.O. The Bottleneck. Scientific American February 2002.
www.scientificamerican.com/sciammag/?contents=2002-02

⁴ Catton, William, R. Jr. Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1980.

⁵ Henry, Reg. The Spirit in the Gene: Humanity's Proud Illusion and the Laws of Nature. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1999.