



Sustainability's Inner Conflicts: From 'Ecologism' to 'Ecological Modernization'

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Abstract: Ever since its inception, the project of sustainable development has constituted a challenge to deeply entrenched political, economic, and social beliefs in modern societies. Now matured, the project seems to be highly incompatible with the predominant neoliberal capitalist economic system, constitutes a nuisance to the structure of global governance, and is a noticeably controversial issue in North-South politics. However, the project itself was born out of a conflict between two opposing needs – the need for continuous economic growth on the one hand, and the need to protect the environment and achieve intra-generational and intergenerational social equity, on the other. This article argues that reconciling the needs for economic growth with concerns for the environment has been a very intricate and thorny process, hence the controversy over sustainable development's definition, aims, and feasibility. By categorizing, examining, and analyzing sustainable development's inner conflicts, this article aims at achieving a deeper understanding of today's sustainability stalemate and potential ways to overcome it. A special focus is placed on the implications of the recent prominence of ecological modernization, especially in the developed countries, on the evolution and integrity sustainable development.

Keywords: sustainable development, inner conflicts, sustainability, ecological modernization, ecologism.

Introduction:

Today's wide celebration of sustainability in global summits and academic debates belies a deep conflict over the meaning and implementation of sustainable development. Within a rather unpropitious context of neoliberal capitalism, a combination of different political, economic, and social factors erect numerous obstacles that have almost brought the evolution of sustainable development to a

grinding halt. Because of its radical agenda, this new project has been confronted with many impediments mostly inherent in the current socio-economic paradigm of development. Essentially, this project faces different kinds of hurdles that obstruct its progress within a globalized economy dominated by corporate power, thus unveiling high levels of incompatibility between sustainability and neoliberal capitalism. However, a closer look at the theoretical background of sustainable development reveals that the hostile climate created by neoliberal capitalism, the global governance system, and globalization has by no means been the only cause behind the plight of sustainable development today.

Over the past few decades, some inner conflicts and contradictions inside the paradigm of sustainable development itself have also weakened this project and crippled its implementation. In addition to facing numerous external impediments, this new project encounters now considerable hindrance from the different approaches to sustainability and growth within the discourse of sustainable development itself. In essence, reconciling the needs for development with concerns for the environment has proved another big challenge that has a serious bearing on defining and formulating this project. Balancing the conflicting imperatives of the North-South divide and the 'Man-Nature' divide in one clear definition of sustainable development has resulted in many, sometimes conflicting, interpretations of this project, aiming at different objectives and serving different agendas. It is precisely the clash between the 'growth agenda' and the 'environment agenda' that has resulted in a notable vagueness about the essence and aims of this project. This ambiguity, in turn, has further undermined the public consensus on sustainability.

Sustainability or Growth: Two Conflicting Agendas

Though human concern for development and economic growth dates back to the pre-Industrial Revolution era, patterns of industrialization and urbanization accelerated dramatically in the early 20th century and reached unprecedented rates in the decades following World War II. This particular period was also associated

with other important phenomena such as decolonization, nation-building, liberalization of the economy, and debates over a 'New International Economic Order' (NIEO). About two decades later, the environment gradually emerged as a high-profile issue at international gatherings such as the Stockholm Conference in 1972 and the Rio Conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. However, midway between these two points in time, a fusion between the drive for economic growth and the concerns about the degraded environment took place. This fusion of these two concerns was widely popularized by documents such as the World Commission on Environment and Development¹ (WCED)'s report *Our Common Future* – popularly known as the Brundtland Report – in 1987 and the coinage of sustainable development as a concept that combines both economic growth and the protection of the environment.

Internationally, the debate about development has increasingly been marked by longstanding issues such as the North-South divide, the South's chronic development problems, and the intensifying process of globalization. Academically, this debate about development usually involves some kind of juxtaposition of conflicting concepts such as 'development' and 'underdevelopment', 'affluence' and 'impoverishment', and 'modernity' and 'backwardness' (Carter, 2007). Nonetheless, the prominence of the environment issue has introduced new concepts and elements to this debate, thus extending its scope to new human concepts such as 'sustainability,' 'green economy,' and 'environmental justice.' Although mapping on some development concerns, the environment debate is still essentially centred on ecological problems and ways to safeguard the environment. As a consequence, the predominant concern in the environment debate is not the North-South divide, but rather the 'Man-Nature' divide. It also includes other juxtapositions such as that of sustainability and 'unsustainability,' of 'common goods' and personal benefits, and

¹ Also known as the Brundtland Commission, the WCED is a legal body that was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1983 and was charged with formulating proposals and long-term strategies to deal with global ecological and developmental issues and achieve sustainable development. This commission published its report (usually referred to as the Brundtland Report) entitled *Our Common Future* in 1987.

of global concerns and local issues. These differences in the essence of the two debates are, in my opinion, indicative of the difficulty to reconcile their conflicting discourses.

On the whole, combining the development and environment debates has been slow and laborious, leading ultimately to “some interesting contradictions and realignments” (McNeill, 2000, p. 21). In this process, formulating a definition of sustainable development was shrouded in confusion regarding the essence of this new project that would harmonize economic growth with environmental protection. Thus, balancing the conflicting imperatives of the North-South divide and the Man-Nature divide in one clear definition of sustainable development proved far from easy. Moreover, a conflict has also emerged between activists in the North who prioritize the conservation of Nature over the alleviation of poverty, and those in the South who are primarily concerned with issues of combating poverty, famine, and underdevelopment.

As I see it, the North-South divide in the development debate and the Man-Nature divide in the environmental debate are now inextricably linked in one broad debate about the future of mankind and the planet as a whole. Consequently, finding the right order of priorities in conceptualizing a discourse that serves both the environment and development was the first big challenge that faced thinkers and activists when the concept of sustainable development was still in an embryonic state. Given these theoretical constraints, observers argue that “one of the main obstacles to developing a common conceptual framework incorporating social, economic, and ecological problems is the lack of genuine consensus among experts in each discipline as to how ecological, economic and social system relate to one another” (Blewitt, 2008, p. 28).

In the light of the multidimensionality of sustainable development as a concept, I believe an innovative approach to sustainability is still badly needed today. In actual fact, this wide-ranging debate is still going on as more and more views (e.g., Axelrod, Harmon, Russell, & Wirtenberg, 2009; Dale, 2001; Vig & Kraft, 1999) contend that if it is to combine different aspects of the global environmental

crisis and the current developmental challenges, this new project clearly requires a host of new intellectual tools and a broad, interdisciplinary vision. For this project to take on the features of a holistic development paradigm, an interdisciplinary vision must draw upon a full range of disciplines including social sciences, economics, politics, and cultural studies. Nevertheless, observers (e.g., Leichenko & O'Brien, 2008; Axelrod et al., 2009; Dale, 2001) pointedly assert that today's classical academic approaches are, in fact, incapable of dealing with the rising global projects such as sustainable development or globalization. In his Preface to *World in Motion: The Globalization and the Environment Reader*, scholar Richard Wilk further explains that "the academic disciplines invented in the nineteenth century which we have inherited are simply not up to the task" (2009, p. viii), pointing out that "it is important to remember that the whole concept of global environmentalism is in its infancy, [and that] we are really the pioneers at the very dawn of a new era" (2009, p. ix).

One of the main factors behind the vagueness in formulating the project of sustainable development is the inexorable debate between the proponents of the 'growth agenda' and those of the 'environment agenda' within the environmental movement itself. "Sustainable development is therefore multidimensional," argues John Blewitt, "encompassing social, ecological and economic goals and perspectives, and this breadth has led some critics to view the concept as vague, self-contradictory and incoherent, incapable of being put into practice" (2008, p. 23). This struggle resulted in some confusion as where to draw the demarcation line between the need for economic growth and the environmental exigencies in this discourse (Harrison, 2000). In fact, both the proponents of economic growth and those of the protection of the environment are vying to impose their own interpretation of sustainable development, which resulted in such ambiguity about what this new project is all about.

Because of the unmistakable vagueness that characterizes the formulation of sustainable development, a wide array of criticism has been directed at the formal discourse of this project as promoted by the United Nations agencies and

international summits in the late 20th century. Some critics (e.g., Baker, 2006; Blewitt, 2008; Dresner, 2002; Carter 2007) accuse this discourse of legitimizing the open market economic system's depletion of natural resources to achieve more economic growth, rather than reshaping and harnessing the market forces, processes of production and consumption as well as all other aspects of the neoliberal capitalist model of growth to protect Nature. Scholar Neil Carter explains, for instance, that "the traditional policy paradigm, which emerged in the 1970s to deal with environmental problems, and which is still deeply entrenched among most policy elites, reflects the way power is distributed and exercised in all capitalist liberal democracies" (2007, p.172). Hence, ever more often suspicions are being voiced as to whether sustainable development advocated by UNCED is promoting any kind of sustainability or calling for a radical re-conceptualization of the development discourse itself. Carter (2007) further asserts that the merger of the development and the environment agendas in formulating sustainable development has been significantly skewed towards giving rise to what is referred to as 'the traditional environmental policy paradigm' which largely reflects the hegemony of the growth agenda.

To my way of thinking, this ongoing conflict between the push for sustainability and the push for economic growth within the sustainability discourse has cast a dark shadow on the integrity and coherence of the project of sustainable development. Lacking in any precision about achieving the requirements of sustainability, the version of sustainable development popularized by the Brandtland Report seems to betray most of the radical slogans of environmentalists and activists who point to the dominance of the neoliberal growth agenda over the environment in this project. In addition to being subject to effects of economic globalization, the project of sustainable development today faces serious internal inconsistencies and conflicts, further limiting its potential and hampering its development. Many of these inner conflicts come as a result of the predominance of the growth agenda over the primacy of sustainability in the discourse of sustainable itself.

Green Ideology: ‘Ecologism’ and the ‘Anthropocentric-Ecocentric’ Dichotomy

Ever since the 1972 Stockholm Conference, there has been a notable growth in the literature on a theoretical distinction between the ‘reformist’ and ‘radical’ approaches to sustainability. Generally, reformist approaches adopt a rather managerial approach to environmental problems, which can be solved without effecting fundamental changes in the current socio-economic paradigm of development. The radical approaches, on the other hand, dwell on some fundamental economic and social changes if humans are to live within the ecological carrying capacity of the planet. At the heart of environmental politics, therefore, lies this ongoing struggle between these two approaches, which has ultimately impacted on the potential of sustainable development. Against such a backdrop, it is my aim to spotlight the effects of this dichotomy on the popularization and implementation of this project.

To begin with, I want to shed more light on the ideological background that underpins sustainable development and examine its coherence in contemporary literature. For the most part, ecologists such as Andrew Dobson (1995), Wolfgang Sachs (1997), and Brian Baxter (1999) consistently emphasize the differences between ‘ecologism’ and other theories, arguing that it stands alone as an independent ideology that underpins much of the current ‘green’ activism. First published in 1991, Dobson’s book, *Green Political Thought: An Introduction*, asserted that ‘ecologism’ was ‘neither left nor right, but in front,’ proclaiming it as a fully-fledged ideology distinct from environmentalism as a mainstream movement. In this landmark book, Dobson contends that his principal aim “is to describe and assess that set of ideas regarding the environment which can properly be regarded as an ideology – the ideology of ecologism” (1995, p. 1). In a similar vein, Brian Baxter explains that ‘ecologism,’ as an ideology, is “fundamentally a thesis about the moral considerability of other living creatures [...] [and] the human interconnectedness with the biosphere of this planet” (1999, pp. 5-6). Commenting

on the coherence of 'ecologism', scholar Neil Carter characterizes this ideology in the following words:

Ecologism should be regarded as an ideology in its own right. It offers a persuasive critique of (capitalist) industrial society and the liberal democratic polity, holding them largely responsible for the current ecological crisis; it outlines a vision of an alternative sustainable society; and it suggests strategies of change that might achieve that utopian vision. (2007, p. 353)

By and large, 'ecologism' as an ideology is based on two main tenets that differentiate it from other ideologies: First, the need for a complete re-conceptualization of the human-nature relationship that places Man as the master of Nature; and secondly, the primacy of the principle of 'limits to growth' imposed by the carrying capacity of planet Earth. According to ecologists (e.g., Dobson, 2000; Baxter, 1999; Orton, 1994), the contemporary environmental crisis has for the most part been caused by human arrogance towards the natural environment, which has resulted in abusing Nature to satisfy human needs. Central to 'ecologism,' therefore, is the principle that Man is not necessarily placed at the top of an ethical hierarchy. Above all, this principle radically opposes 'anthropocentrism,' which attaches intrinsic value only to humans who are placed at the center of the universe, whereas non-human entities are only of instrumental value. Thus, according to anthropocentric principles, Nature has value only in so far as it serves human needs and enhances human well-being.

Counterbalancing this approach is a 'non-anthropocentric' or an 'ecocentric' approach that opposes what ecologists see as the 'human chauvinism' of anthropocentrism and stresses the intrinsic value of non-human entities (Carter, 2007, p. 16). According to this approach, non-human entities like animals, trees, plants and other species, and even inanimate objects like rivers and mountains, have their own intrinsic value. Ecologists such as the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1995), David Pepper (1996), and Bill Devall and George Sessions (2001)

reject, for example, the 'Enlightenment' view of Man and Nature as separate entities, and especially decry the principle that Man is the master of Nature. According to this view, Man is an integral part of Nature and not its master. The concept of 'ecological consciousness' is, therefore, highly celebrated in the writings of these ecologists. These ecologists also emphasize the holistic aspect of 'ecologism' and highlight the close interdependence of ecological systems, which is conducive to reappraising the human-nature relationship and Man's ethical duties towards Nature.

Based on 'ecologism,' the discourse of sustainable development claims that it draws upon familiar concepts such as participatory democracy and social justice borrowed from other ideologies to serve sustainability. "Green politics has drawn on other political traditions, notably socialism, for its critique of capitalism, and from anarchism for its suspicion of the state," maintains Neil Carter (2007, p. 354). These principles are now seen as playing a crucial role in raising 'ecological consciousness' and fostering greener political and economic policies. The father of 'ecologism,' Arne Naess, stresses the new vision in what he refers to as 'deep ecology' or 'ecologism,' putting it as follows: "I believe that multifaceted, high-level self-realization is more easily reached through a lifestyle which is 'simple in means but rich in ends' rather than through the material standard of living of the average citizens of industrial states" (1995, p. 82). To my mind, however, 'ecologism' as a whole, and the project of sustainable development in particular, pose an ideological challenge to the predominant socio-economic paradigm of development in the industrialized countries at the levels of ideas, growth policies, and implementation.

When it comes to formulating and implementing the project of sustainable development, 'ecologism,' in my view, has contributed to the current impasse of this new project. The inherent 'anthropocentric-ecocentric' dualism in 'ecologism' has brought about different versions of sustainable development, thus undermining the public zeal for a new alternative model of development. Precisely, this rupture has caused environmentalists to split into two different camps advocating two different, sometimes conflicting, versions of sustainable development. This discrepancy seems

to thwart the sought-after consensus on sustainability needed in the face of the many obstacles facing this new paradigm of development. Susan Baker spotlights this issue as follows:

The sustainable development project is rejected at either extreme, but for exactly opposite reasons: for the pollution control approach [i.e. weak version], promoting sustainable development is seen as threatening economic growth by taking environmental considerations *too much* into account; at the opposite extreme, deep ecologists argue that sustainable development displaces considerations of Nature, thus taking the environment *too little* into account. (2006, p. 35)

As such, 'ecologism' is also regarded with suspicion by some critics who doubt this ideology's coherence and validity. One formulation of this concern is that "ecologism is rather hazy about how the change to a sustainable society is to occur, and who will take the lead in bringing it about" (Carter, 2007, p. 71). This ideology is, therefore, criticized for setting forth a rather inchoate development paradigm that can hardly be applicable today. While it harshly criticizes the current neoliberal capitalist model of growth, 'ecologism' fails to specify, for example, how exactly a society can opt out of the existing political and social systems and engage in the new 'green' lifestyles (Harrison, 2000). Ecologism also claims to offer a new framework for activism within which participants such as local communities and NGOs can play a bigger role in building 'ecological consciousness,' but it falls short of designing precise methods for putting this process into practice. As a consequence, this vagueness has provoked certain scepticism among critics (e.g., Carter, 2007; Dale, 2001) who have started to reject these calls for fundamental change, denouncing them as utopian and impractical.

Proponents of the reformist approach point out that environmental politics has significantly impacted on contemporary national and global politics, which is, in their view, a very clear sign of its success (Connelly & Smith, 1999). They particularly celebrate the success of 'green' parties and the popularity of the green

agenda in the industrialized countries, which has “forced most parties to treat the environment more seriously, at least by developing a greener rhetoric and strengthening policy programmes” (Carter, 2007, p. 355). According to this view, the ‘weak’ or ‘reformist’ version of sustainable development can be more successful at achieving environmental protection and social equity by boosting economic growth and entrusting the business sector with this type of development. Hence, attaching a price tag to the environment is the best way to protect it: “The object of policies to promote weak sustainable development remains economic growth,” argues Susan Baker, “but environmental costs are taken into consideration through, for example, accounting procedures” (2006, p.33).

Critics of this reformist approach (e.g., York & Rosa, 2003; Dobson, 2000), on the other hand, point out that the failure of environmental politics in reshaping the established political and economic systems is caused by adopting weaker versions of sustainable development. According to this view, the push for reform has often resulted in an ineffective way to promote sustainability, and precipitated sustainable development’s alignment with big business at the expense of effecting fundamental changes that would better serve the environment and society. Denouncing this weak version, scholar John Blewitt writes:

The problem with the concept of sustainable development, and particularly in the form articulated by the United Nations and the World Bank, is that it is effectively synonymous with *capitalist development*, meaning continual economic growth, the private accumulation of profit and the optimization of utility. Understood as such, sustainable development is a contradiction in terms. (2008, p.129)

Still other critics, especially ‘deep ecologists,’ go as far as to denounce the current UN version of sustainable development as a “political fudge” that “seeks to bridge the unbridgeable divide between the anthropocentric and biocentric approaches to politics” (Richardson, 1997, p. 43).

Academically, the proliferation of different versions and interpretations of sustainable development in the literature has made it a highly contentious concept,

which ultimately raises a fundamental question about its essence and viability as an alternative paradigm of development. In the absence of a precise definition of sustainable development, many conflicting ideas or principles can be claimed as part of this project, thus emptying it of any coherent essence. “At the root of these conflicting interpretations,” argues Susan Baker, “lies deep conflict over whether sustainable development is a tool for the construction of radically different environmental futures or whether it should be rejected out of hand, as it represents little more than an anthropocentric management tool, useful to help capitalism to find a way out of its environmental crisis” (2006, p. 215). In a context of an overwhelming process of globalization, however, this project, in my opinion, can hardly afford to lose the public consensus that characterized its inception in the 1980s and which is at stake now. More importantly, the prevalent ambiguities and inconsistencies characterizing sustainable development today have not only emptied it of any meaning, but also seriously weakened it in front of strong overwhelming phenomena such as globalization and global trade liberalization.

Despite the wide controversy marking this concept, the vagueness of sustainable development is regarded by other scholars (e.g., Dale, 2001; Robinson, 2004) as one of its main strengths. In fact, this view celebrates the open-endedness of sustainable development as a positive asset that helps the message behind this concept to resonate worldwide. Scholar Marteen Hajer argues, for instance, that “the coalition for sustainable development can only be kept together by virtue of its rather vague story-lines at the same time as it asks for radical social change” (1995, p. 14). Accordingly, sustainable development’s “constructive ambiguity” is considered as a political strength, for it promises every sector on the political and economic scenes a role to play, thus widening the coalition that endorses this project nationally, regionally, and globally (Dale, 2001).

While some of its aspects can be useful in finding a common ground among different actors, the vagueness that marks sustainable development today has, in my view, done more harm than good to the project of sustainable development. Most significantly, the internal divisions between radical and reformist ecologists as well

as the ambiguity shrouding the concept of sustainable development have shattered the public consensus about the essence and solidarity of this new project. Public opinion has become divided over which version of sustainable development to endorse and politicians have allied themselves with big business and opted for the weakest version of the sustainability project. More seriously, this ambiguity has given politicians a chance to pledge their full support for sustainable development and at the same time maintained all aspects of a neoliberal capitalist economic growth. The popularization of a weak form of sustainable development has also paved the way for the emergence of 'ecological modernization' as a new approach to 'fix' environmental problems. The bias of politicians and corporate elites in favour of untrammelled economic growth has also found in the concept of 'ecological modernization' a good opportunity to enjoy the public support for sustainability and boost their unsustainable economies even more.

Economic Growth and Sustainable Development: Bridging the Gap

Over the last few years, the project of 'Ecological Modernization,' has come to the fore as a solution to the exacerbating environmental problems, especially in the developed countries. Aiming at bridging the gap between the protection of the environment and economic growth, this project has been advocated by some scholars such as Joseph Huber, Martin Jänicke, and Udo E. Simonis as a feasible alternative for the current unsustainable modes of development. Within this context, my primary objective in this section is to discuss to which degree the new project of 'Ecological Modernization' has departed from the neo-liberal capitalist paradigm of development and examine how compatible it is with the original discourse of sustainable development. First, I am going to start with examining some of the views defending this theory and their approach to sustainability, and then I will draw on the main criticisms directed at this theory and examine to what extent this theory has consolidated or weakened the position of sustainable development in its battle with unfettered economic growth.

The term 'ecological modernization' entered the literature of development studies in the 1980s to describe attempts to harness technological advances to serve environmental ends. Originally conceived by German sociologists Joseph Huber, Martin Jänicke, and Udo E. Simonis within a group of scholars at Free University and the Social Science Research Centre in Berlin, this concept came as a new vision to reconcile the 'growth agenda' with the intensifying environmental exigencies of the late twentieth century. However, the concept underwent some drastic changes causing some critics to denounce it as yet another discourse to improve business competitiveness rather than articulating genuine changes in economic or political approaches to the environment. Just like sustainable development, 'ecological modernization' has become a highly controversial concept that is open to different interpretations.

The main proposition of the theory of ecological modernization is that economic growth can be adapted to meet environmental goals and that technological and scientific progress can remedy and reverse environmental degradation caused by economic growth. Shedding more light on this project, scholar Maurie J. Cohen points out that "Ecological Modernization provides a theoretical framework for situating the emergence of new technology-intensive modes of environmental reform such as industrial ecology, environmentally conscious manufacturing, and ecological design" (2006, p. 528). Above all, this new initiative aims at achieving a harmony between economic growth and environmental protection in an attempt to put an end to the lingering conflict that characterizes the growth-environment relationship in modern societies nowadays. Spotlighting the major aims of this initiative, scholar Michael Redclift writes:

In seeking greater integration of environmental policy goals with those of other sectors, ecological modernisation seeks to accommodate late industrial society. It seeks to redefine international competitiveness in such a way that early technological innovators reap market advantages [...] It is assumed that advanced industrial societies can shift their

technologies and patterns of production while leaving the structures of private capital accumulation fundamentally intact. (2000, p. 103)

Central to the theory of ecological modernization is the view that capitalism can be made more environmentally friendly if the right technology is used and the appropriate reforms are put in place, so that the conflicting goals of ongoing economic growth and the protection of the environment are reconciled (Blewitt, 2008; Buttel, 2000). Right from the start, this theory triggered a heated debate about its aims, integrity, and feasibility. Although some scholars (e.g., Cohen, 2006; Mol, 2002) claim that ecological modernization aims at effecting some changes to the current socio-economic paradigm of growth, many other critics (Carter, 2007; Buttel, 2000; Baker, 2006; York & Rosa, 2003; Pepper 1998) contend that this theory clearly distances itself from any calls for a fundamental restructuring of the neo-liberal free economic system. Most of these scholars admit, however, that the concept of ecological modernization declares the contemporary ecological crisis a product of the capitalist economic system. In their article “Key Challenges to Ecological Modernization Theory,” critics Richard York and Eugene Rosa point out that this project “argues for the potential of attaining sustainability from within – a greening of ‘business as usual’ – thereby avoiding such challenging alternatives as radical structural or value changes in society” (2003, p. 274).

The debate about ecological modernization is still ongoing. On the one hand, some observers (e.g., Blewitt, 2008; Christoff, 1996) accentuate the differences between the ‘weak’ and the ‘strong’ versions of ecological modernization, asserting that the two versions should by no means be lumped together. Other scholars (e.g., Hajer, 1996; Buttel, 2000; Pepper, 1998), on the other hand, pointedly argue that the version that has been popularized in literature is the one defending a strong harmony between economic growth and environmental protection without challenging the existent paradigm of growth, thus making of the weak version the predominant one. Regardless of the differences between the two debated versions, this project has, in my opinion,

succeeded in placing the environment as a high profile issue in the political and economic agendas of governments, global forums, and NGOs.

On the whole, defenders of this project (e.g., Sagoff, 2000) reject many environmentalists' claims that the North consumes too much, that the project of ecological modernization is biased against the South, that the carrying capacity of the planet limits economic growth, and that increased consumption would inevitably result in the depletion of natural resources. Many of these claims are denounced as "misconceptions" (Sagoff, 2000, p. 117). It is not a coincidence, however, that these particular issues are especially important in the sustainable development discourse when it comes to raising public awareness and consolidating its mainstream public support. I am going to duly get back to these issues in the discussion of the effects of ecological modernization on the evolution and integrity of sustainable development.

Defenders of ecological modernization also refer to the predictions of some scientists such as biologist Paul R. Ehrlich (1986), who warned during the 1970s and early 1980s that global shortages of natural resources would soon cause prices for food, fresh water, energy, and other material to soar. As a matter of fact, these predictions warned that the humankind would suffer from an age of scarcity in which almost all finite natural resources would be in short supply. Proponent of ecological modernization claim that most of these apprehensions proved unfounded as the 1990s prices for food had plummeted and raw materials – including energy resources – were abundant and even less expensive than before (Sagoff, 2000). Other views also argue that previous predictions of resource scarcity have been debunked, as new technologies have made more efficient use of natural resources possible and have come up with new alternatives to substitute for the depleted resources (Carter, 2007; Davison, 2001).

For the most part, the theory of 'ecological modernization' is based on the belief that the only reasonable limits to growth are the limits of human knowledge. According to this approach, the elimination of hunger and poverty is constrained less by scarcity of natural resources than by trade barriers, misdistribution of wealth, corruption, and the inefficiency of some economic policies in the developing countries. Explaining this point, Sagoff writes: "it is simply wrong to believe that nature sets

physical limits to economic growth [...] The idea that increasing consumption will inevitably lead to depletion and scarcity, as plausible as it may seem, is mistaken both in principle and in fact” (2000, p. 117). Ultimately, the whole ‘limit-to-growth’ thesis is completely refuted within this theory, which calls into question the overall theories underpinning sustainable development. This contradiction constitutes, in my view, one of the root causes that precipitated sustainability’s inner conflicts and deepened the yawning gap between the different versions of sustainable development.

Proponents of ecological modernization draw also on the same logic to refute what they see as ‘the fallacy of energy shortage’ that the world is going to suffer from in the near future. Sagoff (2000) argues, for instance, that new pollution-free energy is available in amounts that exceed our needs, and that all that humans have to do is to focus on how to use this energy and combat whatever barriers show up in the path of green technology. However, in his book *Cool Energy: Renewable Solutions to Environmental Problems*, scholar Michael Brower admits that any potential energy shortage will be caused not by scarcity of natural resources, but rather by a vast array of trade barriers and energy subsidies that tend to favour the same old inefficient and polluting energy uses as the result of short-sighted political and economic policies (1992, p. 26). Above all, defenders of ecological modernization decry the many obstacles erected in the way of ‘green’ technology transfer from the North to South because of intricate issues such as property rights and trade regulations.

The claim that the North exploits the South is also denounced as a misconception in ecological modernization theory. According to this view, the real problem is that the North imports too little from the South, and therefore demands fewer of the South’s exports now than in the past (Sagoff, 2000). This view is actually based on reports from the World Resources Institute showing that with a few exceptions – such as petroleum – most of the natural resources consumed in the United States are from domestic resources and that in the closing decades of the 20th century the USA and Canada were in fact the world’s leading exporters of raw materials (Sagoff, 2000, p. 127). As I see it, however, this approach is at odds with the project of sustainable development that based its discourse on the necessity of avoiding the

Western economic model of growth, which drew exhaustively on the natural resources. By absolving the North of any historical responsibility for environmental degradation and exploitation in the South, ecological modernization theorists seem to thwart much of the argument in the sustainable development discourse about the North's ecological debt ² to the South.

Everything considered, ecological modernization is widely celebrated as a promising project that not only marries economic growth and the protection of the environment, but also ensures better chances for sustainability thanks to technological innovations and scientific progress. By combining the generosity of nature and the ingenuity of humankind, ecological modernization theorists promise the world a model of development that offers the benefits of both economic growth and sustainability. The unmistakable primacy given to economic growth, however, underlies much of the criticism directed at this theory. Critics from different schools of thought have called this theory everything from just another disguised discourse of neo-liberalism to a Northern attempt to deny the South its right to a sound economic growth.

Ecological Modernization and Sustainable Development: Allies or Enemies?

Before delving into this discussion, I find it essential to draw a clear demarcation line between ecological modernization and sustainable development and pinpoint the main tenets of each concept. To begin with, the theory ecological modernization diverges from sustainable development with respect to a few important points, the most important of which is its utilitarian approach to nature and attaching a price tag to the environment through measures such as the 'polluter pays principle'. Put differently, this theory upholds the concept that "a clean environment [...] is a commodity, just like television sets, computers, or soap, and if people desire the commodity, the market will supply it" (Robbins, 2009, p.7).

² The notion of 'ecological debt' is mainly based on the view that economies of the rich, industrialized countries have been built on natural resources such as timber, minerals, oil...etc. from the poor, developing countries, hence these developed countries' responsibility to limit their consumption and seek ways to curb and reverse ecological damage that industrialization has brought about ever since the Industrial Revolution (McLaren, 2003, p. 30).

Ecological modernization, therefore, places a lot of emphasis on the business sector that can make profits by protecting the environment and fostering green technology. According to this approach, manufacturing costs can be reduced by enhancing the efficiency of environment-friendly production processes. Ecological modernization also fosters the concept of 'green consumerism' which is based on the consumption of recyclable, environment-friendly products with minimal ecological damages (Carter, 2007).

While the principle of 'green consumerism' is highly celebrated in the sustainability discourse, the heavy reliance on the business sector and the absence of the 'limits to growth' principles in ecological modernization remain highly incompatible with the project of sustainable development. This discrepancy has, in my view, grown increasingly conspicuous; all the more so because most industrialized governments started to shift their attention from sustainable development to ecological modernization on the grounds that the latter offers more practical cost-effective and business-friendly solutions. Studies show, for instance, that countries such as the Netherlands, Germany, and Japan have become 'leaders' in applying ecological modernization strategies (Baker, 2006, p. 138). Thus, I strongly believe that the prominence of ecological modernization at a time when sustainable development was still in the process of being conceptualized and formulated worldwide seems to have further tilted the balance in favour of the reformist approach and weakened the hard-won public consensus on this project.

Internal as it is, this discrepancy between ecological modernization and sustainable development is echoed in these two projects' agendas for development. Scholar Neil Carter notes, for instance, that with all its emphasis on devising practical solutions to solve the current environmental problems, "ecological modernization also discards much of the political baggage of sustainable development, notably the 'development' agenda of North-South issues, inequalities, social justice and democracy, which can prove controversial and costly to implement" (2007, p. 229). Hence, while sustainable development embraces a wider agenda of setting holistic goals and strategies for an environment-friendly development with

more social equity and political reforms, ecological modernization offers instead a set of practical solutions for fixing ecological problems in industrialized countries. As such, ecological modernization offers practical solutions without theorizing about an alternative to the prevailing, unsustainable development paradigm. Scholars (e.g., Baker, 2006; Connelly & Smith, 1999; Pepper, 1998) point out, therefore, that the focus on devising profit-oriented practical solutions to fix current ecological problems is clearly at odds with the deep concern with a wide array of social, economic, and cultural issues that characterizes the discourse of sustainable development.

The theory of ecological modernization has also been criticized widely by other scholars such as Richard York and Eugene Rosa (2003), Michael Redclift (2000), James Connelly and Graham Smith (1999), and Martin Khor (1995), among many others, who pointed out serious shortcomings in its theoretical underpinnings. For the most part, these critics point to a number of ‘misperceptions’ they see as intrinsic to this theory. Moreover, in approaching this theory, some of these critics seem to adopt a rather Southern perspective, pointing to the ‘pro-Western’ framework of thought that the project of ecological modernization is based upon. They scathingly decry the prioritization of economic growth in this theory and the spiritless version of sustainable development it advocates.

Above all, ecological modernization is often denounced as legitimizing the very free market economic system and capitalist model of development that have engendered the current levels of environmental degradation (Carter, 2007). Scholar Michael Redclift criticizes, for instance, the idea that when it comes to economic growth, “it is assumed that advanced industrial societies can shift their technologies and patterns of production while leaving the structures of private capital accumulation fundamentally intact” (2000, p. 103). According to these critics, the thinly disguised ‘growth agenda’ that marks ecological modernization has overshadowed many of the strengths of this theory. Other observers, such as James Connelly and Graham Smith (1999), also reject the argument that no major changes are needed in the capitalist economic system to achieve sustainability, denouncing it as a new form of ‘green

capitalism.’ While celebrating the benefits of economic growth, ecological modernization is also criticized for bearing insignificant influence on the patterns of production and consumption characterizing the global economy to date. Other observers (e.g., Carter, 2007; York & Rosa, 2003) point out that this project has failed to modify the dominant economic structures in today’s socio-economic paradigm of development, referring to “ecological modernisation as a facet of business development, rather than a means of raising environmental standards” (Redclift, 2000, p. 104).

To my way of thinking, ecological modernization’s disavowal of sustainability’s “political baggage” has had a rather negative bearing on the project of sustainable development in a context of economic globalization. In intentionally eschewing any fundamental change in neoliberal capitalist model of growth, the project of ecological modernization fails to help initiate the essential economic and societal adjustments to achieve sustainability within an environment-friendly “economic system that is able to generate surpluses and technical knowledge on a self-reliant and sustained basis” (WCED, 1987, p. 65). Above all, the undisguised alignment of this project with neoliberalism as well as its celebration of the primacy of economic growth raise challenges to the implementation of sustainable development, which seeks to transform the existing paradigm of development as a whole.

The project of ecological modernization faces also the criticism that it is not ‘global’ in scope. Critics (e.g., Mol, 2003, pp. 63-65) point out that this project was designed and has been promoted by theorists in the developed countries, who have concentrated their efforts on achieving some degree of sustainability by ensuring the protection of the environment without sacrificing continued economic growth and high consumption patterns. Other critics contend that, because it has failed to grow into a global project, “the discourse of Ecological Modernization is often charged with being a discourse that supports the interests of political and economic elites in both the North and the South, with little regard for other communities” (Connelly & Smith, 1999, p. 185). Through ecological modernization, these critics contend, the industrialized countries have been trying to internalize environmental protection costs in the process of economic growth while adhering to the principles of free global trade and continuous

economic and industrial growth. Other observers (e.g., Prorter & Brown, 1996; Baker, 2006; Tarnoff, 1992), however, point out that developing countries rank environmental concerns differently on their developmental agendas. In fact, the concern with the environment in the South is usually more linked to problems of desertification, fresh water scarcity, and soil erosion than to global environmental problems like ozone layer depletion, global warming, and biodiversity loss.

In a context of North-South politics, one more sign of the failure of ecological modernization, observers point out, is the fact that nearly two decades after the 1992 Rio Summit, global commitment to re-adjusting economic structures to internalize environmental concerns is still weak and the implementation of the Rio agreements has been rather shaky especially in the developing countries:

This is the ultimate environmental and social tragedy: the scientific knowledge that could be properly used to provide for every human being's physical needs is being applied instead through industrial technology to take away resources from the Third World largely for the production of superfluous goods. Meanwhile, the majority of Third World peoples sink deeper into margins of survival. (Khor, 1995, p. 38)

In sidelining the South's environmental concerns, the project of ecological modernization has deepened even more the lingering North-South divide, thus making it harder for sustainable development to achieve the necessary global consensus on environmental exigencies in both developed and developing countries. Scholar Martin Khor (1995) confirms that ecological modernization has also exacerbated the rift between the North and the South with regard to options of development and environmental protection at a time when sustainable development is in urgent need of new efforts to strengthen its consensus-building strategies.

Despite the multiple strengths of ecological modernization, what makes this project rather incompatible with sustainable development, in my view, is that the former adopts and advocates a rather distorted version of sustainability, thus undermining much of the hard-won public support for the project of sustainable development as a whole. The dissemination of a rather 'weak' version of sustainable

development through the project of ecological modernization has affected the popularity of sustainable development and caused public zeal for this project to falter in many parts of the world. The project of ecological modernization seems, therefore, to have done more harm than good to the project of sustainable development when it aligned itself with neoliberal capitalism at the expense of achieving sustainability.

Conclusions

Despite the intense academic focus on the different external obstacles that the project of sustainable development faces in a context of neo-liberal capitalism, this project's inner conflicts and contradictions have recently come to the fore as an important contributing factor to the sustainability stalemate nowadays. Sustainable development's popularity has been undermined, for instance, by the proliferation of numerous interpretations of sustainability, generating multiple 'weak' and 'strong' versions of this project. Not only has internal division confused public opinion over which version of sustainable development to support, but it has also given politicians and corporate elites an opportunity to opt for the weakest one of those versions. More to the point, this ambiguity has given politicians an opportunity to publicly pledge their full support to sustainable development and at the same time to maintain the 'business-as-usual' attitude towards the environment. Due to this ambivalence, politicians have been able to further boost neoliberal capitalist economic growth in the name of sustainable development. With the emergence of 'ecological modernization,' this choice became even more appealing to these politicians and decision-makers.

The project 'ecological modernization,' as it stands today, has also been at odds with the project of sustainable development, for it focuses rather on single ecological issues at the expense of other aspects of human development such as social equity and sustainability. By and large, this project fails to take on board a holistic approach connecting the social, the economic, and the ecological issues in the sustainability discourse. Treating the environment just like any other isolated issue, ecological modernization has also contributed to the dissemination of a

disjointed formulation of the concept of sustainable development that has negatively impacted on its resilience. Above all, it has failed to recognize and deal with the interdependency of the relationships between the economic, social and ecological issues within the sustainability discourse.

The prevalent political willingness to adopt the reformist approach to sustainability has also displaced the public consensus from endorsing sustainable development to celebrating the practicality of ecological modernization and the soundness of the neoliberal economic system. On the whole, popularizing 'weak' or 'reformist' versions of sustainability underpinning ecological modernization has created another internal front in the growth-environment battle for the project of sustainable development. The holistic view combining the ecological, economic, and political issues in sustainability has also been marginalized by the focus on quick technical solutions to fix environmental problems that ecological modernization offers. Ecological modernization seems, for instance, at odds with the sustainable development's strategies designed to curb and supervise the TNCs, which are entrusted with producing the 'green' technology needed for solving environment problems

By disregarding social issues such as poverty and social inequality in modern consumer society, the discourse of ecological modernization, in my opinion, has made great concessions on the holistic agenda adhered to in the sustainable development discourse. What is more, ecological modernization's neglect of political issues such as the North-South divide, global governance, and trade liberalization renders it much more appealing to politicians who want to enjoy the rhetoric of sustainability without enacting any radical political or economic changes. The success of ecological modernization in some industrialized countries has also dissuaded politicians and decision-makers from embracing the project of sustainable development, especially as they have found in ecological modernization a quick solution to ecological problems without having to question the whole economic and political systems.

By and large, ecological modernization has failed to reflect a sound version of sustainable development that is sensitive to cultural differences, social values, and the indigenous local knowledge of people in the developing countries. It has also failed to take on board all those marginalized by the predominant socio-economic model of development, by globalization, and by global corporate powers. Ultimately, the project of ecological modernization falls short of representing a radical move to change the patterns of production and consumption that have brought about the current plight of 'unsustainability' in modern society. In the light of all these conflicts within the sustainability discourse itself, a whole re-conceptualization of the current disjointed approaches to sustainable development is badly needed if this project is to be implemented soundly at the dawn of this millennium. Above all, fathoming the multi-dimensionality and interdependence of the economic, social, cultural, and ecological imperatives of sustainability remains key in redeeming the current conflicts within this discourse and setting off a sound implementation of sustainable development.

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