SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CANNOT BE THE FUTURE WE WANT

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I. Fuck Sustainable Development!

In a 2016 article, Professor of Human Geography Simon Springer famously wrote:

> *Fuck Neoliberalism. That's my blunt message … I have nothing positive to add to the discussion about neoliberalism, and to be perfectly honest, I'm quite sick of having to think about it. I've simply had enough … I've been writing on the subject for many years and I came to a point where I just didn't want to commit any more energy to this endeavor for fear that continuing to work around this idea was functioning to perpetuate its hold. On further reflection I also recognize that it is potentially quite dangerous to simply stick our heads in the sand and collectively ignore a phenomenon that has had such devastating and debilitating effects on our shared world. There is an ongoing power to neoliberalism that is difficult to deny and I'm not convinced that a strategy of ignorance is actually the right approach. So my exact thoughts were, 'well fuck it then'. Why should we be more worried about using profanity than we are about the actual vile discourse of neoliberalism itself?* (Springer, 2016, pp. 285–86).

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Springer's coarse sentiments resonate with me because I feel the same about the concept of sustainable development, itself a neoliberal invention that has been the focus of my work and critique for at least a decade. I intensely dislike the idea of sustainable development with the same vigor that Springer dislikes the broader neoliberal context within which palliatives such as sustainable development have been created and continue to operate.

Capitalizing on the momentum created by the 1987 Brundtland Report[1], which formally introduced the concept, sustainable development has now become the compass alongside which the world orientates its neoliberal, capitalist-centered, development vision, from the global all the way down to the local. Sustainable development has become embedded as a guiding principle for decision-making (political, economic, and otherwise) in virtually all social institutions, including, among many others, international law and the development policies of international institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Redclift, 2006).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) embody the latest near-universal agreement setting out a vision of "The Future We Want," and politically institutionalize and structurally embed sustainable development as the world's preferred grand development vision until at least 2030. The SDGs were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 (more formally known as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development) and contain 17 goals and 169 targets that offer a blueprint for guiding humanity's future development course. The 2030 Agenda is based on and has been shaped by the 2012 Outcome Document of the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development, titled *The Future We Want*. This document is explicit about what it considers to be its foundational norm: sustainable development. Sustainable development is therefore *the core principle* informing the

1 The Brundtland Report, also known as "Our Common Future", was published by the United Nations and attempted to merge development and environment into a unified goal. The term "sustainable development" was created and defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (p. 16).

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shape of *The Future We Want*. Assuming that *The Future We Want* is, at least in part, also a democratic choice and should involve a democratic process leading us to decide what future it is that we want (i.e., who are "we," how do "we" reach consensus, do "we" also decide for non-humans, and do "we" decide for future living beings?). This is highly problematic.

From the perspective of an environmental lawyer, I am critical of sustainable development because it promises what it cannot deliver because of the oxymoron at its core, namely that infinite social-economic development is actually possible on a finite planet. Moreover, like associated concepts of "green economy" and "green growth," sustainable development has become a term, and increasingly an unquestioned mindset, that capitalist societies use to treat some of the symptoms of the problem of social-ecological decline in a light-handed way instead of addressing the core causes of this problem, namely neoliberal-driven, growth-without-limits development, over-consumption and extractivism, and exploitation and domination of vulnerable beings.

I situate my concerns and associated critique of sustainable development in the epistemic context of the Anthropocene (Steffen et al., 2015), the proposed new geological epoch that is characterized by human-induced loss of planetary resilience, loss of critical Earth system regulatory functions, fast-approaching planetary boundaries, an ever-diminishing safe operating space for humanity, unprecedented levels of rising injustice, social upheaval, and oppressive exploitation, and an increasingly uneven world order. As we gradually make our way into and through the Anthropocene (precarious as such an unpredictable journey is), given sustainable development's complicity in causing and exacerbating the drivers of the Anthropocene and its inability to address the root causes of these drivers, I believe it cannot continue to function as the foundation for future development. Reflecting on democracy and our collective role in shaping our future, sustainable development certainly cannot be a roadmap toward achieving a just world within planetary limits.

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Although having been formally rejected by the International Commission on Stratigraphy[2], the term "Anthropocene" (loosely translated as the "age of the human") informally denotes the most recent period in Earth's geological history, which is characterized by the formidable telluric force that humans increasingly exert on planet Earth. Through scientific and technological development and progress, humans have acquired the ability to impact key Earth system regulatory functions in ways that equal earthly powers, such as volcanoes and earthquakes, instigating a Sixth Mass Extinction event (Barnosky et al., 2011).

The Anthropocene has become a widely used term-of-art in popular culture and academic debates. Although subject to critique, especially because it tends to generalize human impacts on the Earth system in an undifferentiated way that ignores global inequalities, injustices, and past and present contributions to social-ecological decay, the Anthropocene, as an episteme, offers a useful discursive space to critically re-examine our social institutions, such as law, politics, economics, and religion, which all somehow shape our relationships with each other, with other non-humans, and with non-living entities:

> *[…] the Anthropocene fundamentally challenges basic assumptions of modern thought, such as: dualisms separating humans from nature, conceptions of unique human agency and the presumption of progressive norms, such as liberty, [and] that the planet is capacious enough for individual acts to be thought of as disconnected from the peoples, species and processes once rendered as 'others.'* (Schmidt, Brown, and Orr, 2016, p. 188)

2 On March 21, 2024 the International Commission on Stratigraphy and the International Union of Geological Sciences released a joint statement rejecting the proposal to adopt the Anthropocene as a formal unit of geologic time. The statement does, however, conclude that the term "[…] will remain an invaluable descriptor of human impact on the Earth system." https://stratigraphy.org/news/152

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The imagery of the Anthropocene prompts us to reconceive our social institutions in ways that could possibly address, more effectively, the many challenges resulting from human encroachment on planetary limits at an Earth system scale (Gellers, 2021); elsewhere expressed as planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2024; Rockström et al., 2009). Our newly discovered geological human agency also means that "Anthropocene thought acquires an ethical dimension — what global society *chooses to do* impacts the planetary environmental and ecological systems that must sustain later generations" (Kennel, 2021, p. 90).[3] The fact that we have a choice, and the realization that our current decisions and behavior affect not only present human and non-human generations but also future generations, will essentially require us to carefully consider what future it is that we actually want. The decisions we make now, and how we realize the objectives of these decisions and carry them through our social institutions, will fundamentally affect the interests and well-being of the living order, now and in the future.

III. The Future We Want?

The world has already decided which future it wants, at least until 2030. At the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012, the United Nations General Assembly endorsed the Outcome Document *The Future We Want*. States unequivocally renewed their "commitment to sustainable development and to ensuring the promotion of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for our planet and for present and future generations" (para 1) ; while they acknowledge "the need to further mainstream sustainable development at all levels, integrating economic, social and environmental aspects and recognizing their interlinkages, so as to achieve sustainable development in all its dimensions" (para 3). The Outcome Document further dedicates an entire section to laying out preparatory plans for the eventual development of the SDGs, recognizing "the importance and utility of a set of

3 Emphasis in the original.

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sustainable development goals" that "should address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their interlinkages" (para 246).

And thus, the SDGs were launched with great fanfare in 2015, copying much of the language that was used in the Rio+20 Outcome Document and reaffirming sustainable development as the rhetorical, contextual, ethical, normative, and political fulcrum on which the world's development vision revolves. One can hardly fault the lofty (and possibly sincere) undertakings by states and private sector actors to address many of the world's most critical concerns in the next few years. Who can disagree with an ambitious global resolution that aims "between now and 2030, to end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources" (para 3)? It is encouraging, but rare, to find such high ambition in global political declarations, and when one does, it is either included in non-binding preambular provisions of a binding instrument,[4] or in the main text of non-binding instruments, such as the SDGs. States inevitably dislike binding themselves to ambitious goals, and where consensus is reached about some contentious issue, such consensus usually reflects the lowest possible common denominator that keeps everyone satisfied and in the game, as it were. The result therefore is that *The Future We Want* is fashioned around 17 ambitious, non-binding goals, while sustainable development is the foundation for achieving these goals, and therefore now constitutes the core of the world's present and future development vision.

My central thesis is that although these goals are all appropriate and desirable, they will likely never be achieved, or not achieved to their fullest possible extent, precisely because they are deeply entrenched in

4 For example, one of the few provisions in international environmental law that recognizes the need for planetary "integrity," the Paris Climate Agreement, says in a preambular provision that states note "the importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including oceans, and the protection of biodiversity, recognized by some cultures as Mother Earth, and noting the importance for some of the concept of 'climate justice,' when taking action to address climate change."

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sustainable development dogma. The problem with the SDGs is therefore *sustainable development*, which is an unsound foundation on which to build and pursue a "comprehensive, far-reaching and people-centered set of universal and transformative Goals and targets" (para 2). My reason for saying so derives from a deeper critique of sustainable development dogma that I, and others, have developed over the years (e.g., Kotzé and Adelman, 2022). Here is a brief summary of the core argument:

Sustainable development, as a concept, principle, and/or goal offers nothing new, and in its SDG guise is simply old wine in a somewhat new bottle. Ever since its formal inception in the 1987 Brundtland Report, sustainable development has not been an ambitious undertaking: we simply need to somehow balance social, economic, and environmental concerns and celebrate those (rare) instances where the three circles converge (and to this day they have never converged fully in any meaningful way). The bar was set very low by the Brundtland Report, which was a disingenuous compromise suppressing the contradiction between the ideal of endless extractive growth on the one hand and real and sobering planetary limits on the other hand. Possibly, also with the hope of under-promising and over-delivering (although the latter has rarely happened in the course of history), more ambitious legal and political goals, such as ecological sustainability or planetary integrity, have consistently been rejected by states precisely because they significantly raise the level of normative ambitious and political commitment and the extent and depth of action to be taken by states on specific matters (Bosselmann, 2016).

Sustainable development very conveniently provided that perfect balance between catchy rhetoric and lofty ideals that can appease all stakeholders, while imposing minimal obligations on states to take drastic actions to, for example, reign in carbon intensive industries, or provide free universal healthcare and public transport for everyone. After all, the Brundtland Commission's impossible brief was to square the circle of growth as a precondition for development and environmental protection. The Brundtland definition of sustainable development possessed a conceptual ambiguity that made it palatable to the widest possible audience. It was broad enough to capture the energy of this environmental reawakening and to resonate with the increasingly international nature of popular thinking about environmental problems.

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Its central concern for equity with present and future generations retained sufficient idealism to garnish the support of ecological purists and advocates for distributive justice. Yet its vague, contradictory stance on ecological limits and economic processes weakened that very threat, leaving just enough wiggle room so that pro-growth economists, business leaders, and governments could also comfortably embrace the concept (Carruthers, 2011, p. 99).

While some will point to a few successes of sustainable development over the years (for example that it has at least managed to foster some consensus among nations about the dire state of the world), it has not managed to actually set the world on a more *sustainable* developmental path. The world is probably worse off than in 1987, which is why we needed to create a comprehensive, multi-faceted set of SDGs to get us out of the impossibly tight spot we find ourselves in. But in doing so, we are using the same medicine to treat an illness that it could never cure, while the illness has become infinitely more severe. To be sure, the conclusion of a recent mid-term assessment of the literature investigating the political steering effects of the SDGs is that, on balance, the SDGs are not fully geared toward steering, nor actually capable of facilitating, the sort of transformations we urgently need (Biermann, Hickmann, and Sénit, 2022).

The reality is that the Anthropocene's planetary crisis is so urgent and profound that any future development vision requires a fundamentally different worldview — one that offers a genuinely ambitious and appropriate solution for the problem that it aims to solve. The stark disconnect between the low ambition of sustainable development and the gravity of the planetary crisis that we observe through the lens of the Anthropocene suggests that sustainable development, to the extent that it manifests in the SDGs as the roadmap for future development, will simply reinforce the status quo ante. As the world continues to recommit itself to sustainable development over and over again, despite convincing evidence that this dogma cannot bring about the radical transformations we urgently need in the Anthropocene, *The Future We Want* inevitably remains the past we have inherited and the present we now experience. Nothing has changed and nothing will unless we discard sustainable development and urgently

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search for a new ethic that sees development not only in terms of material gain, but also as a way to care for a planet in crisis and the vulnerable present and future living order it hosts.

While there are other ethics, such as those rooted in Indigenous cosmovisions and the "rights of nature" theory, the recently proposed notion of the "planetary commons" offers a potent alternative foundation to start tracing the outlines of what a different democratic future in the Anthropocene might look like (Rockström et al., 2024). The idea of the planetary commons is based on, but significantly expands, the traditional notion of the global commons. The planetary commons include critical biophysical Earth-regulating systems and their functions, irrespective of where they are located, because they are essential to sustaining all life across the planet, including the stability of our societies. The planetary commons framework is informed by Anthropocene dynamics and includes, as its core rationale, the need to safeguard and steward critical Earth system functions that regulate the stability of the planet and sustain its resilience, avoid breaching planetary boundaries that cause tipping point risks, and work toward ensuring a just and inclusive world for everyone, now and in the future (Rockström et al., 2024). As we enter the Deep Anthropocene, the idea of the planetary commons offers an epistemic framework to creatively develop alternative, more radical, innovative, and contextualized forms of planetary care, while it explicitly rejects predatory paradigms such as sustainable development. More specifically, "commoning" shows us how it might be possible to co-create governance regimes for Earth's destabilized critical regulatory processes and functions that are not yet governed or are governed inadequately. "Commoning" also implies shared governance that offers pathways for democratic representation of present and future human and non-human generations. It simultaneously offers the possibility to craft planetary stewardship obligations that both states and a wide range of non-state actors, such as corporations and civil movements, should embrace. A new global governance constellation that starts with the idea that better protection of the planetary commons is a non-negotiable necessity as we move deeper into the Anthropocene could potentially lead to the development of democratically negotiated, shared, and ambitious goals that planetary commons governance must strive

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toward, such as planetary justice and planetary integrity. As we argue in detail in Rockström et al. (2024), working toward such ambitious common goals and devising ways of keeping everyone accountable to reach them, could go a long way toward optimizing the current lackluster global environmental governance regime.

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