

Seeing through sustainability

In Hans Christian Anderson's allegorical tale, the Emperor's New Clothes, it was a child watching the royal procession that pointed toward the Emperor and cried out, "But he hasn't got anything on." Soon thereafter, other onlookers began admitting a truth, something they had known all along.

The reaction to the Emperor is a case of powerless subjects supporting the perspectives of their more powerful monarch because recognizing the truth entails responsibility.

Like the non-existent royal garb of Anderson's story, a societal path called sustainability is increasingly touted by governments, corporations, non-governmental organizations, and the academy as *the* fix for social and ecological woes. This fix appears magical in that its work is said to be already underway while Western notions of progress and prosperity continue to march on unchallenged. It is mythical in that, for the most part, it has yet to attempt to resolve conflict between the societal status quo and the painful cultural change necessary for long-term survival.

What exactly is on parade? The answer is a large diversity of actors who offer an enticing mélange of distracting promises, wistful programs, and glossy reports. We call this "press release sustainability". Like the Emperor's happy-to-please subjects, press release sustainability needs an audience to perpetuate its hoax. The way this is currently achieved is by making it easy for you and I to avoid the shame of admitting our apparent inability to see the "fabric" by proclaiming its nonexistent beauty. Just as onlookers exclaimed "Exquisite!" to describe the clothes they did not see, we are to congratulate our corporations, etc. for "doing their part" to "save the environment" by pointing to the achievement of trivial "green" targets. We too are to proclaim what we cannot see.

A recent and local example involves Mayor Gregor Robertson's release of the City of Vancouver's Action Plan for 2020, which has the goal of branding Vancouver the world's foremost "Green Capital" (vancouver.ca/greencapital/index.htm). In the media release he provided the following rationale,

The Olympics are a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and we need to do everything we can to help our local economy capitalize on it. That means being aggressive in terms of how we market ourselves to the world. The 'Vancouver Green Capital' branding strategy allows us to define Vancouver on our terms.

This excerpt from the media release exemplifies the "press release sustainability" fix. The Olympics are presented as a tumultuous moment in our history when voters and politicians are to begin to work together to develop the local economy by marketing our unique position as "sustainable". Assumed is the idea that the

Olympic host label can instantly garner one an international reputation for sustainability and that this can serve the nascent needs and wants of consumers and corporations. The questions stemming from this are both practical and philosophical. Practically speaking, what consumer need in the realm of sustainability does the Games produce? More importantly, in exact terms how does this branding exercise direct the region towards greater sustainability? The overall concern then is that the press release appears to sidestep any consideration of whether and why we need to grow/sprawl/densify.

Now imagine another kind of campaign. Instead of a bland press release invoking the metaphors of aggressive competition and individuality on the global “green marketplace”, imagine a bold program actually challenging the culture around how Nature is commodified. Instead of yet more arbitrary, nonbinding empirical targets for carbon emissions or “green” industry jobs, imagine pushing the boundaries of current social programs beyond a relatively narrow focus on the *social safety net* to include an *ecological safety net*. What if the purpose of the “Vancouver: Green Capital” plan were to protect the universal rights of humans and habitat to co-exist? What if the city proposed to expand the notion of *extended health care* to include the health of the land, water and air necessary to grow food and prevent catastrophic climate destabilization? Imagine if ecological destruction was criminalized as a form of abuse - another metaphor - against future generations. These proposals would serve as a truly *universal* health care, rather than only bolster the narrow metaphor of anthropocentrism. Just as government, NGOs, corporations and institutions all now play a role in protecting Canada as a social welfare state, so too could the plan fulfill critical roles in Vancouver not as the investment- and recognition-hungry Green Capital but as the world’s first *Nature Welfare* jurisdiction.

Unsustainability is a frame of mind and movement

If one digs a bit deeper, press release sustainability promotes the root metaphor of progressivism that underlies green branding and its ilk. Progressivism is the assumption that *all* technological development and economic growth is indicative of human “progress”, and that all change is improvement. Progressivism is found in the words of Teryn Norris, a project director at the New York-based Breakthrough Institute (www.thebreakthrough.org), whose talk last summer at UBC’s World Changing Careers conference hammered home the message that in order to be more sustainable we must not only continue to move away from our “cave man” past, but hasten the development of powerful technologies and the greater integration of daily life with industrialization. In one fell swoop Norris arrogantly and ethnocentrically dismissed non-western and various indigenous peoples who may live through alternative metaphors critical to moving forward in sustainability.

Root metaphors are, according to renowned linguistics researcher George Lakoff, one of the ways our minds make sense of the world. Studying root metaphors

provides important insights into the workings and consequences of a destructive culture. For instance, a literal analysis of climate change reductively points to carbon emissions as the culprit. But studying root metaphors shifts our focus to instrumental rationality, mechanistic philosophy, and anthropocentrism as the cognitive sources of the specific practices that are blamed for causing climate change. The problem with only focusing on the practices, rather than the thinking that underlies them is that doing so allows us to remain ensconced in these same destructive cultural perspectives. To retain these myopic ways of thinking to overcome ecological challenges only maintains the status quo, which has us speeding up our slide past peak unsustainability.

Disturbingly, press release sustainability is also based in root metaphors that bless the replacement of Nature with words or pictures or slogans or an accounting entry as a fair substitute. Press release sustainability is riddled with the metaphors of scientism, empiricism and logocentrism embedded in all of our modern social institutions. In other words, without defining what sustainability is for the reader, he or she can assume that Western science and rational thinking alone, applied through precise measurement and new technology, will be *the* way to lead us forward. Prince Charles, a long-time advocate for sustainability initiatives, has recently observed, "We take our mechanistic view of [the world] for granted and believe that the language of scientific empiricism which so dominates our discussion is the only form of language we need to guide us." This can clearly be seen in the phrase "according to scientists" which time after time is rubber-stamped by advocates - including many in Copenhagen - to trump arguments for both more or less drastic action without recognition of the monocultural origins of Western science.

Another Definition of Sustainability: Audience Participation

An alternative definition of sustainability recognizes the existence of a countervailing force equivalent to the brave child in Anderson's tale. Spanning a broad range of actors and ideas, these sustainability advocates are fashioning their own unique tale of sustainability. This tale begins with how we are failing to challenge the mounting destructive effects of the modern industrial and consumer age as they reach their "peak" - hence peak oil, peak habitat destruction, peak detachment and so on. Most importantly, this story provides our wannabee Emperors with a contemporary loom to confess their complicity in the parade and, if necessary, to expose corporate greenwashers' efforts to strategically spin lies in weaving a tale of sustainability.

In recognition of this countervailing force, we explicitly redefine sustainability as follows:

"Sustainability is a positive program forward for living within our collective means; and it is a counter-narrative and social movement against the negative impacts of unrelenting 'progress' defined in terms of modernity."

This definition is a call to action. Such action centres on deliberating and creating a vision of the sustainability that we *need*. Sustainability as a *positive* program means that we strive to *increase*, enhance and expand our restorative and creative impact on the Planet and on society. Sustainability as a social movement means a collective effort to break modernity's current trajectory of unrestrained growth at a scale that defies natural and social limits. It means challenging the low priority that society's current social institutions place on the future. Press release sustainability reflects the confusion over the functions of government, education, law, and media, which continue to compete with one another in a harmful manner and in doing so shy away from the long-term well-being of the Planet. The academy has too often featured such obtuse questions. Governments are responsible for arbitrary, uninspiring and unreliable policy targets. There are few who are not guilty of patronizing talk of what simple actions individuals can do to make a difference, actions which rarely lead to calls for profound change.

A social movement for sustainability seeks an academic, commercial, or government formation that will embrace the change sought. Such a transformation toward new root metaphors will not be easy. But *this* is what we need to realize about sustainability. A pain-free program of press release sustainability is an oxymoron, a *myth*. Ultimately, it will get us nowhere. Instead, sustainability as a social movement may be likened to universal health care and embraced as the next great societal challenge for our respective cities, provinces or even the Nation. None of the grand social changes which social institutions wrought, and which now define our nation, have ever been effortlessly accomplished. The success of ambitious programs like universal health care, social welfare and social security all reflect forgotten political battles in recent history. Social champions like the "Greatest Canadian" Tommy Douglas, the father of Medicare, have taken their knocks to protect the collective and individual wellbeing we now so often take for granted. These far-sighted champions did not opt for a quick and easy fix.

To accomplish this, we *need* prairie giants like Douglas who can envision a better future. Such political figures would have the bravery to propose and fight for sustainability as a collective regional and national mission and to shift the balance away from worn metaphors now past their expiry date.

Just as a doctor would not send a severely ailing patient home with but a simple aspirin to soothe her agony, so too must advocates for sustainability resist the poison of cheap techno-fixes, short-term entrepreneurial solutions and the quick self-congratulations that provide easy fodder for PR. Instead, for sustainability itself to be transformative, advocates must set about the difficult task of addressing the very roots of *unsustainability* – which means squarely facing how they themselves are complicit in perpetuating the modern way of thinking. In other words, we must promise to become openly conscious of our own false consciousness.

You can't dismantle the Emperor's house with the Emperor's tools

While neither the importance of science and rational thinking can be dismissed nor can some progress through technology be denied, the sustainability movement must more substantially integrate other ways of thinking beyond what continues to be essentially 17th and 18th century European culture. In effect, this requires knitting together a greater diversity of fibres into our present collective cloth. While treading carefully around romanticizing indigenous cultures, we need to revisit and consider conserving and revitalizing place-based root metaphors couched in holism and systems thinking, on interconnectedness with Nature, and on a sensible consciousness of the sanctity of the Air, Water and Land. A rediscovery of our how our human kin is an inseparable part of the Land is a necessary counter-weight to the cold empiricism of corporate sustainability bureaucrats and neoliberal efficiency-enthusiasts. We need to shift away from the tunnel-vision of sustainable transportation to *transporting* sustainability as a cultural movement, away from sustainable buildings to *building* sustainability as a new frame of mind, and away from our infatuation with the 3 R's of consumption to an embrace of the most important R of all – *Rethink*.

Fortunately, there are a number of role model organisations presently at work, both locally and internationally, to which we can look for inspiration and leadership. Changing Climates Education Society (www.changingclimates.org) is a BC-based non-profit founded by student Alysia Garmulewicz. The society's mission is to "initiate systemic change with the goal of designing a sustainable future" through "redesigning the education system to foster a sustainable society". Together with Dr. Liza Ireland, an established researcher and practitioner of environmental education, the society plans to initiate the Canadian Educational Centre for Sustainability. The Centre will include an intergenerational sustainability think-tank, professional development courses, and a model school. Farther abroad, Green Cross International (www.gci.ch) is a comprehensive advocacy and training group founded in 1992 by former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev. Its mission entails "fostering a value shift and cultivating a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility in humanity's relationship with nature." Actions of the GSI are founded upon support for the Earth Charter Initiative (www.earthcharterinaction.org). A telling declaration, the GSI preamble begins with three simple words - *Life is sacred* - marking the vital root metaphor of sanctity. Finally, the New Economics Foundation (www.neweconomics.org) is a UK-based "think-and-do-tank" aiming "to improve quality of life by promoting innovative solutions that challenge mainstream thinking on economic, environment and social issues." One of their key projects is the Happy Planet Index, which encourages a big picture view of the connection between social and environmental wellbeing beyond reductive economics. It is from these types of bold initiatives and groups we need to learn in order to design and knit a contemporary fabric for a sustainable society.

Sustainability as our next grand social program

Sustainability as a counter-narrative to modern progress drives deep at the heart of our modern woes. While current approaches aim to pick off low-hanging fruit like a dedicated bridge bicycle lane and a few token plots of community gardens on the lawn of City Hall, a strong sustainability program systematically zooms us out from hanging fruit to include the welfare of the entire “tree”. It recognizes that a single ecological issue like global warming is not *the* problem; rather, it is a symptom, albeit a daunting one, of more fundamental cultural triggers stitched into our modern Western economies, politics and philosophies.

In truth, anything less than this may turn out to be just more unsustainability in disguise. Pope Benedict XVI, urging the protection of “creation” on World Peace Day, proclaimed: “Humanity needs a profound cultural renewal; it needs to rediscover those values which can serve as a solid basis for building a brighter future for all.” In the 21st century, an unbalanced modernity is our threat. Renewal requires going beyond teetering, industrial metaphors to redefine what is “modern.” Sustainability needs to push past well-worn boundaries to head toward new and forgotten metaphors of thinking, living and growing in a vibrant, meaningful society. In the Pope’s words, we need “to rethink the path which we are travelling together.”

Now is the time for the Emperors to admit they are naked, to put an end to the pretence. It is also time to stop fooling ourselves and to go about the hard work of weaving some real clothes.

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