

Sustainable Development and Modernity: Resolving Tension through Communicative Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

The rise of the discourse of sustainable development has been fraught with conflict. Initial conceptual ambiguities have led to a conflictual understanding of the meaning of sustainable development, and the basis for action that this understanding implies. This thesis employs a Habermasian analytical framework to assess the competing views on the relationship between sustainable development and modernity, with particular emphasis on the promise of postmodernism, as developed in more radical sustainability critiques. This thesis argues that the 'uncritically modern' approach to sustainable development does not offer an adequate means for addressing the challenge of sustainability. However, in following Habermas, this thesis argues that postmodernism does not offer a legitimate alternative. Postmodernism fails as a basis for a philosophy of praxis and thus is an unsuitable means for addressing the cultural and ecological critiques against the project of modernity, from the viewpoint of sustainable development. As an alternative to postmodernism, this thesis proposes a critical approach to sustainable development rooted in Habermas' concept of communicative rationality. A new theoretical framework for sustainable development is proposed, incorporating a pillar of 'communicative sustainability.' This new theoretical approach is capable of addressing the majority of the critiques arising from the anti-modern sustainability theorists, while retaining the core praxiological goal of the sustainable development project. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the practical implications of this theoretical shift, focusing on the radicalization of the public sphere, a shift towards a capabilities approach for development, and the implementation of deliberative structures of governance.

KEY WORDS: Sustainable development, Habermas, modernity, postmodernism, communicative sustainability, public sphere, deliberative democracy

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSSION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The discourse of sustainable development has firmly taken root in the world of international business, politics and global civil society. Since the concept first entered the world stage in the mid 1980s, sustainable development has become a golden rhetorical palace – mythical, resplendent in the finest ideological tapestries, bejeweled with the ruby embers of passionate hearts, its treasuries overflowing with the bullion of the well-meaning. In a word, omnipresent.

Unfortunately, as the palace has expanded, winning new converts and the treasures of their lands, the foundation has begun to appear less and less stable. Each day, new cracks appear, floors buckle, walls warp.

Something is seriously, fundamentally wrong.

When pressed, the architects scratch their heads, and the engineers pore over their blueprints, searching for some weakness in the design. There seems to be no explanation. The finest materials were used, and the construction crew was first-rate. In the first stages of construction, few significant obstacles arose, and building continued on schedule. It was only after the palace amassed a certain weight, a degree of ubiquity, that seams began to appear in dry concrete. What could possibly be the cause of such a distressing structural calamity?

In short, sustainable development has been a victim of its own success, as well as its own ambiguity. From the initial documents conveying the doctrine of sustainable development, the term has been an oxymoron of sorts – promising on one hand continuous prosperity for all, while on the other hand levying a bold critique against the environmental carnage wreaked by unchecked economic growth and expansion. As the ambiguous promise of sustainable development gained momentum, penetrating the upper echelons of power in politics and business, its continued growth and expansion seemed a foregone conclusion – who really could wish for *unsustainable* development?

However, as the concept of sustainable development matured, the discourse became increasingly fragmented and nebulous. More radical critics began to argue, for example, that sustainable development had become ‘all good things to all (Adams 1993; Goodland and Daly 1996),’ and in reality was neither sustainable nor developmental (Fergus and Rowney 2005; Luke 2005). Some claimed that the discourse had been hi-jacked in favor of the status quo (Elliott 2004), while others held out hope that the promise of resolving the tension between environment and development would be resolved (Eckersley 2004; Ratner 2004). As the Rio + 10 conference in Johannesburg in 2002 clearly illustrated, the sustainable development movement had become increasingly fractured, with seemingly irreconcilable rifts developing between and within the more radical civil society organizations and the newly formed coalitions of business and government (Elliott 2004). While those at the center of power claimed things were progressing swimmingly, the more marginal and critical groups protested vehemently that the discourse of sustainability had failed to live up to its promise (Adams 1993; Ratner 2004; Luke 2005). What happened?

1a. Thesis Outline

This thesis will relate the conflicting views on sustainable development to the ongoing discourse on modernity and postmodernism, in an attempt to understand the causes of the tension within competing paradigms of SD, both in theory and in practice. By linking tensions within modernity to the sustainability discourse, it will be possible to classify and systematize different strands of thinking within sustainability theory and practice. These competing views on SD and modernity will be taken to their logical conclusions by identifying the fundamental assumptions underpinning their theoretical base (a Kantian critique) – this

analysis will more clearly illuminate the radically different theoretical paradigms underlying various conceptions of SD, which lie at the root of the conflicting views on the implementation of SD. In identifying unresolved tensions between competing views within the debate, a possible synthesis will be implicated, one which offers a theoretically consistent platform for advancing a unified discourse of sustainability.

This thesis will employ a broadly dialectical organizational and analytical approach. In **Chapter 1**, a brief history of the SD discourse will be provided, focusing on the theoretical and epistemological foundations and currents within the discourse as it emerged over time. Before undertaking this discussion, the analytical framework of the thesis will be presented in more detail, including a discussion of the two ‘schools’ of SD central to this analysis: the ‘uncritically modern’ and the ‘anti-modern.’ Following this, I will begin with a discussion of the history of SD, looking particularly at how the discourse and practice became fragmented over its course. Central to this history is a brief discussion of the conceptual ambiguity of SD, which establishes the contested nature of the project.

In **Chapter 2**, the first broad division within the sustainability discourse will be presented, that of the uncritically modern. This stance can be considered the thesis of the dialectic, and can be viewed as synonymous with that of several branches of uncritically *modern* theorists of sustainability. This chapter will commence with a discussion of the development project as a project of modernization. Following this, I will trace out the roots of the development project in the philosophical discourse of modernity. From this vantage point, the concept of SD will be introduced, as understood and implemented through an uncritically modern framework. This discussion will allow for a brief discussion of the implications of this approach to SD.

The antithesis to the uncritically modern school of thought will be presented in **Chapter 3**: the anti-modern. The anti-modern ‘cluster’ contains theorists who may be viewed as postmodern, or more specifically, pre- or anti-modern. However, they share a common foundation in terms of analysis – their diagnoses of the problems of modernity are similar, although their prescriptions differ. This chapter will commence with a discussion of the critique against modernity levied by the two major strands within this discourse – the cultural and ecological anti-modernists. Following this discussion, the concept of postmodernism will be introduced, which will allow for a comparison between the discourse of postmodernism and the critique of the radical anti-modern sustainability theorists. A detailed analysis of the potential for postmodernism as a theoretical foundation for a radical strand of SD theory will conclude the chapter, focusing on the antinomies inherent to this approach.

To resolve the tension inherent to this dialectic, a synthesis will be presented in **Chapter 4**, derived largely from an application of the work of Jurgen Habermas to the dialectic of sustainable development. This chapter will begin with a discussion of Habermas’ critique of modernity, and his theory of communicative action, upon which he bases his critique. This will pave the way for a discussion of Habermas and SD, focusing first on the ways in which his theoretical approach can explain and support the critiques of the radical, anti-modern school of sustainability theorists. Furthermore, Habermas’ approach will be used as a means for understanding the way in which the discourse and practice of SD has unfolded in the two decades since its inception.

In **Chapter 5**, the practical conclusions from this theoretical analysis will be elucidated in some detail, with a focus on denoting avenues for further research and analysis. First, the concept of communicative sustainability will be introduced, with a brief conceptual discussion of its importance for SD. Secondly, I will suggest several practical implications of a critically-modern, Habermasian approach to SD, focusing first on the radicalization of the public sphere and then turning to concepts of deliberative democracy and capability. A brief discussion of the weaknesses or challenges inherent to a Habermasian form of SD will follow, illuminating necessary areas for further research. A brief conclusion will put this work in context, and highlight the need for a radical reassessment of the direction and theoretical foundation of SD.

1b. Analytical Framework

This dissertation will employ a Habermasian approach to critique and analysis. As arguably the premier critical theorist to address the problems of modernity without rejecting the project wholesale (Callinicos 1999: 297), Jurgen Habermas and his *oeuvre* hold the possibility for an alternative vision of a critical modernity. However, as with much of social theory, this *oeuvre* does not directly address environmental concerns or the sustainability challenge, and thus it will be necessary to adapt the Habermasian concepts of the ‘unfinished project of Modernity’ to meet this new challenge. It should be noted Habermas’ work will be used selectively – throughout Habermas’ long career, three distinct phases can be identified (this classification is based upon Anderson (2005)) – this thesis relies primarily on the early and middle period of Habermas’ work. In his earliest work, Habermas focused on the rationalization of the lifeworld and the scientification of politics (Anderson 2005). In particular he focused on the ‘structural transformation of the public sphere,’ which was his analysis of the problems of modernity, and the beginning of his attempt to provide a means of transcending these problems (*ibid.*). In his middle period, he looked more broadly at modernity and the challenge of postmodernism, and in particular developed his theory of communicative action (*ibid.*). In his later (contemporary) period, he has attempted to take his theory of communicative action and apply it more rigorously to politics and the legal system (*ibid.*). While the later work may seem more fruitful for SD it lacks much of the radical power of his earlier work, focusing instead on a defense of the liberal democratic state, and so will be put aside in favor of the earlier material (*ibid.*).

The structure of this thesis follows from Callinicos’ (1999) adaptation of Habermas’ classification of the schools of modernity: the uncritically modern, the pre-modern, and anti-modern. In Habermas’ own words, these groups can be called the young conservatives (anti-modernists), the old conservatives (pre-modernists), and the neoconservatives (uncritical modernists) (Habermas 1981). In a later work, Habermas (1987) refers these classes back to Hegel and Nietzsche, suggesting that the uncritically modern could be considered ‘Right Hegelians’ while the critically modern (namely Marx) could be labeled ‘Left Hegelians.’ The radical anti-modernists can be considered Nietzschean in their lineage (*ibid.*). This thesis addresses primarily the uncritically modern and the anti-modern approaches to SD, partly because this encompasses much of the work done in the field, and also because it provides space for a *critically-modern* synthesis (in a non-Marxian sense) derived from the work of Habermas. This is not to deny that some work in the field of SD could be considered critically-modern (e.g. John Bellamy Foster, Carolyn Merchant and the ecological Marxists generally); however, Habermas provides arguably the most theoretically sound basis for this approach (Callinicos 1999) as well as a distinctly different entry-point, and thus his work can be viewed as an alternative to these often fragmented approaches to a critically-modern SD. It should be noted that some of the more radical ecological and cultural critiques could be considered pre-modern (e.g. the stance advocated by Earth First! – Luke 1997) – these will not be addressed directly although they could be subsumed under the label anti-modern (or more broadly, post-modern). More discerning analyses may see fit to break this category down into pre- and anti-modern, but for this work it suffices (see Turner 1990 for a discussion of streams within postmodernism). In **Chapter 3**, the anti-modern school will be problematized, and in doing so the various threads within this category will become more discernable. In the following paragraphs, I will expand upon the contents of the two paradigms of thought on SD discussed in this paper.

In terms of ‘grand’ visions of a sustainable future, two particular streams of thought can be distinguished. To many critics, the marriage of the quintessentially modern development project with the notion of ‘sustainability,’ and the limits to growth that this concept implies is hopelessly naïve and untenable (Shiva 1989; Norgaard 1994; Luke 1997; Sachs 1999). Modernity (and thus development) is already a failed project, and to ask more of it is simply absurd. These critics, as exemplified by Vandana Shiva, Wolfgang Sachs, the Deep Ecology movement, among many other schools of radical eco- and cultural-critique, have opted for an anti-modern (or arguably postmodern) resolution to the sustainability crisis, rejecting most if not all of the basic tenets of the modernity project and accompanying ‘development.’ This anti-modern stance will be discussed in more detail in **Chapter 3**.

Alternatively, there is a sizeable (and powerful) grouping of thinkers, politicians, and other VIPs who have taken what can be classified as a generally uncritical approach to the modernity project in regards to the new challenge of sustainability (Elliott 2004; Luke 2005). This school consists of those working for ecological modernization (techno-optimists like Hawken *et al.* 1999), the World Business Council on SD, as well as more radical voices such as the Worldwatch Institute and advocates of ecological economics (debatably). To be sure, this school advocates for some reforms – tinkering – with the specific functioning of the market economy as well as the social and political spheres of modern society (internalizing externalities, global environmental governance, etc.), but in general they do not question the historical course of modernity nor its general direction and trends. It could be quite easily argued that this school has tacked on a new criterion to the traditional development project (that of sustainability), without answering any of the many critiques levied against this project, nor fully internalizing the magnitude of the sustainability challenge to such *status quo* rationality. To put it simply, the ambiguities and unmet promises of modernity are left unchallenged and indeed may even be exacerbated, given the new ‘urgency’ ascribed to the development project by the sustainability challenge.

This dichotomy is developed not because it is clear and unambiguous, but because it provides a useful rubric with which to frame the debate. One problem with characterizing work on SD within categories referring to broad and multidimensional theoretical debates is that ‘most of the research on the topic is monothematic, while the issues are multidisciplinary (Jabareen 2004: 624).’ Thus, research areas such as ecological economics become difficult to classify, as the philosophical and ethical underpinnings remain somewhat vague. What is important is not to precisely categorize or systematize every narrative even tangentially related to the sustainable development discourse, but rather to highlight the often problematic (or ambiguous) relationship between sustainable development and the project of modernity.

This work should not be viewed as an end in itself; rather, it is an opening, a beginning from which future work can depart. To attempt to systematize the body of thought roughly encompassed by the label ‘sustainable development’ is an immense and probably impossible undertaking. However, it is an undertaking that is essential, should the vision of a sustainable future be realized. This thesis will contribute to this process, in that it will outline a dialogue between the discourse of sustainable development and that of social and critical theory. This dialogue is necessary for two reasons: first, social theory as a discourse ‘would benefit from a dialogue with a naturalistic conception of the world which recognizes the continuities between both the physical and social worlds... but which does not suppress or ignore the discontinuities between them’ (Callinicos 1999: 306); second, attempts to theorize sustainable development and develop visions and pathways for a sustainable future suffer from a high degree of theoretical and methodological inconsistency, especially in the means by which the naturalistic aspects of the discourse intersect with the social (Sachs 1999; Jabareen 2004; Ratner 2004) – social theory offers the analytical tools and historic depth with which to identify and rectify these inconsistencies. This latter point will be developed more fully in the following sections of this chapter, and throughout the thesis.

1c. Sustainable Development as a Fragmented Discourse: A Brief History

The history of the concept of ‘sustainable development’ is well known by most students of the environment and of development studies. To avoid unnecessary detail, this re-telling of the story will be concise and necessarily incomplete, focusing only on the central ideas which will recur later in this thesis. Of central importance is not a detailed history of the term, but rather the fault lines that have arisen as this history has progressed, and how these fissures can be related to the somewhat ambiguous ideas at the center of the discourse of sustainability. This section will provide a context for the more detailed analysis to come in subsequent chapters. For a more detailed history, see Elliott (2004), which guides much of this discussion. Most other texts on the history of environmental politics and development studies could serve as a reference for the factual background of this chapter (e.g. Carter 2001). Finally, Jabareen (2004) provides a useful conceptual map looking at key conflicts within the discourse and practice of SD.

For the purposes of this story, the concept of sustainable development (SD) was birthed by the United Nations (UN) World Commission on Environment and Development (the Bruntland Commission) whose 1987 report ‘Our Common Future’ can be seen as the blueprint for the movement (WCED 1987). The idea of ‘limits to growth’ and of sustainability were not new in 1987; however, this report represented the first high-profile conceptualization of SD, and as such can be seen as central to the eventual popularization of the concept (Adams 1993; Elliott 2004). As the name of the Commission suggests, in this conceptualization of SD, concerns of the environmental movement were wedded to those of the development community – this marriage would prove to be one fraught with tension.

The need for re-assessing the path forward for development and environment came from the increased realization that the environment was being transformed at a truly global scale – the ozone hole, acid rain, and global warming provided evidence that humans were truly becoming a global force (Elliott 2004). The general ‘impasse’ that development theory had reached by the early 1980s arose as a result of the neo-liberal shift ushered in by Reagan and Thatcher, which called in to question prevailing development strategies in favor of a paradigm of ‘development as economic growth (Schuurman 1993a).’ Sustainable development arose from these twin trajectories as an alternative to contemporary development theory that offered a way forward for both environmentalists fearful of a global ecological crisis, as well as those in the development community searching for an alternative to the neo-liberal paradigm within development (Schuurman 1993a; Sachs 1999; Ratner 2004). As the Bruntland Commission report stated, sustainable development promised ‘development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED 1987).’ The implications of this definition and its inherent ambiguity will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs.

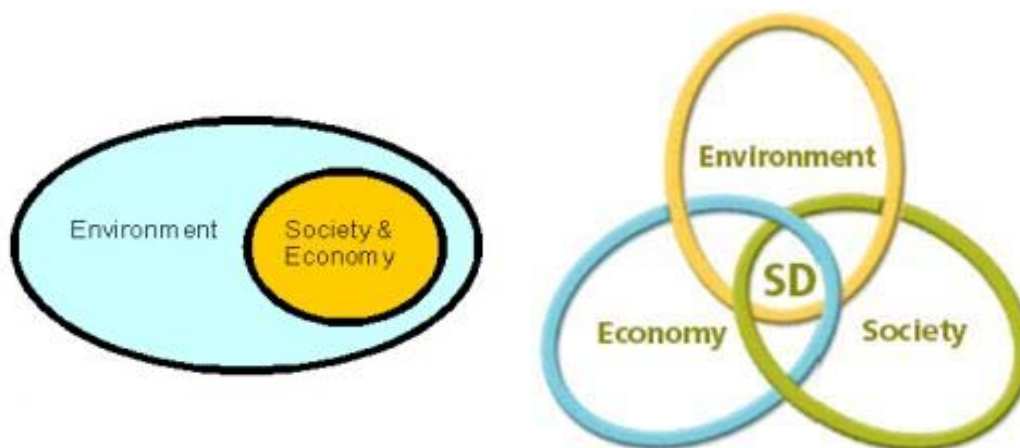


Figure 1: The [Egg Model](#) (a – left) and the [SD Trinity](#) (b – right)

The initial conception of sustainable development by the Bruntland Commission has been expanded upon subsequently. Literally hundreds of definitions exist, and various graphic schemes have been developed to portray the multi-dimensional nature of sustainability (Adam 1993; Elliott 2004). It is not the purpose of this paper to review these multiple competing definitions – however, two popular conceptions of SD are worth noting, as they will be expanded upon in **Chapter 5**. First is the concept of the sustainability ‘egg,’ where human society, the economy etc. are enclosed within the ‘egg’ of the environment. This conceptualization calls attention to the embedded nature of human society *within* the environment, highlighting the dependency of humans on nature (**Figure 1a**). This visual tool has particular appeal to groups advocating a ‘strong’ sustainability platform (Goodland and Daly 1996). The second tool is that of the ‘pillars’ of sustainability (**Figure 1b**). In this conceptualization, sustainable development has three underlying pillars of sustainability: environmental sustainability, social sustainability, and economic sustainability (Goodland and Daly 1996). In many cases, these three themes are projected as overlapping in the form of a trinity or Venn

diagram, resulting in sustainable development. The weight and attention given to each pillar can be seen as indicative of the importance that a given interest group allocates to each sphere, although the nature of the diagram suggests that all three pillars must be addressed for SD to occur (Ratner 2004). In the case of 'strong' sustainability theorists, the environmental pillar is considered the fundamental base of sustainability, with SD as the means to achieve this objective (Goodland and Daly 1996). For a brief discussion of weak vs. strong sustainability as well as an introduction to the three pillars approach, see Goodland and Daly (1996). Most conceptualizations of sustainable development reference (variations upon) these two common visual tools as well as the original Brundtland definition.

In the five years following the release of the Brundtland report, preparations began for a massive conference during which the idea of sustainable development could be elaborated upon and clarified (Elliott 2004). The 1992 Rio Summit formalized the Brundtland definition of sustainability, whilst ensuring a new degree of prominence for the concept (*ibid.*). Little discussion was given to the basic concept itself (this will be problematized later in the paper), but much attention was given to operationalizing the concept (Fergus and Rowney 2005). The outcome was *Agenda 21*, a massive list of means by which to implement sustainable development (Elliott 2004). This was expected to guide future action at the local, national, and global level. While the substantive outcome of the Rio Summit is hotly debated (which is important in its own right), it can safely be said that this conference cemented the reputation of sustainable development as *the* buzzword of the 1990s in policy and humanitarian circles (Adam 1993; Elliott 2004; Fergus and Rowney 2005). As the decade progressed, the concept of SD quickly penetrated civil society, the scientific research community, the world of international politics, and eventually began to appear in corporate publications from some of the largest multinationals corporations ever to exist (Elliott 2004; Ratner 2004; Luke 2005).

With the penetration of SD into new and more diverse spheres of activity, new interventions were carried out in the name of sustainable development. Many followed directly from the means described in *Agenda 21*, while others were more tangentially related to the original conception of SD as agreed upon at the Rio Summit (Elliott 2004). However, as these interventions accumulated, it became clear to even the most uncritical observers that not all of this action was being coordinated in any clear manner, and that many interventions could be seen as conflicting or contradictory (*ibid.*; Ratner 2004). Some contradictions reflected tensions within *Agenda 21*, where efforts were made to green industry and achieve eco-efficiency, all the while stimulating growth and material through-flow (Fergus and Rowney 2005). Even the most obvious attempts at implementing sustainable development, such as the 'integrated conservation and development plans' that became ubiquitous in many rural areas of the Third World, seemed to fail (Chapin 2004). As Chapin (2004) documents, by the early 2000s the 'big three' conservation NGOs had begun to seriously question whether conservation and development could coincide – most attempts to do both had managed to accomplish one of these goals at best. A call to coordinate action and to re-think the direction of sustainable development arose in advance of the follow-up to Rio, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg Summit) (Elliott 2004). However, despite much well-meaning rhetoric and numerous photo opportunities, the Johannesburg Summit arguably failed to mend the rifts that had developed in the sustainable development discourse (Pallemaerts 2003; Elliott 2004; Jabareen 2004; Ratner 2004). New public-private partnerships were formed (see Scherr and Gregg (2006) for a review), but the voices of the more radical critics were ignored (Elliott 2004). It seemed that sustainability and development had become divorced, and that the term sustainable development had lost any clear semantic meaning. As Pallemaerts (2003: 9) argues, the Johannesburg (and Rio) processes achieved little more than 'the rehabilitation of the ideology of economic growth.'

Since Johannesburg, little has changed (Elliott 2004; Scherr and Gregg 2006). The discourse of sustainable development is as fragmented and contradictory as ever, and there seems little that conflicting parties can agree upon save for 'thinking about the future is good.' If, as critics argue, sustainable development has failed to be either sustainable or developmental (Fergus and Rowney 2005; Luke 2005), then the question as to why becomes paramount. To answer this question, or at least intimate as to where the answer may lie, we must return to the basis for the concept. In doing so, it will be possible to see why two rough factions have appeared within the discourse, namely the uncritically modern and the anti-modern.

1d. Definitional Ambiguity in Conceptualizing Sustainable Development

If sustainable development has faltered and possibly failed in trying to live up to its promise, then one must ask what it promised in the first place. To begin, I will look at the fundamental ambiguity of the Bruntland definition, arguably the premier conception of SD, as a source of conflict and confusion. Following this, I will analyze the degree to which the three pillars of sustainability are compatible with each other, to highlight another source of conflict. Following from this brief analysis, it will be clear that in creating the concept of sustainable development, two disparate concepts have been wedded with little thought as to how this marriage should function. In drawing this conclusion, a possible means for resolving the tensions inherent to the concept will be implicated. Subsequent chapters in this thesis (**Chapter 2 and 3**) will elaborate on the basis for this claim, and **Chapter 4 and Chapter 5** attempt to translate it in to a meaningful theory of praxis, whereby theory can be practically applied to make and direct change.

The definition of sustainable development formally adopted by the UN at the Rio Summit in 1992 is straightforward: ‘sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED 1987).’ To paraphrase Timothy Luke (2005), this definition fails to address *whose* needs in the present, whether or not they are *needs* or *wants*, and *how* and *where* development will prevail so as to meet these needs. This ambiguity is carried on necessarily in to the future, which is arguably the crux of *sustainable* development (*ibid.*). At the heart of this dangerously vague definition is a massive social and political debate (Elliott 2004; Ratner 2004) – however, in the enthusiasm to discuss technical and scientific means by which to implement this concept, as well as to avoid controversy, this debate was almost entirely passed over in the 1992 Rio Summit (Fergus and Rowney 2005). As Adams (1993) points out, sustainable development is more of a slogan than a tight theoretical concept. This utterly vague and overly-operable definition was cemented in international law as a guiding principle for arguably the defining challenge of our time (Jabareen 2004). In this conceptualization, sustainable development was truly a concept that could be ‘all good things to all.’ While the imprecision of the definition may be valuable in that it opens a space for diverse parties to gather around a common ‘goal’ (Elliott 2004), it undermines the likelihood of concerted and organized action, as well as discourse oriented towards resolution (Ratner 2004; Luke 2005) – debate and fragmented action become the likely outcomes (Fergus and Rowney 2005). As Fergus and Rowney (2005: 19) clearly elucidate, when discussing the two dominant views of economic sustainability, ‘The debate concerning growth and no-growth is a philosophical argument between two opposing worldviews that, in essence, are the antithesis of each other; resolution will not occur without a larger shared philosophical framework.’ The absence of a shared foundation or ethical stance upon which to base SD leads to the lack of mutually coherent policies disparaged by various analyses of the implementation of Agenda 21 (Elliott 2004; Jabareen 2004 As Ratner (2004: 54) argues, ‘different assumptions yield radically different models of practice and institutional implications.’ As long as SD remains a fragmented discourse without a consistent theoretical framework to guide action, contradictory policies will continue to undermine any hope for success, weakening the legitimacy of the project as a whole (*ibid.*).

There is one conspicuous absence, given the preceding deconstruction of the Bruntland definition, from the typical conceptualization of SD – any direct ‘pillar’ referencing the political institutions and mechanisms necessary to achieve legitimacy for the SD agenda. Given that the imperative of SD is premised upon work in the scientific community (Goodland and Daly 1996), namely the work of systems ecologists, energy and resource flow analysts and other groups in establishing the ‘unsustainability’ of the present (both absolute and in terms of a future trajectory), the absence is telling. A means for mediating between these scientific ‘facts’ and the norms that guide social life becomes paramount (e.g. see the discussion of the World Resources Institute vs. India’s Center for Science and Environment debacle in Yearly (1996) for a telling example). If sustainable development explicitly deals with culturally and politically mediated norms, such as ‘wants and needs,’ while also leaving the means to meet these ‘needs’ open to interpretation and creativity, then some structure must be implicated so that the political discussions and social learning processes

necessary for SD to attain legitimacy can thrive (Fergus and Rowney 2005; Luke 2005). Indeed, in the Bruntland report it is explicitly stated that sustainability (in a physical sense) could be achieved under any social or political system (Yearly 1996)! This has important implications for the legitimacy of the sustainability project.

In principle, by formalizing the Bruntland definition at Rio and passing Agenda 21 (a formal UN program), the representatives of the majority of the world's citizens have legally agreed to the means by which to implement SD (Mecklin *et al.* 2005). However, this view emanates from a supremely uncritical position regarding the state of world politics and the power balances within the UN. Interest groups have achieved such a degree of power at the global level that corporations are now being accused of 'bluwashing,' through exercising undue influence at the UN (Elliott 2004)! To suggest that international law has achieved a widespread degree of on-the-ground legitimacy with the people it governs is to take a leap of faith that requires serious academic support if it is to be recognized. Less broad, but no less substantial, is the assumption that the deliberation and negotiation processes at the Rio Summit (and WSSD) were open, transparent, and free from any major underlying political agenda – this does not hold, as George Bush Sr. clearly insinuated that the American lifestyle was not up for negotiation (Sachs 1999), to provide one example. Indeed, smaller national delegations have consistently had difficulty in attending the immense number of sub-committee meetings and plenary sessions (Elliott 2004) – this gives larger, wealthier nations the upper hand in negotiations. As well, NGOs are typically barred from the 'informal informals' at conferences such as the Rio Summit, and it is these meetings where much of the last-minute negotiation and revision is conducted (*ibid.*). Clearly the issues and solutions discussed at Rio and the WSSD were not representative of every legitimate viewpoint on the issue of sustainable development, and thus the process by which the conference proceeded can not be considered procedurally legitimate as a 'voice for the globe.'

Critics may also respond that the political or normative dimensions of sustainability are covered under the rubric of social sustainability (Goodland and Daly 1996), or recently have been encompassed under the new pillar of 'institutional sustainability.' First, in locating the political dimensions of sustainability among a sea of competing claims (under the rubric of social sustainability), its pre-eminence is obscured (the pre-eminence of the political, or as this thesis argues the communicative, will be developed in **Chapter 5**). Secondly, the concept of institutional sustainability does not refer so much to the nature or quality of institutions that must be formed to achieve SD, but rather to their permanence over time. Its status as the 'fourth pillar' of sustainability is not widely recognized, nor is it adequate were it to become more enmeshed with current debate.

A final critique of the initial conceptualization of sustainable development is the degree to which the instrumentally-rational and technocratic discourse of sustainability evidenced itself in the academic formalization of the concept (Fergus and Rowney 2005). This possibly reflects a desire to jump over the difficult political discussions necessary for concerted action around a legitimate common platform, in favor of a discussion of technical means, something experts are much more inclined towards (Fergus and Rowney 2005). This thesis will be elaborated upon more forcefully in the latter half of **Chapter 4**, but merits brief mention here.

The three pillars of sustainability largely reflect the areas of expertise of the pioneers in the field (and the subsequently dominant voices in the discourse). Economic sustainability as formalized at Rio appeals to the logic of the marketplace, meshing well with contemporary political power struggles and the blind allegiance to economic growth characteristic of mainstream development studies (Adams 1993; Luke 2005). Environmental sustainability follows the technical rationality of the 'limits to growth' neo-Malthusians, as well as the systems ecologists and their integrated ecosystem models. It represents a rationality tailored to the closed physical systems characteristic of planet Earth (Goodland and Daly 1996). Social sustainability is humanism *distilled*, a clumsy amalgamation of all the various sub-disciplines addressing issues of human freedom and well-being, as well as cultural diversity and other slightly incongruous movements (*ibid.*). While various interpretations of each pillar exist and their precise characteristics are hotly debated, it is reasonable to suggest that within each pillar a unique system of rationality propels debate and organizes

consensus – this is often considered a positive attribute, as explicitly advocated by Goodland and Daly (1996). This is where the trouble lies. As any mathematics student knows, it is impossible to optimize for more than one variable – any optimization of the three realms of sustainability will necessarily involve some form of trade-off, unless the competing rationalities are made to speak with each other (Ratner 2004). Unfortunately, the means for this communication is conspicuously absent from mainstream conceptualizations of sustainable development. Without a forum for discursive deliberation and a theoretical framework upon which to stand, the three competing pillars will not be able to synthesize their efforts, and the dominant pillar (typically the logic of the economy) will trump competing systems of rationality (Ratner 2004). This is evidenced by not only the way in which the SD discourse has advanced (see section 4e), but also the continued dominance of the economic growth paradigm in most mainstream conceptualizations of SD (Sachs 1999). Given that most conceptualizations of SD see the need for addressing *all* the pillars, and that many strong sustainability theorists see the environmental pillar as paramount (e.g. Goodland and Daly 1996), this is extremely problematic. This problem will be discussed in depth in the following chapters. In **Chapter 4**, the means by which economic rationality triumphs in the SD discourse (and in turn, in practice) will be explicitly elaborated upon.

1e. The Contested Nature of Sustainable Development

To conclude this introduction, I would like to provide an example from a recent lecture I attended (Ekins 2007), that illustrates well the failure of the sustainability discourse to recognize and address the fundamentally *contested* nature of the concept. After an almost one and a half hour presentation filled with detailed figures and slides and many complicated analyses, the speaker Paul Ekins – a long-time researcher in the field of sustainable development – concluded that sustainable development is ‘economically and technologically feasible, but requires lifestyle changes and guiding or fixing of the economy.’ The reason this had not occurred, despite its clear feasibility, was because of a number of sustainability ‘conundrums,’ namely:

- balance between different elements of quality of life
- balance between present and future
- what lack of inequality is acceptable
- environment vs. economy

This conclusion, twenty years after the release of the Brundtland report, almost perfectly echoes Luke’s (2005) comments about the WCED’s definition of sustainable development. Without developing a means by which to address these ‘conundrums,’ sustainable development cannot hope to gain widespread legitimacy or operational clarity. Without legitimacy, it cannot hope to initiate the massive global change that many of the more intellectually-engaged advocates view as necessary. This example provides a compelling case for the thesis that will be expanded upon in subsequent sections of this paper – the sustainable development discourse, since its inception, has been dominated and propelled by instrumentally-rational forces that have inhibited any legitimate space for meaningful discussion of the means by which to achieve deliberated and *legitimate* ends. Sustainability is assumed to be a universally-desirable goal and sustainable development (in all of its ambiguous glory) the ideals means for achieving this future state. More importantly, the means by which to develop and legitimate more precise ‘ends’ have been neglected (Luke 2005). This thesis, adapted from the work of the critical theorist Jurgen Habermas, will be developed most fully in **Chapter 4 and 5**, but will guide much of the analysis of the sustainability discourse and its intersection with the discourse of modernity in the following chapters.

This discussion utilizes a particular take on the content of each pillar of sustainability. This approach is derived from the Brundtland report, and is arguably representative of the mainstream conception of each pillar. However, different critiques have been levied at this formulation of sustainable development, many of which will be expanded upon in depth, particularly in **Chapter 3** of this thesis. This relatively introductory analysis of the tensions within sustainability serves two purposes: it highlights the direction and purpose of

the forthcoming discussion, where the two dominant ‘paradigms’ of SD are dissected and analyzed in terms of the discourse of modernity; additionally, this analysis offers a glimpse or a preview of the ‘conclusion’ of the forthcoming analysis – namely, a refocusing of the sustainability debate on the contested nature of the political domain underlying any attempt to implement and achieve a legitimate form of SD.

Finally, there are two particular aspects of SD that merit particular attention in terms of the debate surrounding the project of modernity: first, why do so many of the more critical theorists within the SD field so quickly break with modernity (and thus the traditional development project)? Following from this, is a sustainable future possible without resorting to the outright rejection of modernity and the liberational promise of this project? The radical theorists of sustainable development have levied powerful and rigorous critiques against the process and outcomes of the development project (and its fundamental inability to achieve sustainability), critiques that merit serious discussion and resolution. However, in moving from critique to outright rejection of the underpinnings of modernity, it can be argued that they have thrown the proverbial ‘baby out with the bathwater.’

Can a critical approach to modernity resolve some of the main critiques of the anti-modern sustainability theorists, whilst salvaging the liberational and developmental aspects of the modernity project? What form of social and institutional landscape would be necessary to achieve and uphold a critically-modern, sustainable future? This thesis will attend to these questions, arguing that sustainable development *needs* a critically-modern theoretical base, if it is to maintain consistency while successfully achieving its objectives. At the root of this critically modern perspective lies the concept of communicative sustainability, which will be introduced in **Chapter 5**.

CHAPTER 2

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE UNCRITICALLY MODERN

Much of the work conducted under the name ‘sustainable development’ can be classified under the rubric ‘uncritically modern.’ Uncritically modern theorists accept the promise of modernity, and do not challenge its base assumptions and mechanisms (see **Section 1b**). This label is not intended as a pejorative – despite the claims of critics, the project of modernity arose out of the greatest of intentions. Indeed, the focus of this chapter is not to establish absolutely the stance of mainstream sustainable development regarding modernity, but rather to trace the roots of the development project, and to show how it is intimately tied to the project of modernity. Understanding the origins of the development project in modernity will make clear the conflict between modernity and SD, as suggested by the critique of the radical sustainability theorists discussed in **Chapter 3**. By establishing development as fundamentally a project of *modernization*, the break with modernity advocated by the anti-modern school of sustainability theorists will come in to stark contrast. The remaining chapters of this thesis will address this critique, in light of the modern origins of development, in an attempt to find a resolution to these opposing viewpoints.

This chapter will follow a clear (although not obvious) structure: first, the origins of the development project will be discussed, and its foundation in the project of modernity will be established; second, this chapter will trace the progression of development as modernization up to its domination (and dissolution) by the neo-liberal paradigm in the 1980s; in reaching this point of impasse, the concept of sustainable development will be introduced, as understood by mainstream development; finally, the uncritically modern approach to SD will be elaborated, and the implications of an uncritically modern perspective towards SD will be examined, focusing on the gap between theory and practice. This final section will pave the way for the critique leveled by theorists and practitioners adhering to what I have called an anti-modern perspective on SD. This critique and its relationship to the project of modernity will constitute the bulk of **Chapter 3**.

2a. The Origins of the Development Project: A Brief History

The idea of ‘development’ as a grand project arose out of the ashes of World War 2 (Greig *et al.* 2007). Many accounts of the history of development point to US President Truman’s famous inaugural speech of 1949 as marking the origins of the development project (Latouche 1993; Sachs 1999). However, the seeds for this speech were laid in the formation of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods organizations in the late years and aftermath of the war (Greig *et al.* 2007). To caricature a complicated and contested history, development as first conceptualized was a project of modernization – formalized in W.W. Rostow’s famous volume ‘The Stages of Economic Growth’ (1960), development was a project that would accelerate the transition of many of the fledgling nations of the world from pre-modern or primitive economic structures to advanced industrial capitalist modes of production (Greig *et al.* 2007). This theory of modernization held the United States as arguably the pre-eminent example of a ‘developed’ nation (Sachs 1999; Greig *et al.* 2007). This transition was to be affected the world over through carefully designed and targeted interventions that would catalyze development and modernization for the poor and ‘backward.’

While in retrospect this picture of the initial decades of the development project may appear naïve and hopelessly paternalistic, it is a relatively accurate portrayal of reality at the time. The impetus for the development project is hotly contested; I will first discuss several of the decisive factors that may explain why it arose at this particular time in history, without delving too deeply in to some of the more sinister views on development. Some of these perspectives will arise in the subsequent discussion of the anti-modern school of thought. For a more detailed account of the history of development theory and practice, see Greig *et al.* (2007) or Martinussen (1997). Following the brief discussion of the underlying factors that may account for the rise of development following the Second World War, I will look at the ideology that underpins the project of development – it is here that the project of modernity will enter the picture as a

philosophical discourse. In introducing the project of modernity, it will become clear that development is most easily understood as an attempt to hasten the spread of modernity to the farthest reaches of the world. This is not necessarily (although arguably) out of some insidious intent, but rather as a means for sharing the 'promise of the Enlightenment' with those still lying in a dark and pre-modern past (Greig *et al.* 2007).

There are several historical convergences at the end of the Second World War that can be considered to play a role in the rise of the concept of development as a global project. First, there was the need to rebuild after the devastation of a truly global war (Greig *et al.* 2007). This need for reconstructing the built environment of entire countries offered an almost blank canvas for reconstructing society – formerly 'underdeveloped' regions could be 'built' in to the modern era. Secondly, the Second World War (and its discourse of freedom and democracy countering fascism) weakened the ideological justification for colonialism as a system – while the modernizing progress of development could be traced back to colonial discourses of backwardness and progress, the system never really promised freedom or democracy in a true sense (*ibid.*). Thus, anti-colonial movements gained steam in the wake of the war (*ibid.*). The decades after 1945 saw the birth of newly independent countries at a rapid pace – these new countries increasingly became the object of attention for Western scholars and analysts (*ibid.*). As Greig *et al.* (2007: 67) note, an 'atmosphere of intellectual confidence in the powers of state regulation and economic management encouraged Western policymakers and social scientists to broaden their concerns to the non-Western world.' Why were so many regions of the Third World so 'underdeveloped' and 'backward?' What could be done to change this? These questions lay at the root of the project of development. With the system of colonization now removed, these countries had formally entered the world stage, and were assumed to aspire to the same degree of affluence and power as the most modern society in the world, the United States (Sachs 1999). The supremacy of the US had been consolidated at the end of the Second World War, as it had not been physically devastated by war and its economy was booming (*ibid.*). Thirdly, the rise of the Soviet Bloc spawned a new political era – the Cold War – where both Capitalist and Communist were keen to show the superiority of their system (*ibid.*). As Greig *et al.* (2007: 70) note, 'The Cold War was more than a military stand-off – it was a struggle over different paths to development.' The newly independent countries of the Third World provided an ideal battleground for competing models of a modern society. Regardless of which of these events was the 'true' or premier reason for the rise of the development project, by the late 1950s the concept of development had firmly taken root, and was seen as a major project for the wealthiest and most powerful nations of the world (*ibid.*). The wealthy capitalist nations had begun a project that promised to improve the lives of millions of the world's poor, and in the process transform the countries of the world into modern nation-states, with the US as their archetype.

2b. Development and the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity

What lay behind the enthusiasm for 'modernity' that guided the architects of development in their work? What was the promise of this concept, and what precisely did it constitute? These questions are paramount if one is to understand both the origins of the project of development, as well as its course over its 60+ year history. In understanding the project of modernity, it will be possible to anticipate and understand the critiques of the development project as it has progressed, as well as understand the conflict at the heart of development's newest form: sustainable development.

Modernity as a concept is nebulous and somewhat difficult to pin-down. This account is largely based on Habermas (1987) – for an account with a more postmodern slant, see Smart (1990). At its heart, modernity refers to both a set of conditions and to the historic period during which these conditions came to dominate (Greig *et al.* 2007). A more semantic definition would argue that modernity is simply 'the modern,' or 'the new,' and is but a fleeting instant that is constantly being superseded by 'the newer new' (Habermas 1981; 1987). This sense of change and constant flux lies at the heart of modernity as both concept and age. Modernity differentiates itself from its past due to an inherent time consciousness (Habermas 1981; 1987). Modernity is conscious of both a history of unmet promises and a future of promises-to-be – at the meeting point of these two horizons stands modern man, with the weak messianic power to remember the unmet

promises of the past, whilst generating the promise of the future (Habermas 1987). In simpler terms, a vision of progress and of history is the fundamental condition of modernity (Habermas 1981; Greig *et al.* 2007), and explains its ‘transient...fleeting...contingent’ character (Habermas 1987: 8). This notion of progress implies that some form of improvement can be made, and it is in the power of individual humans to realize this potential.

The notion of ‘humanity’ as well as the individual is also central to modernity. In modernity, the individual reigns supreme – as the source for progress and enlightenment, the individual trumps all (Habermas 1987). Modernity is about the self-realization of individual man, which can be achieved through the application of reason (*ibid.*). However, in pursuit of this self-realization, modernity acknowledges that individuals are entitled to a basic set of rights simply on virtue of their humanity (Donnelly 1999) – in recognizing in all humans a basic set of shared rights and privileges, modernity has eclipsed all previous epochs of history.

The notion of modernity as eclipsing previous eras of pre-modernity must be placed in a particular historical context. The start of the ‘modern era’ is a subject of debate, but most scholars can agree upon a few central pillars of the modern era that differentiate it from the past (Habermas 1981; 1987). The more philosophical concepts discussed in the preceding two paragraphs gave rise to a number of material and intellectual shifts that set the modern era apart from previous epochs. The rise of the individual and the notions of progress and reason were a reaction to what was perceived as the oppressive and irrational traditions of the past (Habermas 1987; Greig *et al.* 2007). Modernity broke free from old superstitions and forms of legitimacy – as Habermas (1981) notes, ‘modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative.’ Where in the past, legitimacy was secured through appeals to an external source of validity – religion and the church, or unquestioned cultural traditions passed on from generation to generation – in the modern era, legitimacy must be created by individuals and society *from* itself (Habermas 1987). Tradition could no longer be passed on without validating itself – individuals were empowered with the ability to criticize and question given structures of legitimacy (Habermas 1987; Greig *et al.* 2007). Reason was deemed central to legitimacy – art, science, morality – all must appeal to reason for legitimacy. As well, each of these previously entwined spheres of life could now be set free from dogma and superstition – art, science, and morality could all be allowed to develop according to their own internal rationality in an effort to realize their fullest potential (Habermas 1981; 1987). Specialization and differentiation of the lifeworld arose from this shift, and as such, some scholars have classified modernity as a process of differentiation of the lifeworld (e.g. Weber) (Habermas 1981; 1987).

Differentiation soon gave rise to new forms of organization that can be considered the cornerstones of modernity in a more material and epochal sense. As the lifeworld was allowed to differentiate, systems such as capitalism, industrialization, science, and new structures of governance such as democracy expanded (Habermas 1987). Capitalism was the outcome of the rationalization of the provision of goods for the satisfaction of the need to materially reproduce society (*ibid.*). Democracy provided a system by which the newly empowered individual could exercise their political right to self-determination (*ibid.*). Industrialization (and the technology that drove it) allowed mankind unprecedented controls over the forces of nature and its productive capacities (Greig *et al.* 2007). Science allowed for the rational enquiry in to the basis for life and the universe (Habermas 1969). Art was freed from the tyranny of realism and ancient aesthetics and modes of production (Habermas 1981). In a word, life in the modern era was (and is) absolutely and unmistakably different from all that preceded it.

2c. Development as Modernization

The appeal of modernity is thus clear: modernity offered a break from traditions that were viewed as oppressive and stifling – rather than appeal to some external and unquestioned source for validation, modernity offered the individual liberation and freedom to create a world of their own. Rather than live a life of unquestioned devotion to God in hopes of salvation, modernity offered the promise of realizing one’s self through reason, an earthly quality possessed by all (Habermas 1987). In place of injustices caused by

seemingly arbitrary forces of oppression (the feudal Lord, to take one example), modernity offered universal and inalienable rights and privileges, as well as the power over one's own labor (Callinicos 1999). At its inception, the liberational promise of modernity had obvious appeal to Europe's (and America's) masses.

It is this promise of liberation, of freedom that lies at the heart of the development project. While there is no doubt that development had its origins in a particular set of historic circumstances reflecting a particular set of power structures, the basic promise of development remains the same as modernity: liberation. Whatever the political ideologies of the founders of the development project, at its heart it was an attempt to expand the liberational promise of modernity to the unconverted backwaters of the world (Sachs 1999). While rooted in Enlightenment thought, development in a material sense (as a project) was viewed as a process of modernization and most importantly, *economic growth* (Sachs 1999; Greig *et al.* 2007). However, its Keynesian origins did not view growth as a stable and desirable end in itself – growth should be guided and managed by the state (*ibid.*). Modernization theory found its origins in W. Rostow's (1960) famous thesis 'The Stages of Growth,' and quickly rose to prominence. This theory held that countries passed through five distinct stages of development, and espoused a very linear, structuralist approach to generating economic growth (*ibid.*). At its core, it advocated the pursuit of economic growth as the central pillar of development, and essentially saw this arising from the introduction of the main 'features' of modernity: capitalism, industrialization, technology, democracy and, more implicitly, the doctrine of individualism (and its outcome – consumption) (*ibid.*). By injecting these forces into a country, one could miraculously transform a country from pre-modern to modern, in a period significantly shorter than the length of time it took Britain and the US to modernize (*ibid.*). In hindsight and from the perspective of the 21st century, the naiveté of this vision and this recipe are more than obvious.

2d. Development Critique and the Entry of Sustainability

It is no surprise that as development (as modernization) became entrenched as a chief concern of the Western nations, controversy and conflict rose to meet it headfirst. The history of development theory (and to some extent practice) is one of constant conflict and tense resolution (Schuurman 1993a; 1993b; Sachs 1999) - despite this, development has remained a major force in the Third World since the close of the Second World War (Martinussen 1997). Like the discourse of modernity (which it can be seen as a microcosm of) development has proven resilient in the face of trenchant criticism (Sachs 1999). It is not the purpose of this paper to trace out the history of competing development theories, and the criticisms that development generated (see Martinussen (1997) for this). Many of these will re-surface with sustainable development, the focal point for this paper. However, it is important to establish the roots of the development project in the discourse of modernity. As with the discourse of modernity, the final decades of the millennium proved to be a trying time for development and its theoretical formulations. Numerous critiques piled up, coming from the *dependentistas*, feminists, environmentalists, indigenous rights movements, and numerous other parties (Schuurman 1993b; Martinussen 1997; Geiger *et al.* 2007). However, the rise of neo-liberalism shattered the basis for critical accounts of development, as well as the structural modernization of early development theory – an impasse had been reached (Booth 1985; Schuurman 1993a). Neo-liberalism signaled the death knell for Keynes and interference in the economy - development had become simple growth and economic non-interference (*ibid.*). As scholars began to seriously discuss the idea of post-modernity, the beginnings of theories of post-development started circulating in critical circles (see Schuurman 1993a for an early account). It was in this turbulent environment that sustainable development had its inception.

On the face of it, sustainable development arrived at a perfect moment in time – development theory had reached an impasse with the rise of the neo-liberals in the early 1980s (Booth 1985), and the neo-liberal shift itself was already beginning to yield its discontents. As many authors have argued, for the citizens of the Third World the 1980s were a lost decade (Schuurman 1993a; 1993b). Sustainable development added a new challenge or dimension to the development debate – that of environmental limits (Sachs 1999). It addressed the criticisms from environmentalists in the developed West as well as in the developing periphery (Elliott 2004; Ratner 2004). Indeed, it made the ecological critique a central component of its theoretical

conceptualization (WCED 1987). In recognizing that growth must be carefully focused (if not altogether stopped), it offered a compelling alternative to the ‘growth for growth’s sake’ attitude that had ushered in devastating Structural Adjustment Programs and left the poor in a lurch (Sachs 1999). Furthermore, this drew attention to the harmful industrial practices and over-consumption characteristic of the modern West, challenging the ‘America-as-model’ ideology of modernization theory and the neo-liberal right (*ibid.*). Indeed, it broadened the scope of ‘development’ arguably even more than the World Systems Theory of the 1970s – as Ratner (2004: 51) notes ‘its unifying promise...seems to transcend ideological battles of the past.’ Its definitional ambiguity, itself a source of critique (see the preceding chapter), also made it malleable enough to fit a range of agendas and deflected the devastating postmodern critique levied at anything smacking of a meta-narrative. It would take a few years for the ‘all good things to all’ critique levied in the preceding chapter to become a major stumbling block, although admittedly this critique did arise almost immediately after the release of the Brundtland report (Adams 1993; Ratner 2004). Regardless, at the end of the 1980s and in to the 1990s, SD held much promise for those in the development community looking to refocus development on non-growth objectives, while also hoping to correct the ecological devastation unleashed by modern industrial society (Sachs 1999; Ratner 2004). Whether it lived up to this promise will be addressed in **Chapter 3**.

2e. Sustainable Development and the Uncritically Modern

Having establishing the roots of the development project in the discourse of modernity, I will now take to the second substantial component of this chapter: the approach taken by what I have described as the uncritically modern school to sustainable development. To reiterate, this chapter is intended to provide a relatively uncritical account of the origins and the trajectory of the development project, and its most recent manifestation as sustainable development. The essential critique to this ‘uncritical’ discourse will come in **Chapter 3**, where I take up the anti-modern school of thought.

The defining characteristic of the uncritically modern and their approach to sustainable development is a relatively easy and unproblematic relationship with the promise and the content of modernity, as discussed in the preceding sections. This perspective can be said to apply to most if not ALL of mainstream, Western-led development – as established, the development project as typically defined originates from a fundamentally modern perspective. However, not all of development’s proponents were uncritical – the neo-Marxist dependency school is a perfect example of a school of development taking up the dialectic of the Enlightenment and applying it to the development discourse.

Within the uncritically modern school of *sustainable* development, four distinct clusters of actors can be identified – government (national and international), corporations, development practitioners, and the academy. Civil society plays a number of roles dealing with all of these four particular clusters. Because civil society organizations are so diverse in scope and stance (e.g. Hitler Youth vs. Greenpeace), as well as the means by which they operate (Elliott 2004), they will not be addressed as a particular ‘sphere’ in this chapter. Civil society organizations that adhere to views similar to that of the remaining spheres could be considered uncritically modern, whereas more radical NGOs often espouse a characteristically anti-modern stance. The role of civil society (the public sphere) will be addressed further in **Chapter 5**, after the Habermasian synthesis has been developed. The views of these actor clusters on three particular questions will be discussed in turn: first, how do they perceive the sustainability challenge? Second, how do they perceive the solution? Finally, what are the implications of this approach both in material terms and in relationship to the project of modernity?

How have the various sectors of uncritically modern sustainability proponents perceived the challenge of sustainable development? Within this broad category, there are a range of interpretations of the magnitude of the problem, but all perceive share the view that it is surmountable without abandoning the promise of development and modernity. Ecological modernization is a perfect example of a label often applied to this school of thinking – indeed, much of SD could fall under this label (Carter 2001; Eckersley 2004). As

Adams (1993: 211) notes, '*Our Common Future* lies centrally within the existing paradigms of the industrialized North.' Techno-optimism abounds, with the idea of technological progress as a means for overcoming the limits of a closed system without drastically changing the basic impetus behind development (e.g. Hawken *et al.* 1999). Some reservation towards the capability of technology to radically transform production has arisen from authors within this school, although nothing that would be considered a damning critique (e.g. Goodland and Daly 1996). Essentially, the view can be characterized as 'development as usual' with the added constraint of environmental sustainability (Luke 2005). There are obviously competing views as to the best means by which to achieve both development and sustainability, and it is here that the differences in the perceived severity of the challenge can be most clearly seen. As Eckersley (2004) intimates, an example of the soft and hard (or weak and strong) schools of ecological modernization can be observed in the attitude of authors towards the role of technology and the structure of the capitalist economy – strong ecological 'modernizers' often advocate for structural economic change to accompany technology development and dissemination. In this way, ecological economics, a more radical form of economics for SD, can be (debatably) grouped in to the uncritically modern school, because in general the basic ideals of development and modernization are not questioned outright (see for example Goodland and Daly 1996).

For governments, effective multilateral environmental agreements are a means for addressing the challenge of sustainability at the global level (Carter 2001; Elliott 2004). Creating a favorable policy environment that levels the playing field for all nations will be central in ensuring the optimal use of resources globally. Additionally, incorporating concepts of sustainability in to every-day procedures (essentially as a new criterion in impact assessments, for example) will be essential to streamline governance procedures and reduce the footprint of government (Carter 2001). Adequately funding development initiatives, as well as addressing 'negative externalities' arising from economic activity will ensure smooth and sustainable economic development (Yearly 1996). Environmental economics is a means for addressing the unsustainable outcomes of the economy, and 'getting the prices right' (Yearly 1996; Carter 2001). In general, the neo-classical growth model is not seen as problematic, so long as the growth is of the right quality (non-material and appropriately priced) (Hawken *et al.* 1999). By entering in to Type II agreements (public-private partnerships), governments can mobilize capital and take advantage of the streamlined bureaucracies of big business, in such a way as to promote economic growth while greening the economy (Hawken *et al.* 1999; Zadek 2004).

The corporate world sees itself as the vanguard of sustainability. As Elliott (2004: 118) notes, 'Agenda 21 generally cast business and industry as a part of the solution rather than as a major source of the problem...of unsustainable development.' As the most efficient and effective actors on the international stage, enhanced public-private partnerships and deregulation will allow corporations to ensure that resources are used optimally and the public good is ensured (Zadek 2004; Luke 2005). Eco-efficiency is the mantra (Zadek 2004), with cleaner and greener production mechanisms revolutionizing industrial production (Hawken *et al.* 1999; Zadek 2004). Corporate Social Responsibility and life-cycle analysis are means by which to redress past wrongs arising from corporate activity and ensure the optimal use of resources (Zadek 2004), with triple bottom-line reporting ensuring that traditional externalities are considered (Zadek 2004). Voluntary codes of conduct are generally preferable to top-down 'command and control' means of achieving SD (*ibid.*). Most importantly, SD can be a win-win situation, whereby profit is generated from improving the lives of the masses (Hawken *et al.* 1999; Zadek 2004); indeed, the World Business Council on SD specifically argues that there is a strong business case for pursuing SD (Elliott 2004).

Development practitioners are the front-line, the face of SD. While top-down development economics still has a role to play, the new face of SD will be one of public participation, stakeholder involvement, and 'bottom-up' strategies of development (Martinussen 1997). Micro-credit will provide fledgling entrepreneurs with the means by which to develop their ideas into reality (Prystay 1996). The incorporation of traditional ecological knowledge in to rural development strategies will ensure that interventions are well-suited for local realities, and are culturally-sensitive (WCED 1987; Melnick *et al.* 2005). Integrated Conservation and Development Projects will preserve biodiversity and protect sensitive ecosystems, whilst improving local livelihoods (Martinussen 1997; Melnick *et al.* 2005). Small-scale technologies and

capacity-building will provide the space for endogenous growth (Melnick *et al.* 2005). In a word, the ‘big project, big mistake’ error of the past will be avoided, all the while ensuring that the sustainable practices of tradition are well-integrated in to a modern market economy. Expanded conceptions of ‘human development’ will pave the way for more balanced development, less focused on a growth-as-answer episteme (Sen 1999). An emphasis on good governance will ensure that this critical component of modernity, oft-neglected in the past, is brought to the fore alongside technology, rational management, and free-market capitalism (Melnick *et al.* 2005).

Finally, for academics, uncritically modern SD provides new vistas for the application of the most advanced analytical tools and technologies science has devised. Indeed, much of the clamor that launched the SD movement arose in response to a number of developments in the scientific community: remote sensing (truly making the concept of global a reality); systems ecology; systems analysis and global modeling efforts (Limits to Growth, etc.); and the perceived threat of global-level ecosystem disruption as a result of anthropogenic activities (Yearly 1996; Sachs 1999). These new developments paved the way for numerous efforts to analyze global resource and energy flows and to develop complicated models analyzing the precise means by which humans were transforming the globe (see Luke’s (1997) critique of WorldWatch). These efforts can be largely considered uncritically modern, because many of them aspired to little in the way of praxis – they generated information, to be used by policymakers and development practitioners in guiding their SD efforts (Goodland and Daly 1996; Luke 1997; 2005). Certainly there were exceptions; these will be discussed in the subsequent chapter. More than global-level analysis, the academic community (particularly in the engineering sciences) devoted much effort to developing the technologies necessary for achieving ‘Natural Capitalism’ (Hawken *et al.* 1999). Ultra-efficient energy conversion technologies, new renewable fuel sources, green architecture, state-of-the-art pollution capture schemes, and complicated monitoring technologies were but the tip of the iceberg for the ecological modernization school (*ibid.*). In the social sciences, the viability and application of concepts linked directly to the SD discourse, such as the polluter-pays principle, the precautionary principle, and intergenerational justice, became the focus of heated debate (Elliott 2004). Political scientists were charged with developing means by which to integrate these concepts in to conventional policy and governance structures (see Carter (2001) for an overview). At its most radical, the ‘uncritically modern’ paradigm looked in to means by which to restructure global governance schemes and the economy in a way that would facilitate global SD whilst still ensuring that the modernity project carried on with its agenda of liberation through modernization.

2f. The Implications of an Uncritically Modern Approach to Sustainable Development

What are the practical implications of the ‘uncritically modern’ take on sustainable development? For guidance, one can look at the work of the Global Scenarios Group, who took it upon themselves to envision exactly the type of future that might arise in response to the SD challenge (Raskin *et al.* 2002). In their exercise, they identified several futures that could arise from an ‘uncritically modern’ approach to SD. At its worse, this paradigm could lead to the abyss, to a fortress world or one of barbarization (*ibid.*). This is echoed by Goodland and Daly’s (1996: 1012) comment that ‘manifold expansion of anything remotely resembling the present global economy would simply speed us from today’s long-run unsustainability to imminent collapse.’ This future accepts as rote the most vehement critiques of modernity emanating from the SD camp. At best, such an approach could lead to a tenuous but somewhat stable future, with a very careful balance of policy and practice heading off the abyss (Raskin *et al.* 2002). However, unless the wildest dreams of the technological optimists hold true, it is unlikely that this paradigm could achieve either its developmental or sustainable promise (*ibid.*). Why is this? In answering this question, I will look to the many, many critiques of modernity that have arisen from the SD discourse. In doing so, this thesis will necessarily address the more radical takes on a sustainable future, and identify the roots of the tension that has led sustainable development to its contentious and highly-divided state at present. As many critics argue, the uncritically modern paradigm has added a new constraint or guiding principle to business-as-usual development, without really internalizing the nature of the sustainability challenge. This will become abundantly clear in the following chapter, when the voices of the anti-modern are finally given their due.

CHAPTER 3

VOICES FROM THE FRINGE: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE ANTI-MODERN

The discourse of sustainable development is incredibly fractured, filled with myriad voices arguing for extremely different solutions to topics as diverse as environmental destruction, poverty, human rights, and cultural diversity. However, one common thread unites many of the more radical critiques of the unsustainable present – an extremely critical attitude towards modernity, and its promise of universal freedom and liberation. This attitude is often explicit (e.g. Richard Norgaard), although in some cases lies more implicitly within the critique itself (e.g. in the work of Wolfgang Sachs). These radical critiques are united by a common enemy (modernity as-is), although they diverge greatly in the scope and the basis for their criticism.

This chapter will employ a thematic structure, rather than treat individual authors on their own terms and in depth. This serves two purposes: first, it allows for a breadth of argument that will serve to illuminate the major trends in the discourse, rather than treating each thread in its own right and potentially losing the whole; second, it simplifies the argument to more clearly extract the ‘rational kernel’ lying at its root, and in doing so establishes a clear direction for more detailed future research. This ‘thematic’ approach runs several risks, and thus a caveat is necessary. First, it has the possibility of being somewhat reductionist, although given that this thesis intends to provide a starting point for future analysis, this may not be perceived as a problem, provided it is not too limiting. Secondly, it is very possible that in labeling authors as belonging to one or more somewhat caricatured schools I am pigeon-holing them and not adequately addressing the theoretical depth and complexity of their *oeuvre*. This will be strenuously avoided, although it should be specified that the categorization employed is not intended to demean or to overly simplify, but rather to illustrate and illuminate. As will be explained clearly in the coming pages, in almost every case the authors mentioned make extremely valid and relevant critiques of ‘uncritical modernity.’ This thesis is not intended to question this critique, but rather to link the often fragmented and multi-faceted discourse of sustainable development to a parallel discourse that in some ways underlies it, that of modernity. In doing so, a clearer and more theoretically-grounded picture may emerge, one that can offer a hint as to why these relevant critiques have not had a greater impact than their significance merits, and often seem at odds with each other.

The two thematic critiques that will be addressed can be labeled the cultural critique and the ecological critique. These categories correspond roughly with the common labels ‘eco-centric’ and ‘anthropocentric,’ although the basis for this dichotomy will be challenged. Both the cultural and ecological critiques are united in that they see the ‘system’ institutions of the market economy and the bureaucratic state as problematic – these institutions are associated directly with modernity, and are considered synonymous with or constitutive of the modernity project. Having established the critique of modernity by radical sustainability theorists, I will then explore the chief theoretical alternative to the discourse of modernity – postmodernism – and the promise that this holds for both the cultural and ecological critics. Many critics have embraced the concept of postmodernism as offering a compelling alternative to the hegemonic discourse of modernity (e.g. Latouche). However, I will argue that the liberational promise of postmodernism is somewhat of an illusion, and that only the *most* radical eco-critiques can possibly fit within the boundaries of this discourse, and in that sense may not even really fit within the project of sustainable development. The remaining *critics-proper* – the cultural and the less radical ecological critiques – actually rely on many of the universalizing meta-narratives inherent to the modernity that they so vehemently disparage. Indeed, as is discussed in the latter half of this chapter, postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, and its inherent aporias render it inappropriate as a theoretical underpinning for SD. This conclusion will set the stage for a possible third option – a radical critique of modernity that does

not reject the project out-right. This thesis, as proposed by Jurgen Habermas, will be developed in **Chapter 4** and **Chapter 5**.

3a. The Cultural Critique of Modernity

I will begin this analysis by dealing first with the cultural critique of modernity, emerging from thinkers within the field of sustainable development such as Vandana Shiva, Richard Norgaard, Serge Latouche, and Wolfgang Sachs, among others. I will start here, because the implication of much of this line of thinking feeds in to the critique of the ecological school, although not in all cases. As well, it represents a continuation (with a new twist) of one of the most enduring critiques of mainstream development.

The argument advanced by many radical critics within SD is that modernity is culturally hegemonic, and threatens the lifeways of some of the most sustainable societies in the world (Latouche 1993; Norgaard 1994). As Sachs (1999: 102) argues, 'for centuries, universalism has been at war with diversity.' One central feature of modernity (and a damning critique of the project of development) is the construction of the pre-modern 'other' as the antithesis of the modern individual (Latouche 1993; Sachs 1999; Greig *et al.* 2007). In creating a myth of the backwards, ignorant savage, the discourse of modernity has disparaged venerable and ancient traditions (Naess 1989), dissolving countless different lifeworlds into a rigid other, simply as a means of supporting itself (*ibid.*). With little regard for the cultural traditions and knowledge of the majority of the world's people, modernity has displaced culture in its totalizing pursuit of 'enlightenment' through the application of rationality (Latouche 1993; Norgaard 1994; Sachs 1999). As Latouche (1993: 49) notes, 'other societies...rest on irrational foundations, mystifying superstitions and restrictive traditions. Their only chance is to melt into the grand society through modernizing; otherwise they are doomed to disappear, as being too archaic or rigid to recognize their inevitable future.'

The argument against this process is two-fold: first, the most unsustainable societies are the modern Western societies, those that initiated the project of modernity; second, the universalizing discourse of modernity seeks to impose a Western-style worldview or cosmology upon countless distinct cultures around the world, most of which are substantially more sustainable than the modern West. As Norgaard (1994: 50) writes, 'Western dominance threatens the few remaining traditional cultures from which new lessons can be drawn.' The problem is not simply that modernity and its discourse of universality is running rough-shod over cultures all over the globe (a problem in its own right), but that the replacement it seeks to inscribe is fundamentally unsustainable (Shiva 1989; Norgaard 1994; Sachs 1999). Thus, this argument can be seen as both instrumental and constitutive: constitutive because the right to self-determination and cultural dignity can be viewed as a fundamental human right (if one accepts this argument), and instrumental because the lifeways of marginal groups and cultures can be seen as imminently more sustainable than that which modernity imposes upon them. It should be noted that the version of the cultural critique of modernity that appears in the SD discourse often originates in the 'developing' world, and is particularly popular amongst NGOs in the global south (Norgaard 1994).

There are a number of versions of this meta-critique. Eco-feminism, as envisioned by Shiva, argues that modernity is a fundamentally patriarchal project, and that its extension (through mainstream development) threatens the global ecosystem while oppressing its marginal majority (women and minority cultures) (Shiva 1989). Women are viewed as having a deeper intrinsic connection with nature, and thus are more inclined to act as stewards towards the Earth and its diversity – indeed, nature can be viewed as 'the feminine principle' (Shiva 1989: 38). Conversely, the oppression of nature is directly linked to the oppression of women. Additionally, numerous indigenous rights movements have appealed to the cultural meta-critique, arguing for self-determination and respect among other demands (Shiva 1989; Latouche 1993). They have used the sustainability component (the instrumental argument) to support their claim for independence and human freedom (the constitutive argument). Certain segments of the anti-globalization movement appeal to this critique, although by no means all – Sachs' (1999) vehement critique of globalization in 'Planet Dialectics' is a telling example.

There are two major targets singled out by the cultural critique – market capitalism and (to a lesser extent) the bureaucratic state. Market capitalism is seen as the vanguard of modernity, imposing an ends-blind productivist paradigm on all that lies in its path (Latouche 1993; Norgaard 1994; Sachs 1999). Globalization hastens the penetration of capital into the furthest reaches of the globe, bringing new people in to the modern system of market capitalism, with little to no regard for the systems it displaces (*ibid.*). Unfortunately, while capitalism can expand production to unimagined levels, it carries with it an abundance of problems: it displaces traditional systems of reciprocity and collective welfare; it provides no guarantee that the well-being of the individual will be ensured, only that the ‘utility’ of the majority will be maximized; it introduces a market-oriented worldview that cannot be separated from the consumerist lifestyle that accompanies it; and most devastatingly (from a sustainability standpoint), it instigates a virtuous cycle of increasing material wealth that is premised upon increasing material consumption (Norgaard 1994; Sachs 1999). Thus nature is subjugated to meet the ‘needs’ of a consumerist society (Luke 2005). As Shiva (1989: 6) argues, ‘From being the creators and sustainers of life, nature and women are reduced to being ‘resources’ in the fragmented, anti-life model of maldevelopment (economic growth).’ Many of these criticisms are shared by proponents of the ecological critique. While this critique is radical in scope, its basic themes appear in the Bruntland Report (WCED 1987)! Given that this same report was used as the basis for Agenda 21 and its mandate of economic growth, the contradictions of SD as formulated at Rio should be self-evident.

The second target of the cultural critique of modernity is the bureaucratic state. Far from being the saving grace of modernity as envisioned by Hegel, the modern nation-state is a Western (and indeed European) concept that acts as an agent for normalization and repression of minority groups and women (Shiva 1989; Latouche 1993; Luke 2005). Shiva (1989) sees the state as a means for extending the reach of the ‘patriarchal project’ of techno-science and industrialism. A functional modernity is premised upon the idea of a nation-state and thus this form of governance has been held up as the *de rigueur* standard for the world (Norgaard 1994). Unfortunately, the legacy of colonialism (among other forces) has fashioned a world of states bearing little semblance to the diversity of nations lying underneath their artificial borders (Latouche 1993; Martinussen 1997). In this situation, the state functions as little more than a means for entrenching market capitalism (*ibid.*; Luke 2005) and siphoning of the surplus produced by new wage-laborers in to the hands of a few Westernized elite. For those concerned with cultural diversity and self-determination, the modern concept of the nation-state is a historically and geographically specific artifact of a previous era.

The cultural critique of the radical sustainability camp has a number of implications for SD. These can be seen most clearly in the solutions advocated by various proponents of the critique. The central theme of this critical school, echoed in most of their proposals for a sustainable future, is that of a decentralization of social and economic activity, so that local communities can have the right to ‘develop’ in a manner that is locally appropriate (and legitimate) (Bookchin 1981; Latouche 1993; Norgaard 1994; Sachs 1999). For Sachs (1999), this form of localism is intended to directly counter the globalist hubris of modern, managerial man. In the right of local self-determination is an implicit assumption that this local development will in turn be environmentally sustainable, as opposed to the modernity it rejects. Furthermore, these age-old cultures are viewed as having the right to exist, *tout court* (Latouche 1993). Beyond the local scale, a form of radical solidarity will be cultivated, such that independent communities the world round will be united in their independence and diversity. Norgaard (1994: 189) suggests that this will form around a ‘coevolutionary cosmology’ that values ‘nature and people.’ The broader implications of this proposal will be discussed in more detail after the ecological critique is introduced.

3b. The Ecological Critique of Modernity

The radical ecological critique of modernity challenges the assumptions underpinning the discourse of modernity, as well as its outcomes. The crux of the ecological critique is that modernity is a fundamentally unsustainable project, in that it is premised on the subjugation of nature through humankind’s expanding control over material resources (Naess 1989; Norgaard 1994; Sachs 1999). The reason for the oppression of

nature lies in the individualistic, humanistic core of modernity, which elevates humans to a position superior to that of nature (Naess 1989; Luke 2005). As Norgaard (1994: 171) notes ‘individualism has proven to be a form of escapism, of distancing, of disburdening problems on to others and into the future... these characteristics of modernity...are the sources of many of our problems.’ This anthropocentrism lies at the root of the ecological crisis, and must be overcome if the abuse of nature is to cease. In some cases, this argument leads its proponents to a position of solidarity with groups espousing the cultural critique, as they are viewed as representing ‘alternatives to modernity’ that are inherently more sustainable (e.g. Bookchin and Sachs). However, at its most radical the ecological critique proclaims itself to be anti-humanist (e.g. Naess’ Deep Ecology (1989)), and thus does not recognize the constitutive argument of the cultural critique. It should be noted that within this grouping there are a wide range of stances towards humanism (all at least somewhat critical), although not all claim to break fully with the tradition. However, it will be argued later in this chapter that none manage to break completely with the humanist tradition.

Like the advocates of the cultural critique to modernity, supporters of the ecological critique single out market capitalism and the bureaucratic state as the target of their attack. The ecological critique of market capitalism aligns itself with the cultural critique, although it is less concerned with issues of distribution and cultural disruption (except in the case of Bookchin (1981)). Central to the critique is the argument that capitalism (and in turn modernity) is a fundamentally unsustainable system premised upon the exploitation of nature (Bookchin 1981; Naess 1989; Norgaard 1994; Sachs 1999). This arises because modernity has an individualist conception of humanity, which relies on a subject-centered reason that constitutes nature solely through its interaction with external objects and its instrumental mastery of them (*ibid.*). In other words, to meet individual ‘needs’ (which are justified not by appealing to outside sources of validity, but through the application of reason) humans must objectify nature and master it through the application of science and technology. This conception of reason leads to the fundamentally destructive attitude of modern society towards nature. Market capitalism is the logical extension (the institutionalization) of this form of reason, and represents a powerful means by which humans can objectify nature and use it to satisfy arbitrary material needs (Bookchin 1981; Naess 1989; Luke 2005). The logic of the market is efficiency, and it can be seen as ends-blind in that at best it assumes that what it supplies efficiently is that which is needed by the recipient (Norgaard 1994). Given that modernity is premised upon an individualist and in turn anthropocentric conception of humanity (humanity is itself a universalist and anthropocentric concept rooted in modernity), market capitalism is a logical conclusion of modernity.

The bureaucratic state also fares poorly in the ecological critique. Again, the bureaucratic ‘nation-state’ acts primarily as a means of serving the interests of capital (Bookchin 1981; Luke 2005). The entire premise for organizing into a bureaucratic state is to enhance to spread of market capitalism and the subjugation of nature, in the interests of a materialist and anthropocentric humanity (Bookchin 1981; Naess 1989). As with the cultural critique, the modern nation-state as a form of aggregation is called in to question, this time on ecological grounds. The artificial borders of the modern state bear little resemblance to the natural bioregions upon which a truly eco-centric community would base itself (Norgaard 1994). A system of globally-integrated states facilitates global trade and the expansion of modernity, both of which threaten ecological sustainability, despite the claims of neo-classical economics and its theories of exchange (*ibid.*; Luke 2005). Without the modern market and the state, how could one explain the ecological catastrophe of Las Vegas?

The ‘solutions’ embraced by proponents of the ecological critique are diverse, but revolve around two themes. First is a decentralization of the globe, typically into a more localist, bioregional system of aggregation (Naess 1989; Norgaard 1994). Bioregions are nature’s logical means of organization, and thus should displace the state as the premier locus of action (*ibid.*). This serves the interest of two conflicting schools of thought within the ecological critique – that of the ‘small is beautiful’ appropriate technology gurus, who see the bioregion largely for its ecologically instrumental rationality, and that of the primitivist ‘Luddites’ who reject the trappings of modern technology out-right, and whose model of organization is often inspired by some conception of the Noble Savage (a claim they reject), or a Romantic view of nature and pre-modern society (Luke 1997). As Luke (1997: 205), one should be cautious to distinguish between

the varying schools of anti-modern eco-centrism, as Bookchin and Naess, to take one example, have radically different stances towards culture and humanity.

The second major theme of the ecological critics is the need for a new conception of the relationship between humans and nature. Modernity has imposed upon humans a view of their 'superiority' to nature, which conflicts with the fundamental reality of humans' embeddedness within nature. A call for a new 'ecological ethic' often accompanies this critique, ranging from 'soft anthropocentrism' to flat-out anti-humanism (Bookchin 1981; Naess 1989; Norgaard 1994; Luke 1997). The new ecological ethic will provide the glue which binds humans (as a species, not as humanity) in their quest to live a simple life at one with nature (*ibid.*). As we shall see, the prospects for a truly anti-humanist environmental ethic are slim, especially within the context of the praxiological notion of sustainable development. To summarize, the ecological critique is typically invoked to call for a decentralization of society, as well as a relinquishing of the reigns of control over nature so fundamental to modernity. In doing so, humans can realize themselves in a harmonious and holistic manner through their relationship to nature *as equals*.

3c. An Introduction to Postmodernism

The clear message arising from the anti-modern cultural and ecological critiques raised above is that a sustainable society is unlikely to arise within an uncritically modern paradigm. This leads to an overwhelming question: if modernity is, as argued above, fundamentally unsustainable, what can be done to fix this? Are there alternatives to modernity that promise to liberate humans from the tyranny of modernity's universalist, individualist pretensions? Or can modernity be 'saved,' and its promise of liberation resurrected from the destruction that it has wrought? I will deal with the former possibility in the following section. In doing so, I will argue that the idea of an alternative to modernity poses little hope for resolving the tensions in the discourse of sustainable development, and thus the latter – a critical modernity – must be constituted.

Since the 1960s, postmodernism has risen to prominence as an intellectual movement, and is often invoked as offering an alternative to the discourse of modernity (Habermas 1981; Smart 1990). Postmodernism is a complicated concept, because it is fundamentally pluralist, and thus evades easy characterization (Harvey 1990; Smart 1990; Turner 1990). Indeed, postmodern thought rejects the grand theoretical narratives of modernity, which seek to categorize and subsume all intellectual thought in to narrow and restrictive discourses (*ibid.*). The intellectual heritage of postmodernism varies within and between disciplines, and thus aesthetic postmodernism may appear distinct and quite different from philosophical postmodernism (*ibid.*). Indeed, attempts at sub-classifying postmodernisms have been contradictory – Turner (1990), who is sympathetic to postmodernism, further subdivides it in to anti-modernism and true post- or after-modernism; Habermas (1981) (who is extremely critical of postmodernism), as mentioned in **Chapter 1**, subdivides it in to anti- and pre-modernism. In the following paragraphs, I will first look briefly at the intellectual origins of postmodernism as a discourse (or series of discourses), and I will then attempt to characterize the broad and diverse strands of thought often falling under this label. This will enable a comparison between postmodern critique of modernity and that of the radical sustainability theorists, and the establishment of a shared 'aesthetic worldview' between these discourses.

Postmodernism, like its analytical sister post-structuralism, arose from the linguistic revolution in 20th century philosophy, and came to prominence in France beginning in the late 1960s (Callinicos 1999). To understand postmodernism, one should begin by looking at the evolution from structuralism to post-structuralism, the application of which informed the work of Foucault and constituted the work of Derrida. The structuralists viewed language as an autonomous system, where signifiers (a sound-image or linguistic sign) and signified (the concept) are two parallel systems whose meaning is defined by the differences between each system's parts (*ibid.*). To the structuralists, the symbol is more real than the concept, and thus structure determines meaning (social gives rise to the mental) (*ibid.*). Essentially, a formal and closed system lies at the center of the open and fluid sphere of meaning (concept or signified) (*ibid.*). The implication of this theory is to dissolve the subject (individual or collective, e.g. class) in favor of the

structure – this was the start of a truly anti-humanist social theory (*ibid.*). The problem with structuralism, as Derrida (1967) highlights in his classic essay ‘Structure, sign, and play in the discourse of the human sciences,’ is that this center *does not hold*. In going from signifier to signified (the process of signification), a signified becomes a new signifier – essentially, the binary opposition that gives meaning subverts itself, generating the beginning of a new binary opposition (*ibid.*)! To put this in much more colloquial terms, Derrida (1967) highlights the problem of interpreting the formal and centered structure – every interpretation is influenced by the *episteme* from which it originates, which is in turn an interpretation (a text) – text begets text begets text. Thus structuralism relies on an implicit assumption of a transcendental structure (or signifier) which is beyond language, which Derrida (1967) argues is a philosophically false premise.

Where does this lead us? The genius (or tragedy) of post-structuralism is that it allows one to displace subject-centered reason (Callinicos 1999). The author is divorced from the text (or discourse), and the reader is given primacy (*ibid.*). In de-centering the subject, history becomes another text and loses its structure, and reason becomes suspect – this is the essence of postmodernism. The application of structuralism in anthropology, as well as the challenge of Derrida’s post-structuralism paved the way for Michel Foucault’s genealogies of various institutions in search of the ‘other’ of reason (*ibid.*). Through this work, Foucault argued that historical consciousness can be seen as the mask of various complexes of power-knowledge – there is no knowledge that is not a reflection of a series of power-relations (*ibid.*). This continues and radicalizes Levi-Strauss’ critique of the subject – as Foucault sees it ‘the individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle (in Callinicos 1999: 278).’ Essentially, all dissolves in to Nietzsche’s will-to-power, whose network of power relations constitutes the social body (Habermas 1987). In turn, this power acts upon human bodies, creating the individual and assigning it a role and position in the social body (Callinicos 1999). This constitutes a radical critique of modernity. Rather than represent the beginning of a process of liberation, as the Enlightenment claims, modernity ushered in a new form of power-knowledge in the form of disciplines or ‘value spheres’ which in turn lead to new forms of oppression (Habermas 1987; Callinicos 1999). Thus Foucault challenges the claim of reason (or scientific rationality) to objectivity, by arguing that it is a construct of power-knowledge rooted in the West beginning in the 16th century (*ibid.*). It is thus impossible to separate reason from the ‘effects of power’ that determine it, and in turn the oppression that its application has wrought – reason thus negates itself (*ibid.*).

The preceding discussion highlights the confusing and somewhat complicated nature of post-structuralist and postmodernist thought, especially within the domain of social theory. However, a few key points can be drawn from this discussion, which will make the links to the radical ecological and cultural critiques of modernity arising from within the discourse of SD much clearer. Postmodernism offers several key critiques that radically challenge the discourse of modernity. First, it de-centers the subject, arguing that individuals are constituted through power-relations which thus dominate them. The de-centering of the knowing subject also represents the death of reason – humans no longer can be viewed as possessing an internal form of reason upon which to validate or ground their actions (postmodernism is thus anti-humanist (Habermas 1987)). The claim of universalist grand narratives can no longer hold – they serve simply to mask power.

However, this is not as bad as it may appear! The triumph of postmodernism is that it lays bare the hegemonic power structures lying at the root of the ‘meta-narratives’ of liberation through Enlightenment (Smart 1990; Callinicos 1999). Modern concepts such as reason are simply masks for power, and it is the task of postmodernism to expose these structures of dominance. In the aesthetic sphere this meant that the mythic status of the artist has been shattered – art no longer is the privilege of the few who have mastered the technical and aesthetic dimensions of form and design (Harvey 1990). It is the aesthetic freedom of transcending (or dissolving) the cult of the expert that constitutes the postmodern aesthetic (Harvey 1990). Thus Derrida (1967), in referring to the ‘play’ inherent to texts, suggests two possible interpretations of the unseating of the absolute center (which we can understand as ‘universal truth’) by post-structuralism: ‘the sad, negative, guilty, nostalgic, Rousseauist’ interpretation, which sees this as the loss of the center; or, the ‘Nietzschean affirmation’ which celebrates the joy given to the interpreter in the freeplay of a world without truth (Derrida 1967: 293). Rather than bemoan the death of the absolute and the universal, which have been

revealed as oppressive and fictional, this viewpoint sees postmodernity as offering a new ‘openness’ to meanings arising from previously subjugated discourses.

It should be noted that both Derrida and Foucault only somewhat cautiously embraced postmodernity as opening new avenues for ‘emancipation’ (Schuurman 1993b; Callinicos 1999). One of their biggest targets was the meta-narrative of emancipation in Enlightenment thought (Callinicos 1999). Foucault saw the closed system of power as almost inescapable (in parallel to Derrida’s argument that all becomes discourse) (*ibid.*). In his last years, Foucault began to trace a means for escaping the system of power-knowledge – this was through an ‘aesthetics of existence,’ which seeks ‘technologies of the self’ which can allow one to achieve mastery over one’s self, essentially allowing subjects to act upon and form (self-constitute) themselves (*ibid.*). This is strangely parallel to Adorno’s pursuit of aesthetic self-realization, and also has parallels in Nietzsche’s description of self-overcoming (but without the self-constitution aspect) (see Habermas (1987) for a discussion). In his later years, Foucault’s critique thus began to converge with that of the Frankfurt school, which will be briefly discussed in the next chapter (Callinicos 1999).

Foucault and Derrida offer a compelling critique of modernity and its conflation of reason with power, and also offer a few ideas as to how ‘heterogeneity and difference...’ can be seen as ‘...liberative forces in the redefinition of cultural discourse (Harvey 1990: 9).’ Postmodernism destroys the validity claims (previously legitimized by reason) of meta-narratives, and thus in a sense democratizes discourse – deconstruction opens up space for discourses previously suppressed through the domination of various configurations of power-knowledge (Schuurman 1993b). These discourses (nature, indigenous culture, etc.) are precisely those which the radical SD critics seek to bring to the fore.

3d. Postmodernism and Radical Sustainability Critique

From the preceding discussion, the attractiveness of postmodernism for radical ecological and cultural critics of modernity should be clear. The philosophical underpinnings of the anti-modern critique arguably find their roots in the discourse of postmodernism, and so the relationship between the discourse of postmodernism and SD merits further discussion. The postmodern critique of modernity is total, and many of its themes mesh well with that of the ecological and cultural critiques discussed earlier in this chapter. Both the cultural and ecological critiques of modernity share a common front in their distaste for the totalizing universality inherent in the discourse of modernity. The hegemony of the universal can be seen in the construction of a monolithic Western culture of mass consumption, as forwarded by the cultural critique (‘l’Occidentalisation du monde’) (Latouche 1993; Norgaard 1994). The subjugation of nature arising from the hegemony of ‘humanity’ – the universality of the rational subject – is disparaged by the ecological critique. These arguments can be clearly identified in the postmodern critique. As Smart (1990: 27) notes, postmodernism arose from the ‘realization that the goals and values which have been central to Western ‘European’ civilization can no longer be considered universal.’

Furthermore, both the cultural and the ecological critiques privilege the local and the decentralized over the totalizing and the universal, especially when discussing possible alternatives for a sustainable future. Postmodern art and theory rejoice in difference and thus favor the local and the minority (Harvey 1990). Clearly, there are many similarities between postmodernism and radical anti-modern critique emanating from the sustainability movement – some radical sustainability theorists openly embrace postmodernism as the theoretical foundation (often stated more than explicitly argued) for their critique and their alternative visions (e.g. Latouche 1993), and all (discussed in this thesis) take a decidedly anti-modern stance. This, however, can be problematic.

Does postmodernity offer a theoretically sound basis for sustainability theory and critique? It is to this line of questioning that I will devote the remaining space in this chapter. The following sections (3e and 3f) build upon the preceding introduction, by analyzing the relationship between the ecological and cultural critiques and postmodernism. Before beginning this analysis, I must reiterate a central point to the argument

presented in this chapter. The radical ecological and cultural critiques of modernity being addressed are being used as part of the discourse of *sustainable development*. It should be noted that not all these thinkers would agree to being classified as SD theorists, but their critiques all fall under the rubric of SD in that they contain both an ecological and a developmental component (the balance between each may vary). Hence, this paper is assessing the validity of postmodernism as a framework for what is fundamentally a theory of praxis – sustainable development in this sense does not incorporate eco-transcendental theories of self-realization that are completely divorced from praxis and a vision of change. This demarcation is important, because it will guide the following discussion. The perceptive (or sympathetic?) reader may note that in specifying this, I have already concluded my argument: in this lies my critique of postmodernism.

3e. Postmodernism and the Cultural Critique of Modernity

Many parallels can be drawn between the anti-modern cultural critique developed at the beginning of this chapter and the discourse of postmodernism. Of central importance to the cultural critique is the notion of otherness – Foucault used his genealogies as a means for discovering the ‘other’ of rationality (Callinicos 1999). In searching for a means of liberating the ‘other’ from the clutches of hegemonic discourse, postmodernism appears to resonate with the cultural critique of modernity. Beyond a shared aesthetic stance, can postmodernism really support the critique of the cultural school of SD theorists?

In the description of the cultural critique of modernity, two aspects were noted: the constitutive argument and the instrumental argument. Both of these arguments are convincing reasons for reconsidering the relationship between the project of modernity and culture, and the analysis of modernity posited from this platform meshes well with that of the postmodern critique. However, can the basic constitutive and instrumental arguments hold within a postmodern framework? I will argue that this is more or less impossible if one desires a philosophy of praxis, as sustainable development implicitly demands.

First I will address the constitutive argument. It should be relatively clear that the claim for indigenous self-determination and freedom echoes from a more or less humanist viewpoint, relying on the Enlightenment meta-narrative of ‘human freedom’ in a collective sense as well as implicitly the concept of humanity as transcending all differences. Thus, difference is justified or demanded premised upon the claim of sameness (universality). This plainly contradicts the postmodern dissolution of the grand narratives, which, while possibly celebrating diversity and voices from the fringe, lends no discourse the ‘right’ to exist or to be given any more preference than any other (Habermas 1987; Callinicos 1999). Certainly, it could be argued that it is valuable to place the views of the Kayapo to be put on an equal footing (as a discourse) with that of the President of the US, but this does nothing to dismantle or alter the system of power-knowledge that puts the Kayapo in the precarious situation in which they reside. This argument highlights the fundamental problem with postmodernism as a philosophy of praxis – it may challenge and dismantle the grand-narrative of the Enlightenment, but it offers little solace for those who have been oppressed by the totalizing forces of modernity, save that their oppressor has been unmasked (Habermas 1987). Indeed, as Habermas (1981: 10) notes ‘Nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form; an emancipatory effect does not follow.’ This inability of postmodernism to ground itself has been labeled the ‘performative contradiction’ by Habermas (1987), and can be viewed as a fundamental critique of the discourse. This same line of thinking serves to decouple the instrumental cultural critique from the discourse of postmodernism. With no basis upon which to take action, instrumental arguments have little weight in postmodernism.

The outcomes and structures advocated by the radical cultural critique of sustainability adhere more closely to postmodernist thought, although this does not necessarily bode well for the ‘sustainability’ of these outcomes. Ideas of communitarianism, decentralization, and localism have clear roots in postmodernism (Harvey 1990; Schuurman 1993b). However, the nature of the sustainability imperative – that of global change resulting from local action (and vice versa) – demands some form of global organizing principle (Luke 1997). Indeed, Goodland and Daly (1996) suggest that environmental sustainability is the ultimate universal narrative! While it is certainly true that a postmodern constellation of societies may contain

numerous different and sustainable modes of living, there is no basis upon which to ensure that *all* of these communities adhere to a sustainable form of living. Without all, there is none, as systems ecology has argued time and time again when stressing the ecological imperative for SD. The idea of radical solidarity, which is common among the cultural critics, is universally aligned with some *universal* principle (humanism, unity in diversity etc.) – again, the Enlightenment rears its head, and postmodernism must step down.

3f. Postmodernism and the Ecological Critique of Modernity

The themes raised in the preceding discussion of the cultural critique reappear in the ecological critique. However, there is one very distinct concept arising from the ecological critique that merits further and detailed discussion, that of bio- or eco-centrism. The basis for the ecological critique is less clearly derived from Enlightenment thinking than that of the cultural critique. While both critiques hew very closely to the postmodern critique of modernity, the ecological critique adheres much more closely to the philosophical underpinnings of postmodernism. Thus, while the cultural critique criticizes the oppressive nature of the hegemonic universalist discourses of modernity largely for their outcomes, the ecological critique criticizes the individualist base of modernity's subject-centered reason. It should be noted that this dichotomy between eco- and anthropo-centrism serves an organizing and pedagogical purpose in this paper, and that it is not nearly as strict as may be suggested by this paragraph.

The ecological critique of the subject falls under the label eco- or biocentrism. As many argue, modernity is premised on the subjugation of nature, through the relationship between the conscious subject and the objective world – for example, Hegel argues that 'in need, either man is made an object and oppressed or else must make nature an object and repress it (in Habermas 1987: 27).' As such, Hegel saw the principle of subjectivity as one of domination, which in his system he reconciled with the concept of the 'ethical totality,' whereby man recognizes himself in the oppressed and thus becomes aware of the unity of their existence (Habermas 1987). However, as the ecological critique has emphasized, Hegel's reconciliation did not come about – humanity, rooted in a subjective consciousness, continues to objectify and oppress nature. Thus, one must question not only Hegel's attempt at reconciliation, but also revisit the relationship of subject and object, and in doing so man and nature. It is exactly this which the ecological critique suggests, and which postmodernism accomplishes. The ecological critique argues that sustainability can only come about if humankind relinquishes its role as master over nature – not only this, but humans must also dissolve the boundary between humans and nature, and recognize them as one (Luke 1997). The first claim involves a radical reassessment of the basis for subject-centered reason (without necessarily absolving reason, but at least de-centering the subject – more on this in the **Chapter 4**), while the second claim necessitates a Nietzschean dissolution of the subject and of reason itself. What exactly does this imply?

By questioning subject-centered reason in a fundamental sense, the ecological critique could very well mesh with a postmodern critique of modernity. However, the ability for humans to dissolve the relationship between themselves and nature (as advocated by the ecological critique) should be viewed somewhat skeptically. If humans dissolve the self in an attempt to reject their mastery over *nature*, the material reproduction of humans is called in to question – either humans reject the mastery over nature required to reproduce themselves (which has obvious practical problems, but *would* meet the needs for sustainability (Luke 1997) – this is essentially Jainism with an understanding of microbiology), or they submit to Nietzsche's will-to-power, which puts them essentially in an antagonistic relationship towards nature, an endless struggle amongst competing centers for power. In the postmodern world of power-knowledge constituting the subject, the idea of an ecological catastrophe becomes little more than the reflection of a particular set of power relations, and has no claim to validity.

Thus, the ecological critique cannot simply look to dissolve the relationship between humans and nature, so it seeks to construct a whole from this new relationship (be it Gaian, Deep Ecology or any number of ecosophys) (Luke 1997). This whole is again a meta-narrative, and indeed can be seen as anthropocentric! A biocentrist philosophy of sustainable development is impossible in a sense, because it essentially

humanizes nature through a myth of subjectivity (a reconstitution of the self in nature) so as to change human behavior (Luke 1997). Again, postmodernism does not offer a basis to support this relocation of the self (as a natural whole) – it can only dissolve the self. For a discussion of this process in Deep Ecology, refer to Luke (1997). Without reconstituting nature and humans as a new self (similar to Hegel’s ethical totality), and in a sense humanizing nature, the ecological critique cannot ground itself so as to be a basis for praxis.

Even with the concept of ‘oneness’ with nature, which finds its roots in many Eastern religions, the radical ecological critique runs in to problems with moral-ethical consistency that demands a return to the Enlightenment. Oneness is achieved through recognizing each organism’s intrinsic value (in most ecological critiques) and thus its right to self-realization (in Deep Ecology at least) (Luke 1997). However, for this to work as anything but a transcendental philosophy of self-realization and asceticism, the ecological critique (belying its roots in the scientific discipline of ecology) must make the proviso that all organisms in nature must oppress (my words) other organisms so as to reproduce themselves – this is ‘a biological fact of life (Naess in Luke 1997: 17).’ This inconsistency gives rise to Luke’s (1997: 17) pithy critique:

‘We might let sharks eat as many swimmers as they can find without reprisal or allow grizzlies to chow down on campers and livestock as their mode of self-realization. We could even solve the retirement crisis, prison overcrowding, or warehousing mental patients by staking the old, felons, and the insane out in tidal pools or anthills. But, will we allow anthrax or cholera microbes to attain self-realization in wiping out sheep herds or human kindergartens? Will we continue to deny salmonella or botulism their equal rights when we process the dead carcasses of animals and plants that we eat?’

Essentially, the ecological critique, in order to satisfy its imperative of achieving sustainability, must add a quasi-mystical bent to what remains an anthropocentric and humanist concept of nature – in doing so, they shift the balance of power of man over nature, but they do not dissolve the primacy of the subject (e.g. Norgaard 1994). They reconstitute the subject as a whole or as one with nature, but only so as to implicate a new ethical relationship between humans and nature (Luke 1997). The idea of achieving self-realization through one’s relationship with nature is fundamentally an Enlightenment idea, as is the reliance on a universal conception of the subject as ‘humans+nature.’ One frightening possibility of this critique is that in enforcing a relationship of minimal intervention with nature (the guidelines for which remain vague and unclear, as the ethical base is ambiguous in most formulations of the ecological critique) a new form of eco-fascism could arise, fusing the mystical aspects of pre-modernism with the totalizing nature of modernity (Luke 1997). This is by no means certain, although it is a possibility and so should be adequately addressed by proponents of such a scheme.

3g. The Incompatibility of Postmodernism and Sustainable Development

Postmodernism as a philosophical discourse represents a relatively consistent and cutting critique of modernity. Many parallels can be drawn between critiques emanating from the sphere of SD and that of postmodernism, and often the former invoke the latter. However, as the preceding discussion highlights, this comparison can often be problematic. This largely lies in postmodernity’s tendency to define itself by what it is not (LATOUCHE QUOTE): postmodernism is not totalizing, it is not universalizing, it rejects meta-narratives, and so on. Despite a common platform against postmodernity’s other (modernity), the ecological and cultural critiques of modernity are not necessarily postmodern, and indeed as I have shown can be construed as fundamentally modern. This largely stems not only from the reliance of these critiques on Enlightenment concepts, but fundamentally on the inability of postmodernism to provide a basis for praxis (Habermas 1987). Sustainable development is fundamentally a discourse of turning theory in to action – the field is predicated on a concern not only for where humans have ended up (a critique of modernity), but for where we are going. Thus, the performative contradiction of postmodernism is debilitating (Schuurman 1993b) – without some rational criteria upon which to ground action, postmodernism can simply add a

somewhat nihilistic and theoretically-robust element to radical sustainability's despairing critique of modernity. The premise of sustainable development is thoroughly modern, even if its diagnosis of modernity may flirt with the postmodern. In conceiving of a global ecological *crisis*, SD appeals to a sense of humanity, of a common destiny or trajectory for a species which must necessarily precipitate a universalist response. Otherwise, 'crisis' becomes simply an expression of will-to-power, something that can be overcome only through self-mastery or self-overcoming.

And so the radical proponents of sustainable development are faced with a dilemma – reject the universalist claims and the associated ills that the project of modernity has bequeathed the world, and in doing so reject the universalist claims that spawned the sustainability movement. Alternatively, embrace modernity and its universal aspirations, but find some means by which to direct the project in such a way that it does not result in grievous harm to nature and oppression of humanity. This, I would argue, is to resurrect the dialectic of Enlightenment, and is the approach that will be outlined in **Chapter 4 and 5**.

How can these two competing ends be resolved in a manner which ensures that they do not compromise each other, and that allows the necessary rationality for the self-grounding of modernity? One possibility presents itself: the concepts of unfinished modernity and communicative rationality as proposed by Jurgen Habermas. In this work, Habermas (1987) de-centers the subject so as to allow for a critique of modernity, by locating rationality in intersubjective communication. As will be argued in the remaining two chapters, Habermas' theory offers a possibility for reconstituting modernity so as to conceive of sustainable development as a process of transformation, a means for achieving a deliberated end. To date, the ends of the modernity project have been ambiguous (although the promise was there), and the means have been oppressive.

CHAPTER 4

A SYNTHESIS: HABERMAS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The sustainability question represents an unprecedented challenge to the project of modernity – while the modernity project has been premised upon ever-expanding ‘growth’ and the slow but inevitable subjugation of nature, the recent imperative of ‘sustainable’ development re-integrates the emancipatory agenda of modernity with the biophysical limits fundamental to life in a closed system. The challenges to late modernity ‘as-is’ – as discussed in the preceding chapter – are evidence of a growing concern with the trajectory of contemporary society and the natural world within which it exists. However, as discussed in the final section of the previous chapter, few anti-modern theories seem to adequately address the depth and breadth of the sustainability challenge, without in turn being contradictory. While anti-modern critics have often appealed to the liberational promise of postmodernism, this system of thought cannot deliver the desired outcomes that these sustainability critics envision, whether from an eco-centric or anthropocentric point of view. If the sustainability challenge is to be answered, a theory of SD must be developed that is capable of grounding itself in modernity, in such a way as to avoid the pitfalls of uncritical modernity and the false promise of postmodernism.

One such possibility presents itself, that breaks with the unquestioned path of modernity, but does not abandon the project altogether. This possibility is developed in the work of Jurgen Habermas, an heir to the Frankfurt School and a student of Horkheimer and Adorno. However, unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas does not content himself with despairing critique with very little hope or avenue for emancipation. Habermas, while far from an unquestioning disciple of the Enlightenment, refocuses the discourse of modernity on the liberational promise of the discourse, and in doing so attempts to resurrect the dialectic of Enlightenment (Callinicos 1999). This project finds its center in the concept of ‘communicative rationality’ or ‘communicative action,’ which is the means by which individuals and in turn society can escape from the trap of the philosophy of the subject, without resorting to an abandonment of any form of reason and the performative contradiction that this entails.

In this chapter, I will first introduce Habermas’ critique of modernity, and the means by which he resolves this through the concept of ‘communicative rationality.’ Secondly, I will link this analysis with key themes running through the critiques of the anti-modern school of sustainability theorists discussed in **Chapter 3**, establishing the connections between the two discourses. This will open the way for the ensuing discussion in **Chapter 5**, which will address the means by which to implement this Habermasian critique in terms of sustainable development.

4a. Habermas on Modernity

To understand Habermas’ attempt at revisiting and reconstituting the project of modernity, one must first understand his analysis of late modernity. This analysis follows from the work of the Frankfurt school as well as Parsons, and is an attempt at assessing why modernity has resulted in the negative outcomes so often attributed to it (Callinicos 1999). As Habermas (1981; 1987) conceives it, modernity is a process of differentiation or rationalization– in modernity, the lifeworld is rationalized in to different cultural value spheres such as science, morality, and art, each pursuing their own ends by their own particular forms of logic. The lifeworld can be viewed as the social sphere – its imperative is social integration and reproduction (*ibid.*). Beyond (or above) this process of differentiation is a ‘super-differentiation,’ whereby a new ‘system’ is formed to accompany that of the lifeworld (Callinicos 1999). This system comprises independent media (money, power) which communicate and interact in complex processes that are functionally interdependent and are necessarily beyond the control or responsibility of individuals (*ibid.*). The system is designed to meet the requirements of a society that must materially reproduce itself, and in doing so ensure that the consequences of individual actions are so enmeshed with others that a form of stability of outcomes is ensured (*ibid.*). Two features of modern society are constitutive of Habermas’

system – the market economy and the bureaucratic state (Habermas 1987). These forms communicate with ‘delinguistified media’ (more on this later), and operate independent of individual human control to ensure ‘system integration,’ or the material reproduction of modern society (Habermas 1987; Callinicos 1999). Whereas Weber and many earlier social theorists viewed the rise of the capitalist liberal state with trepidation, due to its domination by ends-blind instrumental rationality, Habermas sees it as somewhat inevitable and possibly beneficial (Callinicos 1999; Anderson 2005). However, this seems to imply a relatively uncritical stance towards modernity – this is not at all the case.

In the work of Habermas, modernity is *not* a benevolent angel offering liberation to the masses, as promised by the Enlightenment. As Hegel and Marx before him, Habermas (1987) sees the project of modernity as Janus-faced, promising liberation but at the same time tending towards domination. This is not because the promise of Enlightenment is false *per se*, but rather because the logic of the ‘system’ has overstepped its bounds, and has colonized the lifeworld (Habermas 1981; 1987; Callinicos 1999; Anderson 2005). The logic of the system can be equated with Weber’s instrumental rationality – a cognitive-instrumental rationality designed to operate autonomously through achieving efficient means for reproducing society. While this rationality may be well-suited for the functioning of the system – the bureaucratic state and market economy – its power and influence must be kept in check by the imperatives of the lifeworld (Habermas 1987). A relatively autonomous system is efficient and effective, but its imperative – reproduction of society – is guided or steered by the demands of the lifeworld. However, in late modernity, as Habermas argues, the imperative of the system has extended its reach in to the communicatively rational spheres of the lifeworld (Habermas 1987; Callinicos 1999). Thus, the system colonizes the lifeworld. To put this in simple and somewhat crude terms, the independent imperatives of money and power, as well as the economic rationality of the market are in late modernity the criteria and logic used to guide life in the social world. To quote Habermas (1987: 355) ‘processes of monetarization and bureaucratization penetrate the core domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization.’ The extension of bureaucratic and economic systems in to further and further reaches of the social world threatens to alienate individuals from control over the lifeworld and in the end, threatens social integration. As explained by Fergus and Rowney (2005: 25) explain, ‘non-economic social frameworks, institutions, and cultural traditions have less and less significance in the forming of society’s structures.’ Indeed, ‘economic rationality has become so prevalent in our society that it is difficult to use language in everyday life without referring to the dictionary of economics (*ibid.*: 22).’

Central to Habermas’ argument on the colonization of the lifeworld is the idea of the transformation of the public sphere (civil society). The influence of the system on the public sphere can be seen in the influence of powerful lobbying forces invading the administration, the commodification of the means of communication, the formation of the ‘culture industry’ which transforms culture in to ideological consumption, and a decline of the role of the family in socialization (Anderson 2005). The result of this invasion of the lifeworld is, in a sense, similar to Weber’s ‘iron cage of rationality,’ where the lifeworld is guided solely by instrumental rationality; however, the explanation of the process by which this situation develops as well as the possibility of transcending this colonization are substantially different from Weber’s thesis (Habermas 1987). For Habermas, all is not lost (Anderson 2005).

4b. Habermas and Communicative Rationality

The situation of late modernity – where individual value spheres have been colonized by the instrumental rationality of the system – is, in Habermas’ (1981) eyes, *not* a sufficient reason to abandon the project of modernity. The possible resolution for the tensions in Habermas’ analysis of modernity lies in the way he conceptualizes the lifeworld. Unlike Weber’s ‘warring gods,’ of competing values and their underlying validity claims, in Habermas’ understanding of the lifeworld there is a means by which competing validity claims can speak to each other and come to a form of consensus – this lies in the communicative action at the root of each speech act (Habermas 1987; Callinicos 1999). Unlike the subject-centered reason that has dominated Enlightenment thought, Habermas does not locate reason in the individual knowing subject.

Furthermore, unlike Nietzsche and the postmodernists, Habermas does not abandon the subject altogether – he de-centers the subject, but reseats rationality (Habermas 1987).

To Habermas, each speech act presupposes ‘the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus (Habermas 1987: 317).’ Thus, communicative rationality is not located in the speaker him or herself, but rather is inter-subjectively constituted. At the base of each speech act is a redeemable validity-claim (a ‘telos’ or purpose/goal that is universal) that is oriented towards the listener – as such, speech is oriented towards achieving a consensus (Habermas 1987). This consensus represents the basis of communicative rationality. As Habermas argues, the problem with postmodern thought is that it has focused on the extreme, on limit experiences, and thus has overplayed the importance of narrative and metaphor in communication (*ibid.*). In everyday speech, metaphor (and its underlying dynamic of power) is minimal – communication is oriented towards achieving consensus in order to solve the everyday problems of social life (*ibid.*). In attempting to demonstrate the ‘other’ of rationality, postmodern thought has privileged the exceptional and let the commonplace fall by the wayside (*ibid.*). Lest this be misunderstood, the point of this critique is not to deny the importance of the exceptional, but not to let the exceptional be used as a reason for abandoning completely the vulgar and ordinary. In constructing a form of reason outside of the subject, Habermas has created a platform from which to perform the critique of subject-centered instrumental rationality – he has avoided the performative contradiction of postmodernity. This allows him to critique modernity, without undermining the basis of the critique. Furthermore, it offers an alternative to and a way out of Weber’s pessimistic ‘iron-cage.’

How can communicative rationality extricate humanity from the problems inherent to modernity as we know it, and in doing so realize the promise of the Enlightenment? More importantly for this thesis, how can communicative rationality serve as a basis for a theory of SD? I will address the former question now, and will deal more explicitly with the latter in **Chapter 5**. The main target for critics of modernity is subject-centered reason, which is seen as totalitarian (Habermas 1987) – communicative reason allows for a critique of subject-centered reason, without necessitating the abolishment of reason as a guiding force in society (refer to section **3c** for this discussion). Through communicative action, humans can legitimize the competing validity claims of the lifeworld, and thus achieve consensus on issues pertaining to completely autonomous systems of thought and rationality (Habermas 1987). In simpler terms, communicative rationality provides a means by which humans can rationally discuss and come to consensus on concerns of social integration and reproduction – culture and values. Modernity can then ground itself, without having to appeal to either an external source of validity (the church, etc. – this is a pre-modern stance) or subject-centered reason. Thus, Weber’s warring gods can achieve peace through communicative action, and (inter-subjective) value rationality can be reinstated through communicative rationality (to stretch the point).

Communicative reason allows humanity to counteract the colonizing forces of the economic system and the bureaucratic state, through the construction of barriers between ‘system’ and lifeworld (Callinicos 1999). Rather than the root of the problem lying with rationality as a whole, it is the dominance of a particular kind of rationality that lies at the heart of modernity’s problems. By constructing borders limiting the relationship between the market economy and lifeworld, as well as sensors monitoring these relations, a balance can be achieved between the competing imperatives of social and material reproduction (*ibid.*). One attempt at striking this balance can be seen in liberal democracy, where the essentially procedural and instrumental aspects of democratic rule by the masses are balanced by respect for the rights of individuals and minority groups as codified in law (for this argument, see Donnelly 1999). This is far from a perfect balance, but provides a more realistic example of Habermas’ intention. Essentially, through communicative consensus and action, humanity can decolonize the lifeworld and allow it to follow its own imperatives, rather than those of the system. Humans can create steering mechanisms by which to guide the economic and bureaucratic system in its effort to materially reproduce society (Habermas 1987). This occurs through the institutionalization of the means for communicative rationality and understanding that is inherent to human communication. This point will be developed more fully in **Chapter 5**, particularly in reference to SD.

4c. Habermas and Sustainable Development: An Introduction

But what does all of this mean for sustainable development? If one takes a somewhat broadminded approach to Habermas' work, it can be used to explain both the root and the rise of the problems of modernity (and thus address many of the critiques of the more radical sustainability theorists), while also offering a way out of the current impasse that radical critics of modernity (and sustainable development) face. There are of course limitations to Habermas' approach, and these will be addressed in turn, particularly when discussing the implementation of a Habermasian approach to SD in the following chapter. Before doing this, however, I will show the parallels between the critiques of the radical sustainability theorists, and link them with Habermas' discussion of the colonization of the lifeworld by the system.

The two main streams of the debate on sustainability, as discussed in Chapter 3, can be categorized roughly as cultural and ecological critiques. These can be seen as critiques from the stance of the lifeworld, and are united in their criticism of the state and market rationality that lie at the root of their critique. The purpose of this discussion is not to delve too deeply in to this analysis, as it has already been addressed in the previous chapter. The point is to show how the critiques of the anti-modern can be incorporated in to a Habermasian framework for sustainable *development*, so that this framework can then be used to move forward from critique in to practice.

4d. Habermas and the Radical Sustainability Theorists' Critique of Modernity

The cultural critique of modernity levied by more radical sustainability theorists can be quite easily addressed within a Habermasian critique of modernity. As with postmodernism, Habermas offers an explanation (by way of a critique) for why modernity has oppressed and effaced numerous cultures and minority (or majority, in the case of women) groups around the globe. For Habermas, however, the cultural critique is not a reflection of the absolutely irreconcilable tension between modernity and cultural diversity – rather, it is evidence of the dominance of market rationality over the various spheres of the lifeworld. The penetration of capital into new markets around the globe has been catalyzed by globalization and the fall of Communism (Yearly 1996). The rapid expansion of capital (the expansion of the system) has led to the fundamental transformation of numerous cultures and lifeways, simultaneously upon integration into markets (Yearly 1996). However, as the doctrine of efficiency and instrumental rationality has spread, threatening less dominant discourses with effacement, the structures of the lifeworld designed to keep market rationality in check have not kept apace (Habermas 1987). The expansion of the system rapidly outpaces the institutionalization of the lifeworld and the structures for communicative rationality. With the expansion of corporate capitalism beyond the borders of the nation-state, the power of even the state to 'correct' or 'guide' capitalism is called in to question (Yearly 1996; Elliott 2004) – this problem is compounded when the nation-state is challenged as a legitimate unit of governmental aggregation, as in the cultural critique. Alternative systems of knowledge (so-called 'traditional ecological knowledge') rarely can compete with modern scientific rationality and market capitalism (Ratner 2004). As Fergus and Rowney (2005: 22) note, 'A societal knowledge framework emerged based on scientific instrumental rationality, which views any thought outside that framework as alternative or on the fringe of what is needed or desired.' As the logic of the market has insidiously tightened its grip upon the lifeworld of the most advanced capitalist nations, it threatens to all but replace alternative lifeways around the globe. Thus, Habermas' critique of late modernity meshes well with that of the cultural critique first discussed in **Chapter 3**.

More important than simple parsimony is the basis for the critique, which was seen as inadequate in postmodernism for a philosophy of praxis. Fortunately, Habermas avoids the performative contradiction of postmodernism, and thus retains the rational criteria upon which to base his critique. In relocating rationality (as communicative reason) in inter-subjective communicative action, Habermas posits a means by which to validate the constitutive argument (right to self-determination, freedom) of the cultural critics. Essentially, he retains the fundamental promise of the Enlightenment, while allowing for a platform from which to critique and hopefully resolve the failures of modernity as an emancipatory discourse.

Habermas' critique of modernity echoes much of the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, and thus clearly addresses the objectification of nature and in turn its oppression (Habermas 1987). This is very similar to the argument proposed by the ecological critique of modernity in **Chapter 3**. Unlike the ecological critique, Habermas does not attempt to dissolve the subject and reconstitute it as one with nature. This 'biocentrist' claim has already been challenged in **Chapter 3** and will be picked up in the next paragraph. If one puts this thought aside for the moment, Habermas' critique of modernity very clearly outlines the means by which humans lose control over the material reproduction of society in modernity, and thus are doomed to unsustainability. It is the overzealousness of the system (which is responsible for material reproduction of society), where it surges past its boundaries and in to the lifeworld that gives rise to the diseases of mass consumption and ends-blind growth (Habermas 1987). In colonizing the lifeworld, the system has ceased to serve the interests of society (something the cultural critique might contend is already problematic) and has commenced a virtuous cycle of endless reproduction and growth that impedes social integration (Habermas 1987). In this sense, Habermas' critique of modernity clearly explains the problems raised by the ecological critique, while still maintaining the possibility for a resolution through the application of communicative reason.

The basis for the ecological critique of modernity can also find support from Habermas' critique, although only if one first accepts the critique of biocentrism raised in chapter 3. As discussed in the preceding chapter, the radical ecological claim to espouse a 'biocentrist' stance runs into certain theoretical inconsistencies that necessitate its transformation in to a form of 'soft anthropocentrism.' This typically occurs through a mystification of nature, which reconstitutes the self as 'humans+nature' – essentially, this is similar to Hegel's concept of the ethical totality, although oriented more towards nature. If one accepts this reconstitution of the subject, one can see the role of inter-subjectivity (and communicative reason) as providing the basis for the system of 'ethical monitoring' necessary for any system of minimal interference with nature. One of the biggest difficulties for turning the essentially ethical and spiritual arguments for 'oneness' with nature into a philosophy of praxis is finding a means by which to moderate and guide human use of nature for material reproduction (Luke 1997). Since humans cannot communicate inter-subjectively with nature, legitimacy cannot be secured within the ethical totality or oneness of human+nature, and thus legitimacy can only be secured through inter-subjective communication between humans. The argument for inter-subjectivity does not deny the existence of an external nature, but rather suggests that it can only be understood in a *shared* context through discourse (Eckersley 2004). This poses a real challenge to the biocentrist argument, but at least offers a means of de-centering the individual subject and achieving consensus on moral-ethical issues mediating the relationship between humans and nature.

The preceding discussion shows the power of Habermas' critique of modernity, as well as its possibility of offering a platform for a philosophy of praxis that can move beyond critique into action. That Habermas' critique meshes as well as postmodernism with the ecological and cultural critiques levied by the radical SD theorists is promising. Unlike postmodernism, Habermas offers a working philosophy of praxis, and a much more promising mechanism for resolving the legitimacy crisis inherent in the fractured discourse of sustainable development. The implications of Habermas' work for sustainable development will be drawn out more clearly in the subsequent chapter.

4e. Habermas and the Discourse of Sustainable Development

Beyond explaining the root of many of the critiques of modernity leveled by the more radical voices within the sustainability discourse, Habermas' analysis of late modernity can also explain the manner in which the SD discourse has unfolded. As mentioned before, even in the early years (at the Rio Summit for example) the more difficult political issues were typically passed over lightly, in order to discuss means for implementation, among other technocratic concerns (see **Chapter 1**). As Fergus and Rowney (2005: 22) explain, 'the focus of the discourse moved quickly to the strengths of that (*scientific – instrumentally rational*) framework, such as problem solving or understanding specific processes.' Achieving popular

legitimacy is difficult and costly, especially when concerns as broad and complex as sustainable development are being discussed (see the discussion in Baber 2004). Thus, given the concern about unsustainable development, it makes sense to accept consensus achieved at the level of the UN, or the individual state as the basis for action. This streamlines the process, and allows for immediate intervention in favor of SD, using the efficient and powerful tools of instrument, technical rationality (Ratner 2004). However, there is a significant problem in this approach – as Habermas has argued, in late modernity the public sphere and the lifeworld have been colonized by the media of the system, and thus the discourse is unable to discuss the meaning of the objectives that these means are to address (Ratner 2004; Fergus and Rowney 2005). This impinges upon public debate and in turn the ability to deliberate communicatively rational ends, and thus technical consensus trump serious substantive concerns (Ratner 2004). Thus deference to the bureaucratic state and to the instrumental logic of the marketplace ensues (*ibid.*; Luke 2005). This can be seen clearly in the preceding argument.

The dominance of systems media in the SD discourse is patently clear in the stance of the uncritically modern, which is characteristic of much of mainstream sustainable development. Much of the work being conducted in the field of SD is of a technocratic nature – the focus of sustainability science is to develop tools such as ‘integrated place-based models,’ indicator systems, scenarios, and the like to understand and manage the technical limits of the planet (Luke 1997; Sachs 1999; Ratner 2004). This is not problematic in itself; it is certainly necessary to increase our understanding of these complicated processes to better understand the impacts of human society on nature (Goodland and Daly 1996). However, ‘what advocates of the more universalizing types of aggregate measures often neglect to acknowledge is that the work that precedes arrival at technical consensus on a decision-making framework is far from technical (Ratner 2004: 59).’ As a result, integration of the competing ‘value spheres’ underlying indicators becomes challenging - while many of these integrated models and indicator frameworks contain mechanisms for ensuring public participation or ‘stakeholder engagement,’ this is rarely to the extent demanded by the competing value spheres underpinning the exercise (Ratner 2004). At best, this rationality presupposes a commonly accepted end (that of a society living within scientifically-determined biophysical boundaries) in order to develop the technical means to achieve this end (*ibid.*). As Luke (2005) argues, ‘Few of its (SD) effects took the form of a more general theory, because sustainability practices mostly steered instead towards analysis, stocktaking and classification in more quantitative forms of planetary accountancy.’ Indeed, this can be in the explicit support for the separation of the three pillars of SD as advocated by Goodland and Daly (1996: 1002) – ‘each follows different laws and methods.’ Then how can they be expected to communicate with each other and coordinate action? To counter this, SD efforts should focus on institutionalizing the space for the exercise of deliberation for achieving communicative reason – this will be developed further in **Chapter 5**. The normative nature of sustainable development necessitates this – without it, the project is doomed to either hegemonic oppression or abject failure. As John Barry (1996: 116 in Eckersley 2004) comments, sustainability ‘needs to be understood as a discursively created rather than an authoritatively given product.’

The question still remains: why worry about complicated issues of political legitimacy at the level of the individual and the society, when *so much* is at stake? There are several simple answers, focusing on the instrumental and constitutive importance of deliberation and communicative consensus: first, without broad political legitimacy, myriad SD efforts are unlikely to break the hold of the systems media of money and power on the lifeworld and achieve the massive change that lies at the heart of the more radical critiques of SD; second, the ability to deliberate about and the freedom to decide the trajectory of one’s own life (and in some form to do so for future generations and non-human nature) lie at the heart of the SD critique, and so these procedural freedoms are thus constitutive of SD and cannot be simply brushed aside. Politics has often been invoked to explain the failure of certain initiatives and policies (e.g. the good governance movement within development, the failure of structural adjustment, etc.), but rarely have the political dimensions of SD been seen as constitutive and pre-eminent elements for the entire movement. Without addressing the political (in the loosest sense) dimensions of SD, action will necessarily be uncoordinated and conflictual, because competing visions of SD will be unresolved and thus power and money will continue to dominate decision-making.

CHAPTER 5

THE IMPLICATIONS OF A HABERMASIAN APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: COMMUNICATIVE SUSTAINABILITY

The sustainability challenge is not insurmountable. It is in fact possible to reconcile the demands of the environment and of human development in some form. However, for this to occur, the internal logic, the demands of these disparate systems of thought must somehow be made to communicate with each other (Fergus and Rowney 2005). To borrow a phrase from Ratner (2004), we need to conceptualize SD as ‘a dialogue of values,’ where competing value systems are able to commence a dialogue, with sustainability the outcome. Sustainable development will be a failure if biodiversity is somehow conserved at the loss of cultural diversity, or if individuals become wealthy in material goods and human freedoms at the expense of massive parts of the natural world. It is the means by which the competing validity claims of environment and development can be assessed, validated, and acted upon that will comprise this chapter.

The bulk of this thesis is devoted to understanding the relationship between the discourse of modernity (and postmodernism) and that of sustainable development. If this discussion has made anything clear, it is that an uncritical attitude towards modernity is untenable for theorizing sustainable development, but that postmodernism is not a valid alternative. A difficult situation arises: how can one reclaim the liberational promise of modernity, while correcting for its dominating and oppressive tendencies, without yielding to the aporias of postmodernism? The work of Jurgen Habermas has been proposed as an answer to this question – I will now discuss the opportunities and the challenges presented by a Habermasian approach to sustainable development.

5a. Communicative Sustainability

The work of Habermas has both conceptual and material implications for the discourse and practice of sustainable development. I will address both dimensions in turn, focusing on how the conceptual gives rise to the material. Following this discussion, I will address a few weaknesses arising from a Habermasian approach to SD. Finally, this chapter will close with a series of concluding remarks outlining the significance of the work on the whole, as well as suggesting areas for future research and analysis along the lines suggested by this thesis.

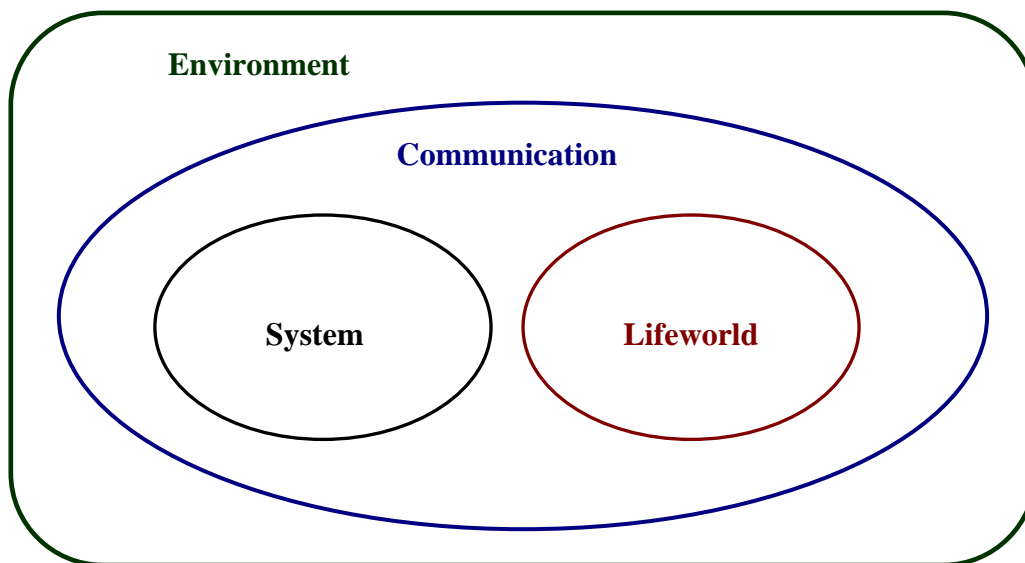


Figure 2: Conceptual Model of Habermasian Sustainable Development

As discussed in **Chapter 1**, the discourse of SD has become incredibly fractured, impeding the material change necessary for a transition to sustainability. One of the suggestions advanced to explain the root cause of this fragmentation was the inability for competing spheres or pillars of SD to communicate with each other in a reasonable manner – the subsequent chapters elaborated upon this thesis, suggesting that this impediment arose as a consequence of conflicting attitudes towards modernity. A Habermasian approach provides the theoretical and practical means for addressing this communicative breakdown, in such a way as to answer the critiques of the radical sustainability theorists (the anti-modern school) without abandoning the project of modernity (and in turn, the development component of SD). This solution involves erecting a new pillar of sustainability, which unites the three pillars of environmental, social, and economic sustainability – the pillar or sphere of communicative sustainability.

Communicative sustainability can be understood as the mechanisms and means by which validity claims (truth-claims) are legitimated. Through this mechanism, competing demands of the ‘lifeworld’ (social sustainability) and the ‘system’ (economic sustainability) can be mediated in a manner that ensures the achievement of environmental sustainability while keeping the imperatives of the market in check (see **Figure 2**) (refer to section **4a** for the discussion of lifeworld vs. system). This form of sustainability recognizes that SD is ‘a social construct in which a wide variety of approaches contend for legitimacy (Ratner 2004: 57).’ The ability of humans to steer the lifeworld and the system is rooted in this communicative sphere of sustainability. As most sustainability theorists argue, the lifeworld and the system are embedded within and dependent on the environment – communicative sustainability allows humans to recognize this biophysical reality, while also recognizing that the interactions between humans and the environment are organized, understood, and legitimized through the action of communication (Bartlett and Baber 1999). As Habermas (1969: 56) argues, ‘conflicts must be decided, interests realized, interpretations found – through both action and transaction structured by ordinary language.’ Communicative sustainability acknowledges and accommodates the constructed and contested nature of reality as constituted inter-subjectively, without falling in to the trap of relativism. Subject-centered reason saw individuals as constituting the environment through their one-on-one engagement with their surroundings, which necessitated the objectification (and thus oppression) of nature – communicative reason de-centers the subject, allowing for the rational deliberation about the means through which humans understand and interact with nature and each other, as well as the values (ends) that guide this interaction (Habermas 1987). This allows for a re-enchantment of the lifeworld and of nature (Baber 2004), without leading to the neo-Romantic fascism of some strands of radical environmentalism or the nihilism of postmodernism.

5b. Implications for the Goals and Practice of Sustainable Development

This is all well and good – however, the important question is not how can we conceptualize Habermas in terms of SD, but rather how can we *operationalize* Habermas to achieve SD? This is not to repeat the mistake of the Rio Summit – rather than create a laundry-list of competing demands rooted in fundamentally incompatible theoretical paradigms, I will now discuss how a sustainable development process would manifest itself, rooted in the theory of Habermas. The main thrust of a Habermasian SD would be to institutionalize the means for communicative action. This in turn calls for refocusing attention on the role of the public sphere in directing and mediating between the state and economy, as well as the construction of structures for deliberative or discursive democracy. In the end, this involves reinserting development in to the concept of sustainable development, but with a dramatic re-conceptualization of the term.

Central to Habermas’ critique of modernity is the idea of the colonization of the lifeworld by the imperatives of the system (or the market and bureaucracy). This has limited the scope for rationality, in that it can remain only purposive or instrumental – the only arguments that can lay claim to validity or truth are those oriented towards means, in particular the means by which to objectify and manipulate nature and humanity. As Fergus and Rowney (2005: 18) argue, ‘the neo-classical economic model is an instrumental device that should not dictate the content and context of society’s actions, language, relationships, and philosophy.’ To

overcome this, humans must find a way to institutionalize and formalize structures for communicative action, because communicative action oriented towards inter-subjective consensus is the only means by which humanity can deliberate and evaluate validity claims appealing to non-instrumental rationality. As Habermas (1981: 13) states, ‘The lifeworld has to become able to develop institutions out of itself which sets limits to the internal dynamics and to the imperatives of an almost autonomous economic system and its administrative components.’ What this implies in a practical sense is that standardized procedures and venues for deliberation and reasonable debate must be constructed at the local and the global level. Unless space and means for reasoned and impartial deliberation on issues concerning the lifeworld (social reproduction) are formalized, the logic of the marketplace will dominate social (and environmental) concerns. More than simply designing and implementing means for deliberation and communicative action, Habermas’ work suggests the need for a radicalization of the public sphere (civil society) – for Habermas, the public sphere is the seat of communicative rationality (and sustainability), and thus must reassert its position at the top of the social trinity of state, market, and civil society (Anderson 2005). It is for this reason that the model of communicative sustainability developed in section 5a places state, market, and society within a sphere of communicative reason. I will now look at the mechanisms by which the public sphere is radicalized and the implications of this for Habermasian SD. Following this, I will address more concretely the means for institutionalizing structures for communicative action.

5c. Sustainable Development and the Public Sphere

If a system of sustainable development is to follow from the work of Habermas, as I argue it should, much attention should be redirected to the public sphere as a source for legitimacy and for action. The public sphere can be understood as civil society, but in a broader sense than the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that so often are considered synonymous with civil society in the environmental politics literature (e.g. Elliott 2004). New social movements and NGOs are important features of civil society and feature prominently in the late period work of Habermas (Anderson 2005), but they will not be addressed specifically in this thesis.

For Habermas, the public sphere is the sphere in which communicative sustainability is constituted and from which it is institutionalized. While the imperatives of the system and of the environment are uncompromising – society must be materially reproduced and a healthy (or at least functioning) environment is essential for the functioning of the system – the public sphere is the locus of control for legitimizing and grounding social action and for steering the system media. This runs counter to today’s dominant political discourse of the nation-state as the root of power and legitimacy (Eckersley 2004), and also challenges the dominance of the market and its medium (money) over the content and direction of social and political decision-making. The public sphere becomes the center of power for a philosophy of praxis, in a Marxian sense – through deliberation humans can engage each other through communicative action oriented towards understanding and consensus – this provides the legitimacy and the support for the development of policy guided by moral-ethical considerations. From a Habermasian perspective, for sustainable development to occur the public sphere (lifeworld) must be radicalized so as to decolonize itself (awake the ‘sleeping gallery’) from the dominance of the system media (money, power), which threaten its independence and vitality. This process can be catalyzed by new social movements and other civil society organizations, but must be sustained through broad participation in public dialogue and deliberation (Eckersley 2004). If this decolonization is successful, communicative rationality can flourish, which will allow for a legitimate and radical platform of sustainable development. As this may suggest, a radicalized public sphere is not only a feature of a sustainable society, but also a precursor – this has important implications for SD in the ‘developing’ world.

A point Habermas neglects to make, but I see as crucial for the radicalization of the public sphere is the need to provide (or generate) a basic set of capabilities among the populace. As Sen (1999) argue, a vibrant public sphere requires a set of essential capabilities, which can be understood as ‘resources’ and ‘freedoms.’ Furthermore, these capabilities are needed for deliberative governance at every level of society to function

(*ibid.*). Communicative reason demands something of its participants that liberal democracy does not – the ability to present and elucidate arguments in a public forum. This necessitates a basic level of education and literacy, a sufficient level of food security to enable engagement in non-productive activities, the right to assembly, and a free and critical mass media that is capable of informing public deliberation in a non-coercive manner (Sen 1999). Active participation in any communicative venue requires, as Sen (1999) argues, a significant degree of political freedom – this is not only important to human well-being, but also serves instrumentally to ensure basic needs are met, as well as constructively in allowing humans to deliberate and frame issues of social concern (the communicative role). Information on issues of public concern must be freely available, through an active and diverse media as well as through government and civil society-led information campaigns (Baber 2004; Eckersley 2004). A free and independent press must thrive, so as to serve as a veritable *polis*. At all scales of bureaucratic organization, deliberative structures must be in place to ensure that a politics of interest does not inhibit free communication and deliberation (Eckersley 2004).

The basic demands for communicative sustainability are quite minimal, but they have radical implications for the SD project. Essentially they shift development from a simple economic and material growth-oriented paradigm to one of capability enhancement. This is in line with the work of Amartya Sen (see ‘Development as Freedom’ (1999) for an overview of the capability approach). This has more radical implications for SD than may appear at first glance. Political freedoms are often ignored as a constitutive component to SD, in favor of more nebulous concepts such as ‘good governance.’ Addressing the demands of political freedom directly would radically transform the nature of the development project from one of economic growth and state-led intervention oriented towards material objectives to an agenda of truly human development (with an ecological component). Development would be to a large extent dematerialized, which fits in with the demands of the radical ecological critique, and reframed as the growth of capabilities. Dematerialization is not necessarily a requirement of Sen, but would be required for truly *sustainable* development. A shift to a capabilities approach must occur for the effective institutionalization of mechanisms for ensuring communicative action at the local and global levels.

Once these basic capabilities have been secured, individuals will be able to regain control over the development process (and in turn, free the lifeworld from the clutches of the economic and bureaucratic system), so as to deliberate in a procedurally just manner over the central issues of SD, such as ecological limits, equity, and inter-generational justice. To my mind, this is the basis for a Habermasian conceptualization of SD, where communicative sustainability serves to organize and mediate between system, lifeworld, and nature. Without a radicalized, capable public sphere as its foundation, efforts to coordinate and implement SD will struggle to break free from the instrumental rationality dominating discourse, and will never be able to have the ‘reflective, inclusive, integrated discourse on the formation of human society (Fergus and Rowney 2005: 25)’ that SD demands. Communicative rationality involves the search for an inter-subjective ‘truth,’ around which action can be coordinated – a shared understanding of the problem(s) (Baber 2004) as well as consensus surrounding the moral-ethical values guiding action are essential for communicatively rational SD (Ratner 2004). An organized and radicalized public sphere is capable of legitimizing the SD project and organizing society around its goals. As a legitimate, grounded, and consistent project, SD will have the power and momentum to create a sustainable human society populated by liberated individuals, united in a shared lifeworld and in close relationship with the nature that sustains and reproduces that self-same society.

5d. Governance Structures in Sustainable Development

A radical and capable public sphere lies at the heart of a Habermasian form of sustainable development. However, at a more concrete level, the public sphere must find a means by which to institutionalize structures for communicative action at all levels of governance and society. The means for accomplishing this task is most clearly developed in the concept of deliberative or discursive democracy. Deliberative democracy can be best understood as combining elements of representative democracy (voting-based

systems) with a system of decision making guided by deliberated consensus (Eckersley 2004). As opposed to traditional democratic structures, the role of public debate is given substantially more prominence, in an attempt to ‘produce policy decisions that are more just and more rational than actually existing representative mechanisms (Baber 2004: 332).’ There are many conceptions of deliberative democracy, and thus different theorists will favor different balances of representation and consensus (see Baber 2004 for a discussion of differences between Habermas, Rawls, and Bohman). The importance of deliberative democracy from a Habermasian perspective is that it formalizes the means for achieving communicative consensus, and thus of ensuring communicatively *rational* decision-making (Bartlett and Baber 1999; Eckersley 2004). In this sense, it allows space for citizens to deliberate and decide on issues of social concern, rather than leaving these decisions to an ends-blind market rationality.

Deliberative democracy has several attributes that recommend it for theorists working in SD. For one, deliberative democracy demands pluralism – under Habermas’ conditions for an ideal speech community, *all* potentially-affected parties must be allowed access and inclusion in a deliberative forum free from coercion and oriented towards consensus (Eckersley 2004). This requires the hearing of minority viewpoints in a *procedurally just* and communicatively rational manner (Baber 2004; Ratner 2004). This process acts as a check for the forces of coercion and hegemony, while ensuring the use of a form of rationality other than purposive-instrumental rationality. Secondly, deliberative democracy is a social learning process – through processes of deliberation, opinions can be formed, changed, and shared. This is the mechanism that builds consensus, rather than the formation of simple interest coalitions and compromises *à la* liberal democracy (Baber 2004). This feature distinguishes a truly deliberative model of governance from a simple conference of stakeholders. For Habermas, this social learning process is central to his theory of communicative action – communication must be impartial so as to ensure that consensus is formed around the ‘best’ or truly rational viewpoint (Baber 2004). Social learning ensures that the interests of minority groups will be given the due that their argument merits, by creating the ‘counterflows of knowledge that would empower traditionally subordinated groups (Baber 2004: 339).’ From the standpoint of SD, social learning processes can be the means by which humans are able to develop an ecological consciousness (*ibid.*) – as many of the cultural critics argue (see section 3b), indigenous people can teach the industrialized world much about how to live sustainably; conversely, the industrialized world can provide support for maintaining and conserving the nature upon which indigenous communities thrive (Elliot 2004). Social learning processes conducted in an inclusive and consensus-oriented environment provide a forum for these views to surface (Baber 2004). Most importantly, consensus-building through procedurally just deliberation ensures that outcomes of the process will be widely construed as legitimate, and thus should serve as the basis for action.

Concepts of deliberative democracy can be institutionalized in number of ways and at a number of scales. At the small-scale, where it is best conceptualized, deliberative democracy has parallels with direct democracy, although the two are not synonymous. Deliberative democracy at a local level can involve public forums in which relevant contemporary topics are discussed, with the help of experts as needed. In the functioning of governments at any scale, deliberative democratic principles can be instituted to ensure deliberation oriented towards consensus as the source for action, rather than simple majority or interest-domination. This lends legitimacy to the proceedings as well as a degree of traceability and accountability, in that each decision can be attributed to particular sets of deliberation (Bartlett and Baber 1999). In any intervention by an organization or a collective (corporation, state, bureau, or civil society group), deliberative proceduralism will ensure that stakeholder involvement is not simply a superficial exercise – decisions affecting a particular group must be deliberated in such a manner as to achieve consensus with the affected population. The basis for action, not simply the means and the ends will be subject to deliberation – this differs radically from many ideas of stakeholder engagement and participatory development. Rather than simply focus on fair and just proceduralism, deliberative democracy seeks to guarantee the development of legitimate, substantive outcomes. Clearly, deliberative democracy demands a lot of its proponents, but at the same time has much promise for achieving a form of sustainable development that can be construed as legitimate and liberational – this is the goal of the communicative pillar of sustainability.

5e. Weaknesses of a Habermasian Approach to Sustainable Development

The preceding discussion of the implications of Habermas' work for the SD project may be accused of being naïve and somewhat utopian – this is a common critique (see the discussion of Bohman in Baber 2004), although to some extent misses the point. While a Habermasian approach to SD may appear as an 'ideal-type,' impossible to implement in a real world dominated by unequal relations of power, it has the benefit of providing a theoretically consistent model upon which to base the project of sustainable development. Unlike uncritical modernity, which offers business-as-usual with a gloss of green, a Habermasian approach has the potential to radically challenge the relations of domination and hegemony rife within the discourse of modernity, and its material realization as modernization. And unlike anti-modernity, which when taken to its critical limit becomes postmodernism or pre-modernism, a Habermasian critically-modern approach to SD avoids the aporias of postmodernism, without sacrificing reason to mysticism and religiosity. A Habermasian framework for SD maintains theoretical consistency from the level of critique to the level of implementation. However, this is not to suggest that a Habermasian approach to SD does not present several problems, at both the theoretical and operational levels.

The main theoretical critiques to a Habermasian conceptualization of SD relate to issues of 'ideal communication,' representation, and scale (Eckersley 2004). To some extent they are all inter-related. I will first address the problem of 'ideal communication.' For communication to be considered communicatively rational in a strict Habermasian sense, a number of criteria must be met: first, each speech act must be free from coercion and oriented towards consensus; second, the speakers must have a shared lifeworld context, to allow for clear and comprehensible communication; third, in any 'deliberative' setting all affected groups must be at least represented, if not present, for the outcome to be considered consensually rational (Habermas 1987; Eckersley 2004). This is a huge and frankly impossible list of demands to satisfy in all but the most local contexts. I will address each criterion in turn.

The idea of speech acts implicitly oriented towards consensus is simultaneously reasonable and idealistic. Habermas is correct in challenging Derrida's notion of communication as the telling of stories (literature) – it is likely that most communication acts are oriented towards understanding, which in turns implies a degree of conceptual consensus. However, the degree to which one privileges the idea of achieving consensus can have radical implications for deliberative democracy (Eckersley 2004). Perfect consensus is likely to remain illusive (Baber 2004), although if one rejects the idea outright then 'communicative rationality' is quickly replaced by the subject-centered reason of the Enlightenment, and the problems this concept has wrought. In some ways, the idea of an 'ideal speech act' is simply that – an ideal – which provides a valuable marker by which to understand and fight the dominance of power in politics and deliberation (Eckersley 2004). Whether it could ever be achieved on the broad scale remains to be seen. As noted by Perry Anderson (in Callinicos 1999: 287), where, we might say, structuralism and post-structuralism developed a kind of diabolism of language, Habermas has unruffledly produced an angelism.' Indeed, Habermas' approach privileges knowledge and 'rational argumentation' in suggesting that impartiality can be achieved and communication can be free from obvert structures of power – this is valuable for positivist science, but could privilege a knowledge elite (Baber 2004). However, as discussed in Baber (2004: 334, 340), 'experts cannot assume their special knowledge will have practical effects unless they can successfully take on the lay perspective' – a (debatable) example of the successful combination of expert knowledge and lay concerns is 'the environmental justice movement... a movement whose strength arises from a multiplicity of local struggles that have merged in to a political network with an associated discourse... *that is both scientifically valid and culturally significant* (emphasis added).'

The need for a shared lifeworld context is both a reaction to and a challenge to value pluralism. In making this requirement, Habermas acknowledges the immense diversity in lifeworld contexts (cultural- or value systems) and the potential impact of this diversity on clear and uncoerced communication (Habermas 1987). Essentially, this acknowledges the possibility that in some cases, consensus will be impossible to achieve even with functional social learning processes, because of the incommensurability of radically different

lifeworld contexts (Eckersley 2004). This does not eliminate the importance of deliberative processes, because social learning is an important end in itself (Baber 2004). However, it does pose problems for the expansion of Habermas' theory to the global realm, which is necessary for any conceptualization of SD. One possibility for a truly universal lifeworld context upon which to base global deliberative processes arises from the SD project – the idea that a 'common concern for survival can be reinforced by the knowledge that the world's ecosystems are interconnected to such a degree that environmental degradation in one area will have an impact on the rest of humanity (Baber 2004: 342).' This could provide the grounds for the formation of a truly universal 'ecological consciousness,' around which to build a global community (*ibid.*; Ratner 2004). This is very similar to Habermas' own (hopefully dated) idea that the threat of nuclear annihilation could serve as a means for relativizing divergent interests, so as to achieve harmonious agreement (Anderson 2005).

The final limitation posed by the demands of the 'ideal speech situation' relates to the composition of a communication community, and is essentially the problem of representation. For a truly legitimate deliberative process, all those affected by a decision outcome should be involved in the discursive process (Eckersley 2004). In everyday situations, this is not problematic. However, for an issue like global climate change, this poses huge problems for governance structures, and thus necessitates a form of representation (Eckersley 2004). As well, SD demands a degree of concern for future human generations and the environment. Thus, a form for representing these stakeholders, who do not possess the ability to communicate in a traditional sense (they are not subjects, as demanded by inter-subjectivity), must be incorporated in to any Habermasian form of SD (Eckersley 2004). This is not to say that an explicit 'future generations' representative is necessary, but rather that these interests are brought to the table of deliberation in some form, which may prove challenging until sufficient concern for future generations becomes imbued in the popular discourse of civil society (see Kavka and Warren (1999) for a discussion of this issue). However, representation cannot dominate governance and communication structures if one is to hold to Habermas' radical critique, because that would lead to a return to representative democracy, in the liberal tradition (Baber 2004). While representative democracy can be seen as a mechanism for steering the bureaucratic state (see Anderson's (2005) critique of Habermas), it does not have consensus as a guiding factor, but rather individual self-interest, and thus cannot claim to be communicatively rational. If and when representation is necessary, voting rights and campaign financing legislation must ensure that the merit trumps privilege in the election of representatives (Baber 2004). When representation in deliberation is necessary, deliberation should continue to be viewed as a social learning process oriented towards consensus.

The problems of representation and a 'shared lifeworld context' hint at a tendency in Habermas' work to tread the line between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism (Eckersley 2004). This tendency makes implementation of a Habermasian form of governance for SD challenging, as it must balance competing theories of organization underpinned by different conceptions of justice – both cosmopolitanism and communitarianism have theoretical limitations from a SD perspective, as well as positives (Eckersley 2004). However, it is also interesting and promising in that both of these systems of governance have been implicated by more radical sustainability theorists. Cosmopolitanism lies at the base of modern concepts of humanity and universal human rights, and underpins much of international law (*ibid.*). Communitarianism is a more socially-oriented form of bioregionalism and localism, in that it focuses on de-centering the individual in favor of the social whole, usually defined on a more local scale (social whole being defined by cultural-linguistic, or for bioregionalists, geographic considerations) (*ibid.*) – this is the system often invoked by anti-modern theorists. Ironically, the modern system of sovereign, anarchic nation-states could be seen as an institutional parallel to a global system of communitarian localism, in that legitimacy is rooted in a shared conception of belonging to an imagined community or 'nation'! The key challenge Habermas' approach faces is that inter-subjectively situated rationality, which assumes universality, also needs some form of shared lifeworld context for proper functioning (*ibid.*). The universality of the system sits well within cosmopolitan thought, whereas the idea of a shared lifeworld context appears more communitarian in its appeal to a sense of shared belongingness. Essentially the challenge is balancing the claims of a system based upon self-determination and difference against those of a system concerned with justice and fairness, both of which Habermas' theory attempts to accommodate, despite their seeming incommensurability (*ibid.*).

This poses challenges when attempting to incorporate the claims of those falling outside of traditional governance or communicative structures – are their claims legitimized based upon their universal right as affected global citizens (affectedness – cosmopolitan), or are their claims legitimized based upon their membership in a community sharing a common lifeworld context (belongingness – communitarianism) (*ibid.*)? Habermas’ theory treads the line between these two poles, albeit cautiously and hesitantly and without clear guidance for implementation.

In the end, Habermas’ work actually may lead to a more theoretically sound and well-developed form of ‘cosmopolitan localism’ as a model for a sustainable global system. While the geography of Habermasian SD is far from clear, one could imagine a rootedness-in-place arising from the formation of an active and radical public sphere. This radicalized form of associational life could catalyze the regeneration of communities at the local scale, while providing the sense of global awareness central to the oft-neglected (in the anti-modern critique) idea of cosmopolitanism. In a sense, global citizenship would be based upon activity –communicative action oriented towards consensus on issues affecting humanity – rather than a simple possession related to birth and formal structures of governance. However, it is not the intention of this thesis to elaborate upon this possibility – the goal is to elucidate the structure and the key ideas underpinning a Habermasian conceptualization of SD, so as to provide space for future work.

5f. Concluding Remarks

The intention of this thesis is to make several simple but important points about the discourse and practice of sustainable development. First, sustainable *development* is a fundamentally modern discourse, rooted in ideas stretching back to the Enlightenment. The most critical schools within the field must acknowledge this intellectual heritage even if they fundamentally disagree with the outcomes this thinking has wrought upon nature and humanity. This is not to downplay the depth of their critique – as this thesis makes clear, modernity and modernization have led to numerous tragic outcomes, not the least of which is the fundamental unsustainability of an uncritically modern perspective on the world. Second, postmodernism, while providing inspiration for a number of devastating critiques of modernity, is not a theoretically consistent and viable alternative system of thought with which to frame SD. A third point follows – a truly sustainable development must remain critical of modernity, and seek ways to modify its theoretical underpinnings and its outcomes such that the liberational promise of development and the Enlightenment can be realized, without compromising nature or humanity in the process. As this thesis has argued, one alternative that has the potential to achieve this goal is to base the theory and practice of SD around the ideas of Jurgen Habermas.

The implications of this alternative, critical approach to modernity are vast, and are only touched upon in the last chapter of this thesis. A Habermasian approach to sustainable development requires the creation of a new conceptual sphere of SD, that of communicative sustainability. This sphere, which consists primarily of the institutionalization of means the achievement of communicative consensus, will provide the means by which to direct and legitimate the SD project. Central to the functioning of this sphere or pillar of sustainability is a reconstitution of the development concept as the development of capabilities (Sen 1999). In refocusing SD on the means by which to deliberate and achieve consensus on issues of moral-ethical and ecological concern, SD will be able to gain a legitimacy and force to underpin local and global efforts.

This last point is central to this thesis – sustainable development must have legitimacy and the support of local and global people if it is to be achieved in a manner that lives up to the liberational promise of development. Otherwise, sustainability may result, but as a product of green imperialism, eco-fascism, or even a system of ‘lifeboat ethics’ with no regard for human dignity. The third possibility, in many ways the most likely, is that sustainability will be achieved only as a reaction to the collapse of the natural ecosystem – this is an option that no human society could wish for or reasonably support. In this sense, the work of Habermas holds great promise for the SD movement – it provides the basis for a theoretically consistent,

optimistic view of the future, *while also providing the mechanism to achieve this vision*: communicative reason.

Many of the more critical takes on sustainable development have provided excellent and comprehensive visions of a sustainable future. Science has developed numerous technologies for SD, as well as insight into biophysical limits and ecosystem functioning. However, this knowledge and these tools are only useful when applied in a consistent and legitimate manner, if they are to achieve SD on a wide scale and in a just manner. Fundamentally, SD needs a theory of praxis to underpin it; this thesis provides a possibility for this theory – the work of Habermas – and begins the process of linking theory to practice. Many may complain that a Habermasian approach to SD demands too much of civil society and the public sphere. However, achieving SD will involve much work and effort in all sectors of society – having the active engagement and support of the public will make all efforts to achieve SD easier and more effective. Future research and experience will help answer some of the critiques raised in this chapter, as well as highlight more concrete means by which to implement a Habermasian form of SD. Much remains to be done; this thesis provides a starting point.

The ultimate goal of this thesis is to point to a means for overcoming the huge forces that hinder the transition to a sustainable future. Unlike the later work of Habermas, this work is not intended to point towards a slightly altered form of the liberal democratic state, and to a certain extent an improved but not drastically transformed ‘business as usual.’ This thesis is a plea for the radicalization of the public sphere, so as to overcome the colonization of the lifeworld by unrestrained market capitalism and a complacent bureaucracy that takes ‘the existing contours of public opinion as givens (Baber 2004: 343).’ The ‘system’ of the bureaucratic state and the market economy, and their imperatives of instrumental rationality and growth-as-end must be returned to its rightful place – the material reproduction of a socially-integrated and liberated society, not blind overproduction as a substitute for a truly independent and functional lifeworld of shared inter-subjective meaning and experience. As Habermas (1969: 60-61) argues ‘The direction of technical progress is still largely determined by social interests that arise autochthonously out of the compulsion of social life without being reflected upon and confronted with the declared political self-understanding of social groups... The fact that this is a matter for reflection means that it does not belong to the professional competence of specialists. The substance of domination is not dissolved by the power of technical control.’ As the argument for SD makes clear, society must be reproduced sustainably, and thus undermining the capital upon which this reproduction occurs is an irrational outcome of an overly rational system. It is the imperative of liberated individuals to collectively and democratically decide the means by which to stop this travesty from occurring – this is the core of communicative sustainability.

Sustainable development must be just, fair, and humane, but it also *must* because, as Yearly (1996: 133) notes, ‘in the long run we cannot live any other way.’ As Goodland and Daly (1996: 1007) note, *environmental* sustainability is non-negotiable – ‘it will inevitably occur.’ However, we have the power to ensure that this transition is smooth, just, and does not result in rampant destruction of nature. We cannot sacrifice human freedom or biodiversity at the expense of directionless and destructive growth and rationalization. We need to see the radical nature of Habermas’ critique, and act upon it – as human beings capable of coming to inter-subjective understanding and consensus, we must realize our collective power and use it to steer human society and nature away from the brink – this is the universal imperative of sustainable development.

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