

Period: Fall 2024

Topic: **Origins and development of the concept of 'sustainability': a critical history of ideas**

Summary

Sustainability may be translated by varying notions in different languages. In most of the neo-Latin languages (Italian, Spanish, Portuguese) and in English, it is derived from Latin verb *sustinere* ("to hold up"), based on two terms *sub* ("from below") + *tenere* ("to hold"). The first writings about 'sustainability' (literal equivalent in German, *nachhaltende Nutzung*) is attributed to Has Carl von Carlowitz, a German mining administrator who wrote a book on forest management in 1713, when deforestation was rampant due to massive use of wood to fuel the mining and metal processing furnaces. In our times, the notion of 'sustainability' has been institutionalized globally (i.e. United Nations 17 SDG) and has emerged as a guiding concept for human organizations across the entire planet. Environmentally and socially sustainable development is commonly hailed as the major challenge for human civilization in the 21st century. The concept of 'sustainability' has become so widespread and expanded to the point that it now encompasses a wide variety of interpretations (and contradictions).

The planetary-scale ecological risks faced by contemporary humans do not seem to have been experienced before. In the past, the risks were limited to occasional, local-level natural hazard-related disasters (e.g. earthquakes, drought, flood, landslides etc.), large-scale accidents (e.g. fire etc.), until 100 years ago. Human consumption and ecological impact were limited. For a large part of the human population resources-use and consumption were confined within the local and regional context of a prevalently subsistence economy based upon the resources of prevalently primary sector that were available in close ranges. Human activities generated much less waste which was re-directed and dissipated within a narrow material-flow circuit; the waste was mostly biotic (bio-degradable), governed by environmental feedback loops, i.e., decomposition and re-cycling in Nature.

That is no longer the case. The global human population is around eight billion (and growing), more than half of global humanity is crammed in densely populated urban areas. Total humanity's merely basic need-fulfillment process requires an ever-increasing quantity of resources and space. It causes strong impact on the biosphere and generates ever-increasing volume of waste. Therefore, it is worth exploring sustainability-related concepts and practices of the past as well as current facts, existing and emerging ideas, various sources of scientific hypotheses, and hypothetical solutions.

Essential References

Pant, D.R. (2004), *Antropologia e Strategia: Saggio sull'essere umano e sull'economia sostenibile*, Guerini Scientifica, Milan (Italy)

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Thiele, L.P. (2024), *Sustainability*, 3rd ed., Polity Press, Cambridge (UK).