

Original citation:

Adelman, Sam (2017) The sustainable development goals, Anthropocentrism and Neoliberalism. In: French, Duncan and Kotzé, Louis, (eds.) Global goals : law, theory and implementation. Cheltenham : Edward Elgar. (In Press).

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Publisher's statement:

This is a draft chapter that has been accepted for publication by Edward Elgar Publishing in the forthcoming book Global Goals: Law, Theory & Implementation edited by French, D. and Kotze, L. due to be published in 2018.

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1. Introduction

This chapter provides an existential critique of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals. With this aim in mind, I interrogate the meaning of sustainability, development and their concatenation in the idea of sustainable development from the Brundtland Commission's promotion of the concept in *Our Common Future* in 1987 to its current incarnation as a neoliberal form of green capitalism.¹ My critique is developed in two parts. First, through an analysis of the differences between sustainable development and ecological sustainability. Sustainable development is widely embraced as a process that promotes sustainability despite the history of extractive, ecologically unsustainable economic development that prioritises economic growth over environmental protection.² Endless economic growth is not sustainable if it breaches absolute biophysical limits and planetary boundaries, and ignores the rupture of the Earth system in the Anthropocene,³ the first geological epoch in which the activities of a single species, *Homo sapiens*, have irreversibly altered the geological structure of the planet. Human disturbance of the Earth system during the Great Acceleration following World War II is clear and connects the geohistory to human history with fateful consequences for all species.⁴ The Anthropocene is a rupture of the Earth system that poses fundamental epistemological and ontological challenges to humankind.⁵ This rupture affects all forms of development, including the mainstream understanding of sustainable development provided by the World Commission on Environment and Development 1987. I argue that ecological sustainability is incompatible with contemporary patterns of production and consumption and models of development that prioritise economic

¹ World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), *Our Common Future* (Oxford University Press 1987).

² 'Extractivism is a nonreciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one purely of taking. It is the opposite of stewardship, which involves taking but also taking care that regeneration and future life continue.' Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 149.

³ Johan Rockström et al., 'Planetary boundaries: Exploring the safe operating space for humanity' (2009) *Ecology and Society* 14(2); Will Steffen et al., 'Planetary boundaries: Guiding human development on a changing planet', (2015) *Science*: 347(6223).

⁴ Earth system thinking systematically and systemically conceives the planet as a single unified, integrated and constantly changing entity rather than a collection of ecosystems. See Jan Zalasiewicz, Paul Crutzen and Will Steffen, 'The Anthropocene' in Felix M. Gladstein, James G. Ogg, Mark Schmitz and Gabi Ogg (eds), *The Geologic Time Scale* (Elsevier, 2012) and Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Will Steffen and Paul Crutzen, 'The New World of the Anthropocene' (2010) *Environmental Science and Technology* 44(7), 2228-2231. On history in the Anthropocene, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses' (2009) 35 *Critical Inquiry* 197-222.

⁵ Paul J. Crutzen, 'Geology of mankind', (2002) *Nature* 415.6867, 23-23 at 23.

growth. The SDGs reproduce growth fetishism by promoting an intrinsically anthropocentric approach to sustainability that reinforces the longstanding criticism that sustainable development is an oxymoron. Herman Daly, a former World Bank economist and proponent of steady state economics, argues that ‘The term sustainable growth should be rejected as a bad oxymoron’.⁶

In the first section, I discuss the troubled history of sustainable development. This is followed in section 2 by a discussion of the intrinsic anthropocentrism in international environmental and climate law reflected in the SDGs. The third section provides an immanent critique of the SDGs that leads to the conclusion that just as sustainable development fosters the illusion that it is possible to achieve endless economic growth and social justice while protecting the environment, so the SDGs promote the delusion that capitalism is the solution rather than the cause of the rupture in the Earth system and the ecological degradation and destruction that accompanies it.

2. The Path from Development to Sustainable Development

After the Second World War, development was promoted as the means whereby what was then referred to as the Third World could achieve economic growth, reduce poverty and promote social justice. In principle, development is a process of social change designed to improve the wellbeing of people. In practice, it has regularly manifested itself as underdevelopment or maldevelopment so that its scope and rationale have been vigorously contested. As Björn Hettne observes, it is ‘one of the oldest and most powerful of all Western ideas’ and is closely associated with growth and progress from backwardness to modernity,⁷ and an almost teleological process of modernisation.⁸ As Westernisation, it was designed to incorporate developing countries into global capitalism; in the Soviet model, it was the path to socialism. Ecological sustainability was not a priority in either paradigm. In the 1970s and 1980s, dependency and world systems theorists cogently argued that the development of the West depended upon long histories of colonialism and imperialism that incorporated what

⁶ Herman E. Daly, ‘Toward some operational principles of sustainable development’ *Ecological economics* 2(1) (1990) 1. See also Wolfgang Sachs, ‘Sustainable development: on the political anatomy of an oxymoron’ in Wolfgang Sachs, *Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development* (Zed Books 1999); Michael Redclift, ‘Sustainable development (1987–2005): an oxymoron comes of age’ *Sustainable development* 13(4) (2005); Ulrich Brand, ‘Green Economy—the Next Oxymoron? No Lessons Learned from Failures of Implementing Sustainable Development’ (2012) *GAIA* 21(1). See also Death, n 29.

⁷ Björn Hettne, *Development Theory and the Three Worlds: Towards an International Political Economy of Development* (Longman, 1995) 29.

⁸ See Walt W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: a Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

was then called the Third World into the global political-economy on unequal terms.⁹ Walter Rodney famously argued that Europe ‘underdeveloped’ Africa in pursuit of raw materials and profits, creating structural inequalities that persist to the present day.¹⁰ Such arguments reflected the significant anti-development or post-development backlash that emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century. For example, Arturo Escobar deployed Michel Foucault’s concept of power to argue that development is a power-knowledge nexus ostensibly designed to save the victims of underdevelopment from themselves while protecting the interests of the superpowers during the Cold War. Developmentalism became an almost evangelical ideology of salvation through industrialisation, modernisation and integration into the global political economy through the free trade and the exploitation of natural resources.¹¹ It was a process that Wolfgang Sachs described as intrinsically and inexorably destructive of the environment and, we might add, that heightens risks to vulnerable communities.¹²

Hettne writes that ‘Development is a contested concept, which implies that it has meant different things from one historical situation to another and from one actor to another.’¹³ One of the major criticisms levelled against the concept is that it has seldom been ‘owned’ by those subjected to it and too often been imposed on populations through violent forms of neo-colonialism and imperialism that repeatedly resulted in chronic socio-political, economic and environmental crises. Gustavo Esteva argues that ‘The metaphor of development gave global hegemony to a purely Western genealogy of history, robbing peoples of different cultures of the opportunity to define the forms of their social life.’ It is a concept that cannot ‘delink itself from the words with which it was formed-growth, evolution, maturation’, and has become totemic-a magic solution to the problems that confront us. But for many people ‘this positive meaning of the word “development” . . . is a reminder of what they are not . . . To escape from it, they need to be enslaved to others’

⁹ Andre Gunder Frank, ‘The development of underdevelopment’, in Stephen M. Wheeler and Timothy Beatley (eds), *The Sustainable Urban Development Reader* (Routledge, 2004).

¹⁰ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Bogle-L’Ouverture, 1972).

¹¹ Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton University Press, 2011). See also Gustavo Esteva, ‘Development’ in Wolfgang Sachs (ed), *The Development Dictionary; A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (Zed Books, 1992).

¹² Wolfgang Sachs, ‘Environment’ in W. Sachs (ed), *The Development Dictionary; A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (Zed Books, 1992).

¹³ Björn Hettne, *Thinking About Development: Development Matters* (Zed Books, 2009), 1.

experiences and dreams.¹⁴ To the objects of development in the global South, it has always been a Eurocentric, technocratic, depoliticising concept.

In response to persistent criticism, the dominant idea of development metamorphosed under the aegis of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) into human centred development (influenced by Amartya Sen's conception of development as freedom) and latterly as sustainable development but economic growth has remained central.¹⁵ The emergence of neoliberalism in the early 1980s marked a crucial turning point. Hitherto, development had generally been understood as a state-driven process; afterwards, the so-called Washington consensus promoted dogmatic market fundamentalism that demanded privatisation, deregulation, free trade in pursuit of endless economic growth, the sanctity of private protection, and protection of contractual and investor rights.¹⁶ Eduardo Gudynas's argument that the classical Western idea of development has been declared dead several times in the last decades but persists in a zombie form applies equally to the neoliberal ideology that infects sustainable development.¹⁷

Neoclassical (especially neoliberal) economists view economic growth as essential and inevitable. Wellbeing is clearly linked to economic activity, but it is quality rather than the quantity that is crucial. As Kate Raworth observes, nothing in nature grows forever;¹⁸ uncontrollable growth is cancerous. Since growth is hardwired into logic of capitalism, we are confronted with a conundrum: whether it is possible to achieve ecological sustainability in a mode of production that impels the breaching of planetary boundaries and if so, whether capitalism can be sufficiently reformed to permit this. 'The development mentality is the daily manifestation of growth fetishism,'¹⁹ as Clive Hamilton argues, because the hegemonic conception of development cannot countenance non-capitalist economic activity or commons governance.

¹⁴ Gustavo Esteva, 'Development' in Sachs, Wolfgang (ed), *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power* (Zed Books, 1992) at 9, 10.

¹⁵ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Sen attempted to shift the focus of development from growth to freedom and human capacities.

¹⁶ See Baxi's analysis of the emergence of trade-related, market-friendly human rights: Upendra Baxi, *The Future of Human Rights* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁷ Eduardo Gudynas, 'Buen Vivir: Today's tomorrow', (2011) *Development* 54(4) 441.

¹⁸ Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist* (Random House, 2017). Raworth rehearses the overwhelming arguments against using GDP as the primary measure of development, not least because of the danger this poses to the Earth system. She advocates a form of economics that addresses impoverishment within planetary limits.

¹⁹ Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish* (Allen & Unwin, 2003) 184.

Ramírez-Cendrero distinguishes between ‘pure’ post-developmental proposals such as *buen vivir* or those based on the rights of nature, identifies possible spaces for an alternative to capitalist development, and clarifies the differences between alternatives to development and alternatives to capitalism.²⁰ He is sceptical that post-development models can transcend capitalism, although he recognises that ‘post-developmental criticism has contributed decisively to the awareness of the physical and environmental limits of capitalism’s production and consumption patterns . . . and the risks of neo-extractivism associated with new development strategies in some Latin American countries as merely new forms of capitalist modernization.’²¹

In Latin America, alternatives to development have emerged based upon Andean cosmovisions such as *buen vivir* (roughly translated as living well). Many indigenous knowledges have no concept similar to the Western idea of development. *Buen vivir* takes several forms but all seek to dissolve the society-Nature dualism in Eurocentric rationality, to overturn the notion that human beings are the only source of values, and to move beyond modernity’s obsessions with growth and progress. It:

moves away from the prevalence of instrumental and manipulative rationality. It rejects the modern stance that almost everything should be dominated and controlled, either persons or Nature, so as to become a means to our ends. Furthermore, the Buen Vivir does not endorse the classical understanding of a unidirectional linear progression of history, following a precise path, as several directions are possible.²²

Buen vivir is intrinsically pluralistic and rejects the hierarchies and dualisms that characterise Western philosophy but has nevertheless evolved to incorporate aspects of Western thinking where they are not antithetical, such as Western science. Its salience to sustainability flows from the conviction that wellbeing is only possible within a community in harmony with nature, symbolised by the centrality in its axiology of *Pachamama* (Mother Earth), the source of life. *Buen vivir* ‘calls for a “biocentric” understanding of life in which Nature has rights of its own and an intrinsic significance regardless of its value for human life’.²³ As such, it

²⁰ There is a significant difference between alternative development and alternatives to development. Whereas the former envisages development in a different form, the latter rejects the concept of development as irredeemable.

²¹ Juan M. Ramírez-Cendrero, ‘Limits and Contradictions of Post-developmentalism as a Heterodox Approach to Capitalist Development’, *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 2017 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2017.1334220> at 15.

²² Gudynas n 17, 445.

²³ René Ramírez, ‘La transición ecuatoriana hacía el buen vivir’, in Irene León (ed.), *Sumak Kawsay/Buen vivir y cambios civilizatorios* (FEDAEPS, 2010) 24.

provides a coherent critique of modernity and hegemonic theories of development that rejects the reduction of human identity to a *homo economicus* defined by material consumption. It has a strong communitarian ethos that promotes substantive participatory democracy and progressive visions of social, environmental and climate justice.²⁴ *Buen vivir* has been incorporated into the constitutions of Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009), albeit in contradictory ways.²⁵ Above all, it promotes a conception of what sustainable development might mean that is markedly different to mainstream Western understandings.

2.1. Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a deceptively simple idea that is widely incorporated in domestic and international environmental law, but its meaning is contested. An obvious reading is that it is development that is sustained in the sense that it endures over a period of time, but it is more commonly understood as development ‘causing little or no damage to the environment and therefore able to continue for a long time.’²⁶ The widespread purchase of this inaccurate perception illustrates the extent to which it has successfully been inculcated in public consciousness as an environmentally friendly process.

Sustainable development emerged, albeit indirectly, at the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. The preamble is notably anthropocentric, linking the importance of protecting the environment to its impact on ‘the well-being of peoples and economic development throughout the world’.²⁷ It became a leitmotif in *Our Common Future* in 1987 and the centrepiece of Agenda 21, a non-binding document adopted at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, from which the Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change emerged. In 2002, the

²⁴ Alberto Acosta, ‘El Buen (con) Vivir, una utopía por (re)construir: Alcances de la Constitución de Montecristi’, (2010) OBETS. Revista de Ciencias Sociales, 6 (1), 35–67; Alberto Acosta and Eduardo Gudynas, ‘La renovación de la crítica al desarrollo y el buen vivir como alternativa’, (2011) Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana, 16 (53), 71–83

<<http://www.gudynas.com/publicaciones/GudynasAcostaCriticaDesarrolloBVivirUtopia11.pdf>> accessed 15 May 2017; Arturo Escobar, ‘Sustainability: Design for the Pluriverse’, (2011) *Development*, 54 (2), 137–140.

²⁵ The Ecuadorian Constitution guarantees the rights of *buen vivir* (articles 12-34) and grants rights to nature (articles 71-74). *Constitución Política de la República del Ecuador*, 20 October 2008. In Bolivia, *buen vivir* informs the 2009 Constitution, which does not grant rights to nature. However, *Pachamama* is protected under the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth (Law 071 of the Plurinational State) passed by the Plurinational Legislative Assembly on 21 December 2010.

²⁶ Cambridge English Dictionary <<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sustainable>> accessed 5 May 2017.

²⁷ Stockholm Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, UN Doc. A/Conf.48/14/Rev. 1(1973); 11 ILM 1416 (1972).

World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg produced non-binding declarations on sustainable consumption and production, water and sanitation, and energy. Principle 4 in the Rio Declaration makes it clear that ‘In order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it’, but Principle 12 requires states to ‘cooperate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to economic growth and sustainable development in all countries.’ 20 years later, the ‘Common Vision’ of the Rio+20 summit in 2012 reaffirmed ‘the need to achieve sustainable development by: promoting sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth.’²⁸

The Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,’²⁹ and this has become the dominant framing in a formulation that proffered the possibility of integrating ‘economic development, social justice and environmental protection in a virtuous circle on the one hand, and a means of overcoming the physical limits of the biosphere through market solutions on the other’.³⁰ Within five years of the publication of *Our Common Future*, more than 70 definitions of sustainable development had been proposed, demonstrating the chameleon-like capacity of the concept to mean all things to all people, but it is this vague capaciousness that enables states and transnational corporations to greenwash unsustainable activities by misleading the public about the environmental impacts of their products or services.³¹ Most of these definitions perpetuate instrumental rationality, progress, economic growth and they conceive nature as capital. Sustainable development has been described as ‘economic development that is complementary to environment and society, as a process of development that emphasises intergenerational equity or as a process of ensuring environmental services on a very

²⁸ Emphases supplied. Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (A/CONF.151/26, vol. I) and Agenda 21 (A/CONF.151/26, vol. II), adopted by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 14 June 1992; United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Outcome Document: The Future We Want, 20 to 22 June 2012. A/RES/66/288.

²⁹ WCED n 1, 43.

³⁰ Sam Adelman, ‘Rio+20: Sustainable Injustice in a Time of Crises’ (2013) *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 4(1), 6-31 at 11.

³¹ Johan Holmberg and Richard Sandbrook, ‘Sustainable development: what is to be done?’ in Johan Holmberg (ed), *Policies for a Small Planet* (Earthscan, 1992). A notorious recent example are the measures taken by car manufacturers to defeat emissions tests for diesel cars: Jennifer K. Lynes, ‘Volkswagen committed the cardinal sin of greenwashing: Lying’, *The Globe and Mail* 24 September 2015 <<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/rob-commentary/volkswagen-committed-the-cardinal-sin-of-greenwashing-lying/article26500698/>> accessed 27 June 2017.

long-term basis’;³² but as Ruth Gordon argues, it ‘appears to address what is essentially an enigma without meaningfully challenging existing power structures or the impact that the modern quest for a higher material standard of living has had on the natural world.’³³

The Commission treated development and sustainability as commensurate and interchangeable, and viewed poverty rather than unrestrained extractive industrialisation as the main enemy of sustainable ecosystems. It viewed poverty as a cause rather than a symptom of unsustainability and its solution was to encompass environmental issues within sustainable development rather than changing the dominant model of development. This is explicit from the outset: ‘What is needed now is a new era of economic growth—growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable.’³⁴ The Brundtland report focused on the core concepts of needs and ‘limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs’ rather than biophysical limits and planetary boundaries.³⁵ It considered the needs of current and future generations but not those of other species. In the view of Imran, Alam and Beaumont, its ‘anthropocentric approach fails to adequately acknowledge the relationship of environmental crises to environmental ethics and values . . . [and i]t does not adequately recognize the ecological limits of natural capital—i.e. the boundary beyond which exploitation of a natural resource will have significant irreversible impacts.’³⁶ This anthropocentrism is reflected in the report’s treatment of species and ecosystems as resources for development in assertions such as ‘Conservation of living natural resources is . . . crucial for development.’³⁷ The report accepts that conservation ‘is not only justified in economic terms’³⁸ but the aesthetic, ethical, cultural, and scientific justifications it provides are also markedly anthropocentric.

The Brundtland Commission sought to reconcile economic growth, social equity and environmental protection (the so-called the triple bottom line) in a single concept. Four decades later, in a world scarred by inequality, looming climate catastrophe and the rupture to

³² Emmanuel Kumi, Albert A, Arhin and Thomas Yeboah, ‘Can post- 2015 sustainable development goals survive neoliberalism? A critical examination of the sustainable development- nexus in developing countries’, (2014) *Environment Development and Sustainability* 16, 539- 554 at 544.

³³ Ruth Gordon, ‘Unsustainable Development’ in Shawkat Alam, Sumudu Atapattu, Carmen G Gonzalez and Jona Razzaque *International Environmental Law and the Global South* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 63.

³⁴ WCED n 1, xii.

³⁵ WCED n 1, 43.

³⁶ Sophia Imran, Khorshed Alam and Narelle Beaumont, ‘Reinterpreting the Definition of Sustainable Development for a More Ecocentric Reorientation’, (2014) *Sustainable Development* 22, 134–144 at 135.

³⁷ WCED n 1, 147.

³⁸ WCED n 1, 155.

the Earth system, sustainable development's 'success' is still predominantly measured in terms of economic growth. The concept has been condemned for fostering the illusion that endless growth is possible on a finite planet but as Haydn Washington argues, 'In a finite world, we need to accept once and for all that sustainability *cannot* be about further growth. This challenge remains critical, though still denied.'³⁹

Escobar argues that sustainable development emerged through the:

problematization of global survival, a process which induces a re-working of the relationship between nature and society. This problematization appeared as a response to the destructive character of development, on the one hand, and the rise of environmental movements in both the North and the South, on the other . . . [t]he ecodevelopmentalist vision expressed in mainstream versions of sustainable development reproduces central aspects of economism and developmentalism.⁴⁰

He argues that it 'focuses not so much on the negative consequences of economic growth on the environment, as on the effects of environmental degradation on growth and the potential for growth.'⁴¹ Redclift contends that sustainable development 'was coined in the 1980s to meet contradictions in policy and practice, and to "square the circle" of resource conservation and economic growth . . . [but in practice] has been advocated primarily as a means of subordinating nature to economic growth.'⁴² In a similar vein, Wolfgang Sachs writes that it 'promises nothing less than to square the circle: to identify a type of development that promotes both ecological sustainability and international justice' in a formula 'designed to maximize consensus rather than clarity.'⁴³ Sachs argues that the Brundtland report failed to address the crisis of justice arising from unsustainable development and moved quickly from the conservation of nature to the conservation of growth.⁴⁴ Seeking to maximise acceptance of the concept, the World Commission on

³⁹ Washington, Haydn. *Demystifying Sustainability: Towards Real Solutions* (Earthscan, 2015), 36 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁰ Arturo Escobar, 'Constructing Nature: Elements for a poststructural political ecology' in Richard Peet and Michael Watts (eds), *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements* (Routledge, 1996), 51-52.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 54.

⁴² Redclift, Michael, and Graham Woodgate. 'Sustainable development and nature: the social and the material', (2013) *Sustainable Development* 21(2), 92-100 at 92.

⁴³ Wolfgang Sachs, 'Sustainable Development and the Crisis of Nature: On the Political Anatomy of an Oxymoron' in Frank Fisher and Maarten A. Hajer (eds) *Living with Nature: Environmental Politics as Cultural Discourse* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 25-26.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 29.

Environment and Development provided capitalism with a conceptual basis and an ethical/normative justification for the commodification and monetisation of nature.

Withering criticism of this kind has not deterred proponents of ecomodern developmentalism such as Jeffrey Sachs, who declaims that we have entered the era of ‘the Age of Sustainable Development’, ‘a world in which economic progress is widespread; extreme poverty is eliminated; social trust is encouraged . . . and the environment is protected from human-induced degradation.’⁴⁵ Sachs believes that salvation does not require trade-offs between getting rich and saving the planet, but instead lies in the virtuous synergies that technology can deliver. A more realistic perspective is provided by advocates of degrowth who disparage the faith that discourses of ecological modernisation place in the role of markets, pointing to the deficiencies of carbon markets and the likelihood that decarbonisation will be cancelled out by unceasing economic growth. They argue that it is possible to achieve sustainable degrowth through the ‘equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term.’⁴⁶ Healy, Martinez-Alier and Kallis write that:

The promises of ecological modernization (i.e. dematerialization of the economy, economic growth linked to lower environmental impacts, win–win sustainable economic development) cannot be fulfilled. On the contrary, these promises and the assumptions on which they are based have evolved into discourses that legitimize the opening up of new spheres of capital circulation and accumulation. The ascendancy of the rhetoric of the ‘green economy’ or even ‘green growth’, and the promotion of markets for carbon and ecosystem services, illustrate this well.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Jeffrey Sachs, *The Age of Sustainable Development* (University of Columbia Press, 2015) 3. The term Anthropocene appears three times in 543 pages.

⁴⁶ François Schneider, Giorgos Kallis and Joan Martinez-Alier, ‘Crisis or opportunity? Economic degrowth for social equity and ecological sustainability. Introduction to this special issue’, (2010) *Journal of Cleaner Production* 18(6), 511-518 at 512. See also Arturo Escobar, ‘Degrowth, postdevelopment, and transitions: a preliminary conversation’ (2015) *Sustainability Science* 10(3), 451-462; Joan Martínez-Alier, Unai Pascual, Franck-Dominique Vivien and Edwin Zaccai, ‘Sustainable de-growth: Mapping the context, criticisms and future prospects of an emergent paradigm’ (2010) *Ecological economics* 69(9), 1741-1747; Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (Earthscan, 2009).

⁴⁷ Hali Healy, Joan Martinez-Alier and Giorgos Kallis, ‘From ecological modernization to socially sustainable economic degrowth: lessons from ecological economics’ in Raymond L. Bryant (ed), *The International Handbook of Political Ecology* (Edward Elgar, 2015), 586. Ecomodernists are prominent amongst those celebrating the possibility of a ‘good’ Anthropocene made possible by techno-fixes such as geoengineering, terraforming, etc. Clive Hamilton, ‘The Theodicy of the “Good Anthropocene”’, (2015) *Environmental Humanities* 7(1), 233-238. On green economy, see Adelman, n 31.

As a core discourse of ecological modernisation, sustainable development frames eco-political issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and ecological degradation ‘as matters of scientific knowledge, technological innovation, and managerial perfection-an effort that has always been central to the paradigm of sustainability and the policy approaches of ecological modernization’ as a means of depoliticising them.⁴⁸ In Erik Swyngedouw’s words, ‘Vague concepts like climate change policy, biodiversity policy or “sustainability” replace proper names in politics’ so that ‘[p]ost-political climate governance does not solve problems; it moves them around.’⁴⁹ Environmental problems are addressed through environmental legislation or technological fixes frequently accompanied by market-based instruments.⁵⁰ Maarten Hajer, a leading ecological modernisation theorist acknowledges that sustainable development does not call for structural change and is ‘basically a modernist and technocratic approach to the environment that suggests that there is a techno-institutional fix for the present problems . . . [it] does not address the systemic features of capitalism that make the system inherently wasteful and unmanageable.’⁵¹

A decade after the euphemistically styled Great Recession, neoliberalism lives on zombie-like, incapable of providing viable responses to either sustainability or development, but seemingly incapable of being consigned to the dustbin of history.⁵² David Harvey describes neoliberal economics as an ideological smokescreen designed to conceal a more fundamental class project of accumulation by dispossession through private appropriation of the commons.⁵³ Ecological sustainability will not be delivered by neoliberalism and it cannot be achieved through the dystopian anthropocentrism that disfigured the Holocene but is perpetuated by the SDGs.

3. Anthropocentrism

⁴⁸ Ingulfor Blühdorn, ‘Sustainability-Post-sustainability-Unsustainability’ in Teena Gabrielson, Cheryl Hall, John M. Meyer, and David Schlosberg (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 268.

⁴⁹ Erik Swyngedouw, ‘Depoliticized environments and the promises of the Anthropocene’ in Bryant, Raymond L. *The International Handbook of Political Ecology* (Edward Elgar, 2015), 140.

⁵⁰ Ian Bailey, Andy Gouldson, and Peter Newell, ‘Ecological modernisation and the governance of carbon: a critical analysis’, (2011) *Antipode* 43, 682–703.

⁵¹ Arthur P. J. Mol and David A. Sonnenfeld, ‘Ecological Modernisation Theory in Debate’ in Arthur P. J. Mol and David A. Sonnenfeld (eds). *Ecological Modernisation Around the World*, 22. Mol and Hajer quoted in Oluf Langhelle, ‘Why Ecological Modernisation and Sustainable Development Should Not Be Conflated’ in Gert Spaargaren, David A. Sonnenfeld and Arthur P. J. Mol, *The Ecological Modernisation Reader*, 402–5, 414.

⁵² Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism* (Polity, 2011).

⁵³ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

Law is deeply, intrinsically and persistently anthropocentric.⁵⁴ As Klaus Bosselmann puts it, ‘The law cements the view that only humans matter and the environment has just instrumental value—a view with grave ecological blindness.’⁵⁵ Law has been instrumental in naturalising the idea of nature as property over which human beings have dominion. Private property is a foundational concept in Western domestic law and international law, a consistent trope in which land and nature are primarily conceived as objects of ownership. Burdon argues that property rights epitomise Eurocentric approaches to the environment that justify humanity’s right to exploit and expropriate nature.⁵⁶ In short, law legitimises the idea that nature exists solely to serve the needs of human beings. Earth jurisprudence, Wild Law and Law for Nature are prominent amongst emergent legal philosophies that seek to correct the deep anthropocentrism of law.⁵⁷

Anthropocentrism is the ‘idea that human interests, human goods and/or human values are the focal point of any moral evaluation of environmental policy and the idea that these human interests, goods and values are the basis of any justification of an environmental ethic’.⁵⁸ Human beings exploit nature because they have come to conceive it as existing for their own personal benefit through unsustainable epistemologies of mastery and ideologies such as neoliberalism that are legitimated by anthropocentric legal systems.⁵⁹ We may perforce think as *Anthropos* but human cognitive abilities do not lead ineluctably either to anthropocentrism or the correct identification of long term human needs and interests.⁶⁰ Indeed, the plethora of onto-epistemologies and the differential power to materialise illustrates the danger of treating *Anthropos* as a homogeneous, undifferentiated

⁵⁴ On mechanical jurisprudence, see Fritjof Capra and Ugo Mattei, *The Ecology of Law: Toward a Legal System in Tune with Nature and Community* (Berrett-Koehler, 2015).

⁵⁵ Klaus Bosselmann, *The Principle of Sustainability: Transforming Law and Governance* (Ashgate, 2008) 135.

⁵⁶ Cormac Cullinan, *Wild Law: A Manifesto for Earth Justice* (Siber Ink, 2002); Peter D Burdon (ed), *Exploring Wild Law: The Philosophy of Earth Jurisprudence* (Wakefield Press, 2011); Peter D. Burdon, *Earth Jurisprudence: Private Property and the Environment* (Routledge, 2015). See also Anna Grear, ‘Human rights, property and the search for “worlds other”’ (2012) *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 3(2), 173-195.

⁵⁷ Vito de Lucia, ‘Towards an ecological philosophy of law: a comparative discussion’, (2013) *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 4(2), 167–190.

⁵⁸ Eric Katz, ‘A pragmatic reconsideration of anthropocentrism’, (1999) *Environmental Ethics* 21, 377–390 at 377-378.

⁵⁹ Sam Adelman, ‘Epistemologies of Mastery in Anna Grear and Louis J. Kotzé (eds) *Research Handbook on Human Rights and the Environment* (Edward Elgar 2015).

⁶⁰ On the nature of *Anthropos*, see Anna Grear, ‘Deconstructing anthropos: a critical legal reflection on ‘anthropocentric’ law and anthropocene ‘humanity’’, (2015) *Law and Critique* 26(3), 225-249; Anna Grear, ‘‘Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene’’: Re-encountering Environmental Law and its ‘Subject’ with Haraway and New Materialism’ in Louis J Kotzé (ed), *Environmental Law and Governance for the Anthropocene* (Hart, 2017).

entity.⁶¹ Moreover, it is not inevitable that anthropocentrism will result in speciesism on the one hand or misanthropy on the other.⁶² The freedom to reason enables *Homo sapiens* to choose to embrace onto-epistemologies that give precedence to Gaia.⁶³

Despite these caveats, anthropocentrism is generally regarded as problematic on several grounds. Deontological thinkers believe it is wrong when it is negatively motivated, for example harming other species. Immanuel Kant argued that right action is motivated by a sense of duty derived from the categorical imperative. Virtue ethics hold that actions may not be negatively motivated but may still be regarded as intrinsically wrong if they fail to give equal value to the needs and interests of other species and the biosphere. Arguments for sustainability are made on the basis of obligation and virtue but the literature on sustainability, climate change and the Anthropocene increasingly reflects consequentialist perspectives buttressed by Earth and climate science in which actions are considered right or wrong in light of their actual or probable effects.⁶⁴ Utilitarianism may be viewed as an anthropocentric version of consequentialism in which the pleasure, happiness, preferences and interests of human beings are the only relevant factors in assessing the correctness of actions.⁶⁵ In the Brundtland report, sustainable development is ‘explicitly rooted in a

⁶¹ Jason Moore is amongst those who argue that the idea of the Anthropocene is problematic because it does not give sufficient weight to the reality that a particular mode of production has successfully reinforced anthropocentric epistemologies already at work in religious, economic and political philosophies: Jason W. Moore, ‘The Capitalocene, Part I: on the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis’, (2017) *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. 44(3), 594-630. I agree with this position but use Anthropocene for the reason advanced by Donna Haraway, that it is well entrenched and seems less controversial than Capitalocene for many important players: Donna J. Haraway, ‘Staying with the Trouble Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene’ in Jason W. Moore (ed), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (PM Press, 2016).

⁶² See Onora O’Neill, ‘Environmental Values, Anthropocentrism and Speciesism’ *Environmental Values* 6 (1997), 127-42.

⁶³ James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia* (Allen Lane, 2006). The Gaia hypothesis was initially proposed by Lovelock in 1970s. Named after the Greek goddess of the Earth, it argues that the advent of life on the planet generated a homeostatic tendency to regulate the biosphere in ways favourable to the development and maintenance of life. It gained wide public traction but is scientifically controversial. See Michael Ruse, *The Gaia Hypothesis: Science on a Pagan Planet* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁶⁴ There is a difference between actual and expected consequentialism, i.e. between effects or harms that have already occurred and those that can reasonably be expected to occur. Stephen Gardiner argues that virtue ethics rather than consequentialist or deontological approaches are most appropriate to climate change because ethics is ‘not only about our relationships with other morally important entities, it is also about *who we are*.’ Stephen M. Gardiner, ‘Are We the Scum of the Earth? Climate Change, Geoengineering and Humanity’s Challenge’ in Allen Thompson and Jeremy Bendik-Meyer (eds), *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change: Human Virtues of the Future* (The MIT Press, 2012) at 242; emphasis in original. On geoengineering and consequentialism, see Sam Adelman, ‘Geoengineering: Rights, Risks and Ethics’ (2017) *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 8(1), 119-138.

⁶⁵ The work of Peter Singer demonstrates that this form of consequentialism is not necessarily confined to human beings but can be extended to sentient beings. See for example Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge university press, 2011). Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill gave consideration to other species but remained resolutely anthropocentric: Peter G. Brown, ‘Are there any natural resources?’, (2004) *Politics and the Life Sciences* 23(1), 12-21.

utilitarian and social philosophy that reflects a form of enlightened self-interest, conserving land and resources for later human use.⁶⁶ As neoliberal economics has demonstrated, this is a short step away from cost-benefit analyses that put a price on nature but cannot value it in non-monetary terms.

Consequentialist theories differ according to the ways in which they deem actions to be right or wrong, whether such actions are evaluated on individual or collective bases, and the knowledge that agents have about potential consequences. The negative ecological consequences of the Anthropocene orient much philosophical thinking but consequentialism does not offer simple answers to unsustainability. As we have seen, ecomodernists who comprehend the scale of the planetary emergency, nevertheless resist the contention that anthropocentrism is the source of climate and environmental harms.

Ecocentrism seeks to overcome the inherent anthropocentrism of Western modernity arising from the Cartesian separation of society and Nature and the Baconian treatment of the environment as a set of resources that exist to service humanity.⁶⁷ It sees intrinsic and moral value in nature, on which all living beings depend for survival, and views the Earth and the universe as an interconnected and interdependent web of sub-systems.⁶⁸ Because human history and the geohistory are now inextricably linked and human agency has epochal geological consequences, it follows that anthropocentrism that correctly identifies the interests of current and future generations must paradoxically be premised upon a radical ecocentrism because human wellbeing is contingent upon the health of the Earth system. In this perspective, ecocentrism becomes a form of anthropocentrism.⁶⁹

For Donna Haraway, counterposing anthropocentrism and ecocentrism reflects a failure to comprehend the scale of the harms and changes we confront. Thinking in terms of the Anthropocene is *too* anthropocentric because it privileges ‘human exceptionalism’ in ways that occlude the nature of the problem as well as possible solutions. Haraway rejects

⁶⁶ Sophia Imran, Khorshed Alam and Narelle Beaumont, ‘Reinterpreting the definition of sustainable development for a more ecocentric reorientation’, (2014) *Sustainable Development* 22(2), 134-144 at 136.

⁶⁷ See Adelman, n 50.

⁶⁸ ‘Ecocentrism goes beyond biocentrism (ethics that sees inherent value to all living things) by including environmental systems as wholes, and their abiotic aspects. It also goes beyond zoocentrism (seeing value in animals) on account of explicitly including flora and the ecological contexts for organisms’, Haydn Washington, et al., ‘Why ecocentrism is the key pathway to sustainability’, *The Ecological Citizen* 1 (2017) at page Y. Kopnina argues that ‘moral ecocentrism is necessary if the interests of nonhumans are to be protected outside of utilitarian interests’: Helen Kopnina, ‘The victims of unsustainability: a challenge to sustainable development goals’, (2016) *International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology* 23(2), 113-121 at 4.

⁶⁹ On the relationship between ecocentrism and deep ecology, see Helen Kopnina, ‘The Lorax complex: Deep ecology, ecocentrism and exclusion’, (2012) *Journal of Integrative Environmental Sciences* 9(4), 235-254.

both Anthropocene and Capitalocene in favour of thinking about and beyond the human, the non-human and the inhuman on the Chthulucene, the new Earth that requires new thinking.⁷⁰ Haraway excoriates those who naively fetishise technoscience, climate change catastrophists who foreclose possibilities, and those who do not adequately respect other species, the optimists who threaten to unleash hubristic anthropocentric techno-fixes such as geoengineering in pursuit of illusions of mastery, and the pessimists who are unwilling to think sympoietically about systems that are complex, self-organising, collectively producing, and boundaryless.⁷¹

A more conventional approach is taken by Clive Hamilton, who argues that it is now too late to think about anthropocentrism with the intellectual tools of the Holocene because the Anthropocene has fundamentally altered what it means to be human. Since *Anthropos* has misidentified its interests, a new, reconceptualised anthropocentrism is required because the only way to promote human interests is by protecting the Earth system through a more rigorous, self-conscious anthropocentrism.⁷² More rather than less anthropocentrism is required to grasp both the immensity of the power humankind has accrued and the enormity of the obligations this imposes. Critiquing post-humanist thinking, Hamilton distinguishes between anthropocentrism as scientific fact and as normative claim and argues that the rupture to the Earth system means that it is too late to abandon anthropocentrism even if it were possible to do so. ‘The original fault in the growth-driven techno-industrial system is its *monstrous* anthropocentrism rather than its anthropocentrism as such. The problem is not that human beings are anthropocentric, but that *we are not anthropocentric enough*.’⁷³

Hamilton contends that only by recognising the super-agency that humankind has acquired as a geological agent can *Homo sapiens* accept the consequences of its behaviour and a commensurate level of responsibility needed to protect the biosphere and its biota. This new anthropocentrism, which can only emanate from an acknowledgement of the embeddedness of *Anthropos* in nature-as-a-whole, offers hope that it is still possible that human beings may use their immense, planetary changing powers to enhance rather than

⁷⁰ A concept derived from the Greek *khthon*, ‘of the earth’ and *kainos*, ‘completely new.’

⁷¹ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016). See also Anna Grear, ‘“Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene”: Re-encountering Environmental Law and its “Subject” with Haraway and New Materialism’ in Louis Kotzé (ed) *Environmental Law and Governance for the Anthropocene* (Hart, 2017).

⁷² Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (Polity Press 2017). I paraphrase Hamilton’s terminology, which tends to treat human beings in an undifferentiated manner that ascribes equal agency and historical responsibility for the Anthropocene.

⁷³ Hamilton n 73, 43; emphases in original.

destroy the Earth system. The singular prize of the Enlightenment, our freedom to reason, is also freedom to choose to turn away from the calamitous path of capitalism. Hamilton counterposes his anthropocentrism to hubristic Promethean ecomodernist thinking that he regards as misanthropic rather than anthropocentric when it advocates solutions such as geoengineering that threaten the interests of humankind.⁷⁴

In Hamilton's new anthropocentrism, the SDGs fail because they are both insufficiently and too anthropocentric. On the one hand, they continue to propagate an anthropocentric conception of development that does not adequately address the nature and scale of the rupture of the Anthropocene. On the other, they are not anthropocentric enough because they fail to acknowledge and accept the responsibilities that come with human agency on a geological scale and the irrefragable logic that follows now that the interests of the Earth system and humanity coincide completely, if temporarily, with the collision of human history and geohistory. The following section analyses the SDGs as a Holocene anachronism.

4. The Sustainable Development Goals

With the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) due to expire in 2015, preparatory work on the SDGs began at the Rio+20 summit in 2012. The outcome document, *The Future We Want*, called for the creation of an open Working Group to prepare a geographically 'fair, equitable and balanced' proposal for the SDGs.⁷⁵ In September 2015, the non-binding SDGs were unanimously adopted by 193 member states in the UN General Assembly. Whereas the MDGs applied only to developing countries, the SDGs are global and extend the focus of international development beyond poverty to sustainability. And whereas the MDGs contained eight goals and met with mixed success, the SDGs contain 17 goals, 169 targets and 304 indicators. One study found less than a third (29 per cent) of the 169 targets to be well defined and consistent with the latest scientific evidence, that 54 per cent could be more specific, and 17 per cent to be weak.⁷⁶ Economic growth is still envisaged as the primary means of reducing poverty. Since the size of national income is valued more than the quality of economic activity and its relationship to human and ecological wellbeing, the SDGs hold

⁷⁴ Some ecomodernists terrifyingly speak about a 'good Anthropocene' in which profit can be made by using unproven technologies. Clive Hamilton, 'The Theodicy of the "Good Anthropocene"', (2015) *Environmental Humanities* 7(1), 233-238.

⁷⁵ UN General Assembly, 'The Future We Want', General Assembly Resolution A/RES/66/288, 27 July 2012, p. 64.

⁷⁶ ICSU/ISSC, *Review of the Sustainable Development Goals: The Science Perspective* (International Council for Science, 2015) 6.

fast to neoliberalism and thus fail to reconcile the contradiction between growth and sustainability at the core of sustainable development. They promote an anthropocentric approach to poverty reduction in which environmental protection is necessary only to the extent that it is consistent with growth in an extremely weak form of sustainable development.⁷⁷ Paragraph 48 in *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* states that the signatory states ‘are committed to developing broader measures of progress to complement gross domestic product’ but it is not clear how ecological sustainability is to be measured.⁷⁸ The phrase ‘harmony with nature’ appears three times in a document that is resolutely anthropocentric and envisages economic growth on a scale incompatible with such harmony.⁷⁹ Samir Amin argued that the MDGs were a discourse ‘intended to legitimize the policies and practices implemented by dominant capital and those who support it,’ a charge equally applicable to the SDGs.⁸⁰ The 2030 Agenda contains lofty ambitions and stirring rhetoric but no enforcement mechanisms.⁸¹ The signatories:

envisage a world in which every country enjoys sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all. A world in which consumption and production patterns and use of all natural resources—from air to land, from rivers, lakes and aquifers to oceans and seas—are sustainable . . . One in which humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected.⁸²

On face value, the goals are praiseworthy. They include the restoration of water-related ecosystems, a halt to the loss of biodiversity, ending overfishing, deforestation and desertification, achieving sustainable cities, and combating climate change—all undoubtedly necessary for ecological sustainability. The problem lies in the implicit underlying messages in the Agenda about the aims and meaning of development, and the many contradictions between its parts and its broader aspirations.

⁷⁷ On weak and strong forms of sustainable development, see Hopwood, Bill, Mellor, Mary and O'Brien, Geoff, ‘Sustainable development: mapping different approaches’, (2005) *Sustainable Development* 13, 38–52.

⁷⁸ UN General Assembly, ‘Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’, 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1 <<http://www.refworld.org/docid/57b6e3e44.html>> accessed 8 February 2017. All the paragraphs referred to in this section are from this document.

⁷⁹ The aim of Goal 12.8 is to ‘ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature’ by 2030.

⁸⁰ Samir Amin, ‘The Millennium Development Goals: A Critique from the South’, (2006) *Monthly Review* 57(10) 6.

⁸¹ Joachim H. Spangenberg, ‘Hot Air or Comprehensive Progress? A Critical Assessment of the SDGs’, (2016) *Sustainable Development*. Like the Paris Agreement, the SDGs reflect the voluntarist nature and increasingly *la carte* nature of international law.

⁸² Para. 9; emphasis supplied.

The solutions offered ultimately fall short of effective regulation. They include ‘environmentally sound management and safe use of chemicals, the reduction and recycling of waste and the more efficient use of water and energy’ (para. 34); halving ‘capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels’ by 2030 (Goal 12. 3); and encouraging ‘companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices’ (Goal 12.6). The overall aim of Goal 12 is to achieve ‘sustainable patterns of production and consumption,’ which is worthy but inconsistent with the cognitively dissonant ways in which the Agenda promotes more consumption and production elsewhere.⁸³ The underlying logic seems to be that the failure of extractive, growth-driven development to deliver sustainability is because it has not been imposed with sufficient rigour. Thus, Goal 8 calls for increased annual GDP growth in least developed countries and higher levels of economic productivity everywhere. Remarkably, sustained unsustainability is combined in a single sentence in the call for ‘*sustained*, inclusive and *sustainable* economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.’⁸⁴ The targets further complicate the aim of this goal. Goal 8.1 aims to ‘Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries’ but says nothing about the logical corollary that growth in developed countries will need to substantially decrease to have any chance of meeting the 2°C target or the exhortation to keep the increase in average global temperature below 1.5°C in Article 2 of the Paris Agreement on climate change (the latter being more consistent with climate science and the needs of least development countries).

Goal 8.4 calls upon states to endeavour to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation through improvements in ‘global resource efficiency in consumption and production,’ which is essential because as Fletcher and Rammelt argue, ‘without decoupling, the goals themselves will be unlikely to be achievable.’⁸⁵ However, there

⁸³ There is substantial evidence of the negative impacts of unfettered consumption on the environment. See for example, John Bellamy Foster; Brett Clark and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth* (Monthly Review Press, 2010); Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System* (Monthly Review Press, 2016). Paul Ekins argues that a sustainable consumer society is another oxymoron: ‘The sustainable consumer society: a contradiction in terms?’ (1991) *International Environmental Affairs* 3, 243–257. It has been calculated that 4.1 Earths would be required if everyone on the planet consumed as much as an average US citizen: Charlotte McDonald ‘How many Earths do we need?’ *BBC News*, 16 June 2015 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-33133712>> accessed 14 February 2017.

⁸⁴ Emphases supplied.

⁸⁵ Robert Fletcher and Crelis Rammelt, ‘Decoupling: A Key Fantasy of the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda’, (2016) *Globalizations*, 2. Tim Jackson regards decoupling as a myth that is not economically feasible. Thomas Wanner describes it as a central myth of the Green Economy agenda. Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* (Routledge, 2011). Thomas Wanner, ‘The new ‘passive revolution’ of

is much scepticism about the likelihood of decoupling. Ward et al. use historical data and modelled projections to demonstrate how difficult it is to decouple GDP growth from increases in material and energy and argue that it is ‘is therefore misleading to develop growth-oriented policy around the expectation that decoupling is possible’.⁸⁶

Paragraph 68 states that ‘International trade is an engine for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction, and contributes to the promotion of sustainable development.’ It is also an engine for skewed globalisation and massive inequality, and incompatible with sustainable production and consumption. Goal 17.10 calls for *more* trade liberalization and *more* power for the WTO. Goal 17.13 vaguely mentions the need to ‘enhance global macroeconomic stability’ through ‘policy coordination’ but provides neither specific targets nor the means for achieving this. The goal makes no mention of tax avoidance and evasion or debt service, which drain developing countries of vast amounts of income that could be spent on poverty reduction.⁸⁷ The SDGs call for ‘debt financing, debt relief, and debt restructuring, as appropriate’ but not *cancellation*. Parts of the Agenda clearly read as if they were written by groups that had not been introduced to each other.

The aim of Goal 10 is to reduce inequality within and between countries but the means of achieving this envisaged goal is likely to result in ecological catastrophe. Goal 10.1 aims to ‘progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average’ by 2030, but the SDGs do not address the causes of inequality or drivers of poverty such as free trade and the structural inequalities hardwired into the global economy.⁸⁸ Goal 1.1 aims to ‘eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day’ by 2030 but

the Green economy and growth discourse: Maintaining the ‘sustainable development’ of neoliberal capitalism’, (2015) *New Political Economy* 20(1), 21–41.

⁸⁶ James D. Ward, et al., ‘Is Decoupling GDP Growth from Environmental Impact Possible?’, (2016) *PloS one* 11(10) 10/14.

⁸⁷ Developing countries lose about \$100 billion annually due to tax avoidance by transnational corporations: Tax Justice Network, ‘UNCTAD: multinational tax avoidance costs developing countries \$100 billion+’, 26 March 2015 <<http://www.taxjustice.net/2015/03/26/unctad-multinational-tax-avoidance-costs-developing-countries-100-billion/>> accessed 25 May 2017. See also Clemens Fuest and Nadine Riedel ‘Tax evasion and tax avoidance in developing countries: The role of international profit shifting’, (Oxford University Centre for Business Taxation, 2010). The World Bank estimates that developing countries have paid more than \$4.2tn in interest payments since 1980 <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.INT.DECT.CD?locations=XO>> accessed 25 May 2017.

⁸⁸ Immanuel M. Wallerstein, ‘After Developmentalism and Globalization, What?’ (2005) *Social Forces*, 83(3), 1263-1278; James Rice, ‘Ecological unequal exchange: Consumption, equity, and unsustainable structural relationships within the global economy’, (2007) *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 48(1), 43-72.

as Jason Hickel points out, it is not possible to escape poverty on £1.25 per day.⁸⁹ Although global GDP has increased by 271 per cent since 1990, the number of people living on less than \$5 a day has increased by more than 370 million, demonstrating that the link between growth and poverty reduction is tenuous. The problem is not a lack of wealth but how it is distributed, and the SDGs offer no conception of distributive justice-nor, for that matter, environmental or climate justice-although the aim of Goal 5 is to achieve ‘gender equality and empower all women and girls.’ The poorest 60 per cent of the global population received just 5 per cent of all new income generated by global growth between 1999 and 2008.⁹⁰ Oxfam calculates that the richest one per cent has owned more wealth than everybody else on the planet since 2015, eight men own the same amount of wealth as the poorest half of the world, and the incomes of the poorest ten per cent of people grew by less than \$3 a year between 1988 and 2011, while those of the richest one per cent increased 182 times as much.⁹¹ A recent study estimated that eradicating poverty will take at least 100 years at \$1.25 per day and 200 years at \$5 per day, and global GDP will have to exceed \$100,000 per capita.⁹² As Hickel argues, ‘To eradicate poverty global GDP would have to increase to 175 times its present size if we go with \$5/day. In other words, if we want to eradicate poverty with our current model of economic development, we need to extract, produce, and consume 175 times more commodities than we presently do’.⁹³ Maldevelopment of this kind that fails to address pathologies of accumulation and consumption will wreak ever greater ecological destruction and increase impoverishment as humanity hurtles down the path to madness.

Ariel Salleh argues that ‘The SDG proposals are not just unrealistic but undemocratic, since the goals are to be realised by growing gross domestic product (GDP), increasing market liberalisation and free trade, as well as according more power to the World Trade

⁸⁹ Jason Hickel, ‘Five reasons to think twice about the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals’ <<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2015/09/23/five-reasons-to-think-twice-about-the-uns-sustainable-development-goals/>> accessed 25 May 2017.

⁹⁰ The Story of Poverty <<https://therules.org/campaign/the-story-of-poverty/>> accessed 24 May 2017.

⁹¹ Deborah Hardoon, ‘An Economy for the 99%: It’s time to build a human economy that benefits everyone, not just the privileged few’, (Oxfam International, 2017) <<https://oxfam.app.box.com/v/an-economy-for-99-percent/1/15862322999/122574711571/1>> accessed 14 February 2017, 2.

⁹² David Woodward, ‘*Incrementum ad absurdum*: global growth, inequality and poverty eradication in a carbon-constrained world’, (2015) *World Economic Review* 4, 43-62. ‘The new global poverty line is set at \$1.90 using 2011 prices. Just over 900 million people globally lived under this line in 2012 (based on the latest available data), and we project that in 2015, just over 700 million are living in extreme poverty.’ The World Bank <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/global-poverty-line-faq>> accessed 25 May 2017.

⁹³ Jason Hickel, ‘It will take 100 years for the world’s poorest people to earn \$1.25 a day’, *The Guardian* 30 March 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/mar/30/it-will-take-100-years-for-the-worlds-poorest-people-to-earn-125-a-day>> accessed 24 May 2017.

Organization.’⁹⁴ In a similar vein, Heloise Weber argues that neoliberal policies are explicit goals in a ‘framework that privileges commercial interests over commitments to provide universal entitlements to address fundamental life-sustaining needs. Political struggles over development will continue *against* the ideology of the SDG project and for transformative shifts for actually sustainable development.’⁹⁵

The SDGs bring to mind an Irish joke in which a lost tourist rolls down her car window and asks a local for directions to Dublin. He rubs his chin, thinks for a moment, and says ‘I wouldn’t start from here.’ In the Anthropocene, the point of departure for the goals should surely have been ecological sustainability rather than development. Starting with development as growth precludes ecological sustainability; starting with sustainability opens up a range of alternatives more likely to reduce poverty and promote social justice. Starting from ‘here’ with development subordinates the Earth system, most of the global population and all other species to the ‘needs’ of the economy. After all, it is possible to measure the health of the atmosphere, ecosystems oceans and species with increasing precision and to set targets in international environmental governance instruments such as the SDGs.⁹⁶ Starting from ‘here’ reproduces the fallacies of modernity and Holocene thinking. Starting from ‘here’ reinforces neoliberal dogma and market fundamentalism by insisting that economic development requires free trade, protection of investor rights and the privatisation of commons when what is most needed is a new global ‘Grundnorm’, an organising principle for global governance enforced through a deceptively simple but utterly profound test for all economic activity: is it ecologically sustainable?

5. Conclusion

The SDGs are incommensurate with the scale and urgency of the unfolding planetary catastrophe and offer no real possibility of global, climate or social justice for current or future generations. They promote a weak, anthropocentric form of sustainable development that ignores ecological reality and continues to prioritise economic growth above social justice and environmental protection. They contain a ‘lack of consideration given to the need for radical change in people’s demands on the Earth’, and ‘a perpetuation of the view that

⁹⁴ Ariel Salleh, ‘Climate, Water, and Livelihood Skills: A Post-Development Reading of the SDGs’, (2016) *Globalizations* 13(6), 952–959 at 953.

⁹⁵ Heloise Weber, “‘Politics of ‘Leaving No One Behind’’: Contesting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals Agenda’, (2017) *Globalizations*, 1-16 at 1 (emphasis in original).

⁹⁶ For example, the targets in articles 2 and 4 in the Paris Agreement.

nature is merely a collection of natural resources that can be subdued by the human race.’⁹⁷ Hickel maintains that the SDGs ‘lock in the global development agenda for the next 15 years around a failing economic model that requires urgent and deep structural changes.’⁹⁸

As Haydn Washington argues, development cannot be sustainable if it ignores ecological limits and planetary boundaries. Extractive, fossil fuelled growth is the driving force of *unsustainability*. Development cannot be sustainable and prioritise endless economic growth while leaving contemporary patterns of production, consumption and accumulation unchanged because the commodification and monetisation of nature are anathema to sustainability.⁹⁹ To be ecologically sustainable, economic activity cannot replicate the anthropocentric shortcomings of Eurocentric rationality predicated upon dominium over nature; it cannot be an alternative form of development rebadged as sustainable development but an alternative *to* development.

The MDGs enjoyed mixed success.¹⁰⁰ When commentators review the SDGs in 2030 hopefully they will not find that global poverty was reduced in a series of pyrrhic victories that came at the cost of widespread ecological destruction, species extinction and growing injustice from climatic harms because the goals were based on Holocene thinking. If not, they may lament the failure to move beyond the contradictions of a conception of development that could never have been sustainable and belatedly accept that ecological sustainability should have been the starting point, the focus and the central goal of Agenda 2030 rather than an optional extra because sustainability is a precondition for all attempts to reduce poverty in the Anthropocene.

⁹⁷ Colin C. Williams and Andrew C. Millington, ‘The Diverse and Contested Meanings of Sustainable Development’, (2004) *The Geographical Journal* 170(2), 101.

⁹⁸ Jason Hickel, ‘Why the new Sustainable Development Goals won’t make the world a fairer place’ <<http://theconversation.com/why-the-new-sustainable-development-goals-wont-make-the-world-a-fairer-place-46374>> accessed 2 June 2017.

⁹⁹ Haydn Washington, *Demystifying Sustainability: Towards Real Solutions* (Earthscan 2015), 193-194.

¹⁰⁰ Despite a decline during the fifteen years of the MDGs, approximately 700 million people remain in extreme poverty: World Food Programme <<https://www.wfp.org/climate-change/climate-impacts>> accessed 1 November 2016. These numbers would be substantially higher but for China’s dramatic growth since 1979.