

“Religious Precepts” Sustained by the Covid Crisis: The UN “Sustainable Development” Project Serves the Interests the Financial Elites

Sustainability: Modelling vs. the Empirical Frontier

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Thirty years ago I organized an International Congress on Environmental Consciousness and Mass Media, held in Dresden at the Deutsche Hygiene Museum.[i] The central concern of that conference attended by journalists, PR and advertising experts, corporate communications officers and artists from more than 23 countries, was what does the mass media do to shape our awareness of issues and the importance we assign to them? (It took several years after the 1991 Gulf War for people to realize that what they thought was live combat reporting was in mainly televised “video game” footage.) The question was also asked what is the relationship between consciousness and action? Does the awareness of something always motivate and define action? After some thirty years of observing the way environmentalism has been transformed from a marginal fetish of opposition politics to a central dogma of multinational corporations and government policy.[ii] I believe the past thirty years and especially the past three years have provided me the experience to justify an empirical skepticism regarding the sincerity of this transformation.

Empirical Skepticism

The title expresses that skepticism. I am skeptical about what sustainability really means. I am also skeptical about the knowledge claims underlying the so-called Global Sustainable Development Goals (GSDG or simply SDG). I especially do not believe that we should rely on models— at least not the models that have been used to justify the seriously misguided and destructive policies asserted to support those goals. I believe much of our present misery— not yet fully appreciated in its scope— is due to a superstitious belief in “Science” and its models and a refusal or at least a severe hesitance to observe and act on the basis of what we can find at the empirical frontier.

The most recent UN report on sustainability is the 2019 Global Sustainable Development Report, entitled *The Future is Now: Science for achieving sustainable development*. Written by the “independent group of scientists appointed by the Secretary General (UN)”, the report focuses on “how science can best accelerate the achievement of the sustainable development goals”. The authors call for “sustainability science”. The authors add that, “science and technology are at the heart of the 2030 Agenda, included as one of the means of implementation under Goal 17.”[iii]

This raises the question “what is science?” I believe most people would answer this question with the admission that “science is what scientists do”. There are sciences, like physics, chemistry, biology, that are called the natural sciences, sometimes the “hard” sciences.

Then there are those relatively new fields like psychology and sociology or economics, which are frequently called human, or social, or “soft” sciences. The distinction implies that physical or natural sciences are somehow more scientific—by which people generally mean experimentally based, tested, fact-oriented while social sciences are not really experimental, not very accurate or lacking in universally accepted methods. I do not want to open this debate here. However I think it is very important to recognize that even under normal conditions there is no universal answer to the question what constitutes science.

What is meant by sustainable, especially sustainable development? The UN definition says this is development that “meets then needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” So if we accept this definition—at least for the sake of argument—then what does science tell us about sustainable development and how best to accelerate its achievement?

I want to argue here that “science” actually does two things. One, it provides models for interpreting reality. Two, it provides the rhetorical foundation for what must be believed, that is what we call Truth.

At the end of the 19th century there was a change in economic theory and in the structure of the sciences as a whole. In what has been called the Marginal Revolution, led by economists like Stanley Jevons, Carl Menger, Léon Walras and Alfred Marshall, economics ceased to be the study of the allocation of surplus and became the study of scarcity.[iv] At the same time economists shifted their attention from the real economy and industrial development to mathematical models of the economy. This was the time when mathematics became the language of science. Science defined reality in mathematical terms and therefore reality was supposed to be the most logical, coherent and efficient mathematical formula. Today that mathematical modeling is also computer-based modeling. We are supposed to assume that the model is not just a selection or a hypothesis about reality—but that it is identical with reality.

In the 1970s there was a series of high-level international meetings at which the human environment was debated.[v] All of these meetings focused on the claim that the world was overpopulated and that this overpopulation was causing all the social and economic disruption that had been increasing since the end of the Second World War. Then as now, supposed overpopulation and scarcity of resources was made the central policy issue to be governed by global action. However the only way one could possibly claim that population was excessive was to build a mathematical model. Any such model requires assumptions—which cannot be proven—and a choice of parameters from a potentially infinite number of factors. The main assumption, better said concern, by those attending

these international meetings was: after the world war and the independence of many European and American colonies, population was growing again. These people would want to live at least at the same level as their former colonial masters did. This problem was defined as overpopulation. A cottage industry emerged producing mathematical models to show that such development would lead to disaster—leaving it rather vague as for whom.

Already at the 1972 Stockholm conference the People's Republic of China objected to the population model proposed. China was justified in its objection at least because, like the Soviet Union, it had lost about 20 per cent of its population due to World War II and the subsequent civil war (fought also to prevent re-colonisation of the country as had occurred in Korea and Indochina after 1945). While world population has grown since 1945, this growth has not been uniform. While consumption has expanded, that too has not been distributed uniformly. US diplomat and "Cold Warrior" George Kennan advised the US government in the immediate post-war era that it would take military and economic coercion to assure that the US - with approximately 20 per cent of the world's population—could continue to consume about 60 per cent of the world's resources. In short, the main assumption of the overpopulation model was the equilibrium needed to preserve the status quo for now and "for future generations". The model for population growth treated the non-white (including China and the Soviet Union) like a rabbit infestation. It assumed that such rabbits would naturally consume more resources and reduce that 60 per cent claim. Just as the marginal revolution seems to have coincided with the abolition of slavery in the 19th century, the basis of population science and its peculiar form of environmentalism emerged with the end of European colonialism.

Moreover the insistence that a necessarily finite series of factors were isomorphic with the earth's environment requires a political decision and the power to impose it. The choice to eliminate all natural phenomena, e.g. solar or lunar influences or the movement of the Earth in the solar system (or universe) from any calculations is based on limited and in part erroneous assumptions—foremost of which is that the model is identical with reality. Add to this some of the factual absurdities like "zero carbon" or "net zero carbon dioxide emissions". All aerobic animals—of which humans are just the most conspicuous—produce carbon dioxide by metabolizing oxygen from the atmosphere. At the same time nearly all plant life depends on the absorption of carbon dioxide. Carbon is not the foundation of fossil fuels but the foundation of life itself on this planet. Hence "carbon neutral" is just another euphemism for an equilibrium in which the status quo—for the ownership/ ruling class—is preserved at the expense of respiration for the rest of the planet and osmosis for the Earth's plant life. Systems theories also emerged together with cybernetics at the same time as these population reduction models. Why was that? It was surely no coincidence that the leading edge systems theory acolytes joined the military-industrial complex. Probably the most notorious system developed was the counter-insurgency program in Vietnam known as Phoenix. Systems theory together with CIA -funded social anthropology were developed to manage emerging populations that had previously been managed by missionaries and the colonial services. Cybernetics as well as artificial intelligence (AI) continued where Taylorism finished in the reorganization of factory labour. Despite extravagant scientific assertions and miraculous claims for improvement of work processes, the real scientific value produced by "compulsive calculators" is not beyond dispute.[vi]

All these models purport to predict the future (because they claim to represent the real world) but are in fact only tools for social management, like Tarot cards. Fortune reading

can influence behavior and perceptions but that is not the same as predicting the future. That should be obvious once we ask what our particular future would mean for someone on another continent whom we do not even know. Scientists respond with statistics and measurements but these too are only structured guesses. One can only measure something one already assumes exists. We do not know therefore the possible importance of all the things we are not measuring!

The universe or the planet might be treated as a system but there is absolutely no way to know whether it is a system or whether the description of such a system in mathematical or computer simulation is accurate. The only thing that a model can do is provide instructions for people to behave in certain ways. Thus a policy based on a model is no different from a policy based on arbitrary command or fantasy.

The next problem we have is “the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. If these needs are truly—their own—how can we know what they are or how they could be met? What we really mean is – assuming that the future will be like the present, preserving the ability to meet needs perceived today in some unknowable future will lend ability to those who actually live in the future. That is if they are like us. That is what “the science” tells us.

Essentially since 1945, when the largest industrial science project in the world (at that time) the Manhattan Project, established the US as the world’s single biggest funder of all scientific activity, Science has been transformed into a new religion, complete with priests and an ecclesiastical hierarchy.[vii]

This was possible not only because of the enormous amounts of money spent to produce the atomic bombs but because everyone involved at any level of scientific management was sworn to secrecy and loyalty. These priests in this religion of science also claim to know the Truth.

That is they claim the right to tell us what must be believed– even if it contradicts lived experience. The church of Science is based on that access to power first obtained by the ability to make terrible weapons of mass destruction. The flows of money and privilege to universities, research centres, publications, hospitals, schools, in short everywhere where knowledge is produced or transmitted, also mean the capacity to control access to those resources and institutions.[viii] We are talking in other words not about the science that tells us how to build a house or a car but the Science that tells us what we have to believe about the world and about ourselves.

Sustainability is not a rational question, nor is it a scientific question. It is a political question.

It is a question we have to ask ourselves in real time in real space. If we use a model we must remember that it is just a model. The CAD/CAM image is just an image and not the product. The ingredients on the package are not identical with what you eat or drink. Science cannot tell us what we need, let alone what future generations will need. These are political decisions and not scientific ones. Of course if one abandons political criteria using real data in real time and space for whatever some authority claims is “the science” then it should be clear that any decisions that result are based on what we are told to *believe* not on what we know.

The GSDGs claim to be based on Science because that has become our universal faith. Science has changed from the techniques of knowing, e.g. experimental feedback, trial and error, into the model for Truth, as religious dogma.[ix] Science has become just another way of saying “the word of god”. This does not mean that everything discussed or proposed under the Sustainable Development Goals lacks empirical sense. However the goals can really only make sense if they are subject to empirical testing and reflect the real living conditions of the people in the places where action is contemplated. In fact careful reading of the UN documents shows a plan to convert people to a vision and persuade them to apply this vision just the way the missionaries did since exploration and colonial expansion began some 500 years ago. The stakeholder is either a financial beneficiary or someone who will be burned at the stake for the benefit of the former.

The central premise of the official version of sustainable development—as promoted by the UN—has always been that nothing could be modified in the surviving system that could jeopardize the survival and growth of the victors in the Great War against socialism. To put it in a vulgar but more sincere form, sustainability meant (and means) sustainable profits and growth of the victors’ system, the capitalist system, in particular finance capitalism—concentrated in the US and EU, but dominated by the tandem financial hubs, Wall Street and the City of London. Since 2000 and again 2008 and again 2020, the rhetoric of the Sustainable Development Goals, although attributed to the UN, is really verbatim the language of the World Economic Forum, the ecumenical council of finance capitalism.

The SDG and the repeated proposals for their implementation are religious precepts. As such they lack both historical and empirical perspectives. They are dogmatic assertions. The policies and eventual laws, rules and regulations proposed or already adopted do not rely on life experience, history or local reality. While lip service is paid to participation and admissions that there is no “one size fits all” policy, the actual imposition of these dogmas has no basis in the observed empirical frontier. It is like so many other clerical dogmas, a top down regime. There is no real feedback loop or interest in what happens in daily life.

To illustrate my point: in 2020 almost the entirety of small and medium-sized business was ordered to halt. Computer models were used to produce absurdly exaggerated projections of mortality and healthcare system risk. At the highest international level, so-called scientific experts claimed that they knew what would happen to the health and survival of the world’s population. In fact the historical record shows that these models were rehearsed repeatedly over the past 20 years.[x]

Yet these experts at no time were able to construct a model for the survival of the SME sector. There was no risk management plan to preserve the critical employers and producers. In fact these issues were never substantive elements of the tabletop exercises of which there were more than 20 held since 2001. We know here in Portugal how important the SME sector is for employment and survival of many families. This was not a discovery of 2020. If we are honest we know that many people had to work covertly for fear of incurring serious financial penalties. We know that under such conditions another “illness” is promoted, corruption. The SME sector is vulnerable to the corruption regime by which one has to find favors from the local police or administration— just to work or do business. We can only guess how much it cost or would cost when people who need to work for survival are forced to pay protection to do jobs that are completely lawful.

Although global systems planning anticipated the use of the mass media and other centrally controlled facilities in the event of a “health emergency”, none of the models and none of

the policies derived from them in any way addressed the local economic conditions. Moreover while there were constant reports of alleged cases, there were no details available for how many people were unemployed (sacked) or businesses that closed permanently. There was enormous concern for the supply of medical products. However the obvious disruption of supply chains— attenuated by virtue of years of “just in time” (JIT) downsizing and outsourcing— were disregarded— at least for the SME sector. What was clear — no later than the end of 2020- is that the global online distribution cartel had no such problems moving goods or money.[xi]

On the SDG website one can watch the short video introducing the 2019 GSGD Report. The narrator explains what an opportunity was created by the 2020 “pandemic”. It is praised as an opportunity to destroy much of the economy to “build it back better”.[xii] So if you think that the SDG are a United Nations project, supported by an international consensus of people who want to sustain a decent quality of life for humans wherever they live, then you will find you are mistaken. The SDG are a project of the most powerful business corporations in the world: it is a project to manage their risks by transferring them entirely to you.

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Notes

[i] See Gerhard de Haan, (Ed.) *Umweltbewußtsein und Massenmedien: Perspektiven ökologische Kommunikation*, Berlin, 1995.

[ii] T.P. Wilkinson, “The Temperature Movement: The Reincarnation of a Perennial Anglo-American Obsession”, www.dissidentvoice.org 29 October 2019

[iii] In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: “Science for sustainable development is the focus of Chapter 32 of Agenda 21. It calls for: strengthening the scientific basis for sustainable management; enhancing scientific understanding; improving long-term scientific assessment; and building up scientific capacity and capability. (www.sdgs.un.org)

[iv] See Nuno Ornelas Martins, „Interpreting the capitalist order before and after the marginalist revolution“ in *Cambridge Journal of Economics*(2015), 39, 1109-1127.

[v] The 1970s were an era of great unrest, the US war against Vietnam, independence wars in Africa, domestic protests, the first “oil shocks”. In 1972, the Club of Rome issued its report *The Limits to Growth*. Based on the *World 3* computer model the authors insisted that the world’s resources would be exhausted by continued population growth.

[vi] See Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason*, New York, 1976.

[vii] The Manhattan Project started in 1939. By the time the atomic bombs were deployed the project was employing more than 130,000 people and spending the equivalent of approximately USD 23 billion. The project’s secrecy was so great that long after the project had formally ended the US government executed Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953 for allegedly supplying the Soviet Union information about the atomic bombs. One of the project’s leading scientists, Robert Oppenheimer, was purged and deprived of his security clearances for opposing the development of the hydrogen bomb. Already “Big Science” had emerged as a combination of huge research budgets and political power.

[viii] Another example is the US National Institutes of Health, originally part of the US military. The subunit National Institute for Allergies and Infectious Diseases, headed by Dr Anthony Fauci since 1984, has a budget of more than USD 8 billion per year to dispense as research grants, making it one of the world's largest single funders of scientific research. A substantial portion of that money comes from the US military budget, too.

[ix] See Morse Peckham, *Explanation and Power*, New York, 1979 and Stanley Aronowitz, *Science as Power: Discourse and Ideology in Modern Society*, Minneapolis, 1988.

[x] See Robert F. Kennedy Jr. *The Real Anthony Fauci: Bill Gates, Big Pharma and the Global War on Democracy and Public Health*, New York, 2021.

[xi] "The 13 top consumer-focused e-commerce businesses increased their revenues sharply during the pandemic. In 2019, these companies made sales worth USD 2.4 trillion. Following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, this rose sharply to USD 2.9 trillion, and a further increase followed in 2021, taking total sales to USD 3.9 trillion ... Alibaba, Amazon, JD.com and Pinduoduo increased their revenues by 70% between 2019 and 2021 and their share of total sales through all these 13 platforms rose from around 75% in 2018 to over 80% in 2020 and 2021." www.unctad.org This does not take profits into account.

[xii] See Klaus Schwab (World Economic Forum), *Covid-19 The Great Reset*, 2020. "The pandemic represents a rare but narrow window of opportunity to reflect, reimagine and reset our world." For a critical discussion of the real economics behind the past thirty years, in particular the fallout from the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis which is irradiating the world economy to this day, see the work of economist Michael Hudson, starting with *Superimperialism* (first published in 1968) and subsequent work: www.Michael-Hudson.com

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