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The Dialectic of Sustainment

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In an article in a previous issue of DPP ‘sustainment’ was placed in the context of an epochal shift, which was named as ‘The Sustainment’. The magnitude of this shift equates with the move from the ancient to the modern world. Its imperative is to counter the inherent defuturing of the economy, cultures and institutions of the contemporary ‘developed’ world. Defuturing is defined here as the agency of unsustainability in the medium of time. The pervasive condition of unsustainability is usually inchoately designated as a global ‘environmental crisis’ constituted by specific biophysical problems like global warming. But such a designation does not actually name the fundamental problem, which is, de facto, the unknowing actions of our anthropocentric being. Thus, all the manifest problems evidencing a biosphere under stress are themselves merely symptomatic signs of this far more fundamental causal condition. So while significant biophysical problems get constantly objectified as fixed empirical facts they are frequently the product of human agency, with their severity relative to the positive or negative actions we take *en masse*.

'The Sustainment' speaks to the thinking, designing and making that has to be done in the face of this situation. This task is extraordinarily difficult to grasp as an overall vision, but nonetheless vital to embrace. Our aim now is to register some of the most obvious implications of responding to this challenge, and to help to do this the concept of 'the dialectic of sustainment' will be introduced and unpacked.

Before going further, the notion of the dialectic and its relation to sustainment begs qualification.

It is not possible to evoke the notion of the dialectic without introducing complexity and controversy. The term has a long history of unstable and contestable meanings. While this indeterminate situation opens up a number of problems, it also provides a possibility for new usage in the emergent dialogue of sustainment.

Interest in dialectics has ebbed and flowed. As a method of forcing knowledge to reveal itself in conversation based on questions and answers, it was first demonstrated in Socrates' discursive dialogues and in the dialogical style of thought of Plato, who asserted in the *Republic* that it is supreme knowledge. However, it seems to have been first systematically used in the – 3rd century by the founder of Stoic philosophy, Zeno, a follower of Parmenides. Additionally, Aristotle incorporated dialectics in his method of logic, defining it as reasoning from the basis of probabilities. Dialectics then, is firmly lodged in the very formative moment (and problematic nature) of western thought. The idea re-emerged at various moments in the history of philosophy. For instance, it appeared again in twelfth century in the writings of Scholastic philosopher Abelard, who employed a mode of argument based on putting both a case for and against his postulated proposition. Equally, a concern with dialectics was part of Enlightenment thought – Immanuel Kant viewed it as flawed reasoning that led to specious argument. In contrast, GWF Hegel, its greatest champion, gave it a great deal of attention and claimed it as a specific logic of thought. This is generally, but inadequately, characterised as a process in which contradiction, and then the reconciliation of contradiction occurs by working through thesis, antithesis and finally, synthesis.¹

Arguments over forms of dialectics continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – the most overt example being Karl Marx's claim to have turned 'Hegel on his head' while having appropriated his thinking on the dialectic unchanged. Notwithstanding the shadow of Hegel, no consensus on the meaning of dialectics can be claimed. The very notion goes to the core of the relation between concepts, meaning and language. As Theodor Adorno observed, 'the name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than most objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that then comes to contradict...'²

By implication, whatever we name, whatever we identify, there is also that which evades, escapes, is other and supplementary. Truth is thus never simply a victory over untruth but a perpetual struggle with its own internalised negation. Long before deconstruction arrived and embraced this idea, dialectical thought had acknowledged such a condition. It follows that dialectics itself is not free, and cannot be liberated, from the condition of limitation it speaks.³

One cannot think 'the dialectic of sustainment' outside of the implications of such thinking. And one cannot think 'the dialectic of sustainment' scientifically, for in its enfolding of contradiction dialectics is profoundly unscientific. Dialectically, sustainment depends upon the creation of non-scientific thought beyond the limitation and exhaustion of the humanities.⁴

Sustainment means nothing without grasping its unbreakable bond to unsustainment, which is its very ground (this is one reason why so much of the rhetoric of sustainability, with its quietism on unsustainability, is not only meaningless but lacks the possibility of ethical decision).

Recasting this observation: destruction and creation are indivisibly implicated in each other – the one always coexists with the other. This thinking can of course pass through many levels. To take one example: the process dematerialisation (the aiming to displace products by the creation of sustaining services) or rematerialisation (displacement of high impact material practices via the [re]creation of low impact ones) can be seen as unified elements of one sub-set of the idea of 'the dialectic of sustainment'. Once this particular form of destruction and creation becomes understood and generalised amongst designers, it has the possibility of becoming a taken-for-granted part of their everyday working practices (including their dialogue with clients).

What is created or what is destroyed can be comprehended as negation or affirmation. To bring something into existence is to create a force that can, slowly or rapidly, sustain or undermine being, and of course, for no matter how slowly change occurs, nothing is unchanging. Likewise, whatever we destroy can open or close the possibility of affirmative creation.

To take this analysis to the project of advancing 'the sustainment' requires identifying what has to be destroyed as well as what has to be created, and thereafter find the means to do both.

The fabricated world of human making, and its transformation of the 'natural,' has been constituted by the relational interactions all domains of human knowledge, their symbolic orders and associated material practices. But it has also been a product of unknowing – be this manifest as the accidental, a lack of curiosity or simply by acting in ignorance. Unknowing, however,

is not simply the binary opposite of knowing, nor is it immediately erased by the latter's arrival. Rather, and in keeping with a dialectical understanding, it has always been a fellow traveller of knowledge.

From the perspective of the still expanding condition of unsustainability, the most significant consequence of the continuation of unknowing has been a failure to realise, as indicated, that creation is, and always has been, indivisible from destruction. Taken at its simplest, we humans destroyed trees to build ships (while failing to realise the consequences of the destruction of forests); we burned coal, and more recently oil, to produce energy (while failing to realise the destructive climatic consequences); in feeding ourselves we have killed enormous numbers of animals and depleted vast numbers of the sea's fish stock (while failing to realise the consequences for the well-being of the biodiversity of the critical ecological systems upon which we depend).

Wherever we look we find examples of the unknowing and unthinking that has underpinned the destructive actions of human beings. Destruction is therefore not mostly the product of intention, although numerous technologies of war and peace-time have been created over the millennia to deliver it, but rather destruction is elemental to our anthropocentric being (as is creation).

It is essential to recognise that to counter the structural condition of unsustainability, there needs to be a continual effort of destruction, and that without this, there can be no ability to sustain. In moving the ability to sustain from a metaphysical to an ontological condition, it is vital to know that the advancement of sustainment requires taking full responsibility for what is both created and destroyed. By exercising this responsibility, acts of sustainment become possible as ethics inscribed in practice and artifice (which is rather different from an 'ethical practice' wherein ethics can be divided from practice).

Brought to the conjuncture of ethics and practice, responsibility is actually enacted by deciding what to materially and symbolically make *and* what to destroy. Such acts of decision are a pre-condition for establishing the epochal shift that 'The Sustainment' names. However, sustaining 'The Sustainment' does not demand a condition of perpetual self-consciousness. Moreover, designing directed by the decision of 'what needs to be destroyed and created' should not be viewed as just the means by which immaterial and material things are positively changed but, more fundamentally, this designing needs to be embraced as the founding of cultural traditions able to carry sustainment into realms of unknowing. The way tradition is characterised here implies that acting with sustaining ability can be behaviourally inscribed through new materially grounded symbolic actions.⁵ The ontological designing implicit in this suggestion is again predicated on a refusal of a binary distinction between symbolic knowledge and things.

Such designing and its relation to establishing new traditions stands in clear contrast to the positing of transformative agency with material artefacts by ‘green design,’ ecodesign’, ‘sustainable design’ etc. Furthermore, such designing asserts that cultural actions are of equal, or even greater, importance than those that take place in the techno-scientific sphere.

Crucially, what is being advocated is the acquisition of the means of destruction of that which destroys.

Against this backdrop, one may ask ‘what are the basic elements of the advocated practice’? The answer involves two intertwined activities: learning to eliminate the unknowing destruction that is at the core of unsustainability; and, learning to make as a material and cultural remaking.

More specifically – learning to eliminate what is destructive of the foundation of being sustain-able, first of all requires learning how to create a theoretical practice able to disclose significant material and symbolical forces of negation. This learnt activity of critical inquiry has nothing to do with making moral judgements. Rather it involves, in conjunction with a process of creating disclosures, an engagement with forces of negation as they are inscribed or embedded in:

- acts of conception/design and making; in the very existence of what has been made
- normalised operation of services, systems, organisations and industries found to be present in cultural life, and
- irresponsible and evident acts of disposal.

In keeping with how the ‘dialectic of sustainment’ has been characterised, the disclosure of negation although providing a focus for what has to be eliminated/destroyed/unmade may also bring to light what sustains, or what can be made sustainable by designed remaking.

The question of what acts of elimination/destruction/unmaking/remaking actually consist of cannot be answered in general: only conjunctural and post-inquiry specific answers can be presented. However, it is possible to sketch some elimination scenarios that will help ground what has been abstractly outlined.

While the elimination of the unsustainable, characterised as a ‘force of negation of being’, may actually involve an environmentally physically benign act of destruction (e.g., via the dismantling, crushing, dissolving or complete combustion of a specific material agent of unsustainability) its complete neutralisation will frequently require a complete symbolic erasure of value, status, presence and cultural agency. So while it might be appropriate, for example, to deal with a business making and selling animal parasite control products that introduce harmful chemicals into the food chain, by having them withdrawn from the market (and then safely incinerated in a closed retort), this will not really deal with

the fundamental problems. These rest with a consumer market constantly demanding so much food that intensive agriculture has become the norm. Technically, the link between parasite infestations and intensive agriculture centres on 'stocking rate' – the more, and the longer, animals are accommodated together in limited space (e.g. cattle in a feedlot), the more physical problems will occur. In this situation, and many others, chemicals are continually being used to sustain unsustainable farming practices. Thus, to advance the ability to sustain the health of many farm animals, and to prevent public health problems, requires taking aggressive symbolic and economic action that devalues the legitimacy of (and then eliminates) particular kinds of dietary habits, agricultural production practices, their associated materials, technologies, enabling products and meanings. Such aggressive economic and cultural action would effectively contribute to changing the public perception, and the desirability of, food that is produced unsustainably.

Bringing animal products, and the production of food in general, back within the constraints of the carrying capacity of the land and its environmental character, privileging quality over quantity (including flavour over appearance), localising distribution (rather than distributing from centralised markets) are demands that are able to gain popular support. They are not at odds with feeding populations. The forms of elimination necessary for such an approach to agriculture to become the dominant model (rather than just supplying niche markets) while not without pain, would not put farmers out of business. The reverse, it would reward those many farmers who already are environmentally responsible, as well as creating new farming opportunities.⁶

While significant means of elimination are clearly available in many spheres of economic and cultural activity, there is still an enormous design challenge to bring them to light, explore their potential and innovate. The same observation applies to remaking.

The practice of remaking gathers and tutors a clustering of intellectual and material enterprises that acknowledge that we make both conceptually and materially by reducing what exists in mind and matter to a raw material. It follows that, within the schema of 'the dialectic of sustainment' remaking is the interlocutor of elimination. We can only make with what already is, be it of mind or matter.

Remaking, so framed, embraces going beyond the intellectual project of deconstruction (as it exposed the foundations and constituents of thought) to remake thinking (a very different exercise from 'rethinking' with the way we already think) in order to act with sustaining ability. So grasped, it is theory directive of a material practice that acknowledges the imperative to overcome the unsustainable. This could mean a literal disassembly and recreation of some thing, but equally it could also leave a thing

totally untouched, but transform how it is viewed and used by radically changing its meaning and status by a designed cultural reconfiguration. Remaking is not just limited to engaging specific ideas or objects. It can also be characterised in a larger frame as creating a mode of ‘trans-formative being-in-the-world toward-sustainment’, which means the formation of ontologies that occupy an unsustainable world while working to remake it so it may become sustain-able. The ‘dialectic of sustainment’ here becomes a lived condition wherein a being moves from the continual confrontation with, awareness of, and a need to decide between, creation and destruction, to the naturalisation of elimination and remaking for sustainment as the way that being ‘responsibly anthropocentric’ shows itself. What this mode of being registers is that while we cannot overcome our nihilistic essence, we can mitigate it.

Making the first move toward remaking one’s self to become a ‘being-in-the-world toward-sustainment’ requires an initial exercise of embracing the ‘dialectic of sustainment’ at a personal level of elimination and remaking of thought and action, with the aim of becoming a more clear(ed) thinking, response-able and critical actor. Essential to this exercise is the rejection of a utopian view of ‘sustainability’ and recognising the creation of the epoch of sustainment as an enduring work, without an endpoint, but just process (the process of being sustain-able). It also means rejecting the false promise of the gestural, but ruling, model of ‘sustainability’ that ends up sustaining unsustainability.

Clearly remaking that which is so critical for human futures, cannot restore the already destroyed. However, as has been said, it is possible to destroy many forces of destruction. Equally, it is also possible to recover, recreate and newly invent numerous agents of material, immaterial and cultural sustainment.

Concretely, the substance of what is being evoked by these remarks is overwhelming, sobering, extremely confronting, replete with positive opportunities and absolutely vital to confront. Certainly, elimination and remaking have to be seen in terms of the historically established content and intent across a very broad front that includes, for example, existing forms of: education, habitation, traditions, values, beliefs, lifestyles, careers, production, products and services, as they all drive the formation and deformation of our world (including how we see ourselves and non-human others). In contrast to the conceptual superficiality and questionable efficacy of current practices of ‘sustainability’, working for ‘The Sustainment’ – a paradigmatic shift in our ‘being-in-the-world’ – proffers a condition of limitation that (dialectically) provides an almost unlimited scope of action over an unlimited expanse of time. So far but a few people have glimpsed this vista, either as a transformation of daily routines or, more dramatically, as a mind-spinning challenge to one’s imagination and skills. Certainly,

it enfolds a fundamental remaking of the nature and potential of design.

We should be clear: 'The Sustainment' has very little to do with 'saving the world' and everything to do with securing a future for our being-in-the-world that overwhelms our worldly presence as the primary agents of a still proliferating condition of unsustainability, while at the same time making us anthropocentrically responsible agents for sustain-ability.

'The Sustainment' cannot arrive via voluntarism.

Most succinctly, 'The Sustainment' (so named or named in another way) will increasingly be the only possible way to maintain the most critical freedoms of 'being-in-the-world'. This implies the imposition of control over the still unchecked expansion of defuturing unsustainability.⁷ Equality among nations and populations to become 'modern' and freely 'consume' without control is a contemporary false freedom. It expresses that un-freedom which is unsustainability. Such 'false freedom' is uncontained destruction and antithetical to justice. We should recall that a fundamental principle of civil society is that freedom is dependent upon limit and control ('freedom under the law'). This fundamental principle demands being reapplied to the current unstable socio-political world, for societies wishing to be sustained have to impose new limits and controls in the face of the unsustainable. The proposition of 'sustainable development' ('sustainability' integrated into globalising economic expansion) rest with the absolutely flawed capitalist utopianism of merging economic growth with the ability to sustain. Within the framing of 'the dialectic of sustainability', for growth read unchecked destruction via unlimited 'consumption'. In contrast, the remaking of 'quality' by design begs to become the means to re-realise what anthropologist Marshall Sahlins identified as an economic condition created by some now erased 'primitive' cultures – 'wealth without excess'.⁸

Imposition of controls obviously incorporates a good deal of existing environmental regulation, but more radically, asserts an extensive control of consumerism (and so production, but not on the failed model of a command economy). Obviously, such action puts democracy firmly before a critical gaze, while throwing up some extremely confronting questions, like: 'can the imposition of limit and controls essential for sustain-ability arrive democratically'?

It's fair to say that delimiting the freedom to consume would hardly be viewed as a viable proposition for democratic politics and politicians to take to an electorate. Likewise, it is not exactly a saleable idea that democratic nations can put to the non-democratic world as part of their project of establishing a global hegemony for their monolithic economic determinism. Against this backdrop, only two options exist: (i) the creation of an unbreakable consensus between all democratic parties within democratic nations so that the control of consumption with all

its economic consequences, is imposed; or, (ii) the arrival of a new decisionist politics able to both impose the controls and a new economic model. As already indicated, this might be predicated on expanding the idea, form, practice and meaning of 'quality' while eliminating the capital accumulation resting on a quantitative system of exchange. Conversely, it could even be that the imposition of limits and the shift to a 'quality' based economy, while being destructive of the (hollow) democracy of unconstrained consumption, could actually herald the forging of an authentic democracy of resources – democracy that recognises that equity, limits and the ability to sustain are at the core of a politics of freedom.

Thinking the relation between democracy and sustain-ability is one of the many daunting tasks before us. Certainly, it is an issue on which more has to be said.

Notes

1. This common description does not grasp the movement of 'knowledge knowing itself' (the knowing return of foundational thought to itself) as a basic trait of 'the other of the one' (the contradiction of critical reflection), the thing and the human, the ontic and the hermeneutic. See, for example the account given by Werner Marx in *Heidegger and the Tradition* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971, 59.
2. Theodor Adorno *Negative Dialectics* London: Routledge, 1990, 5.
3. Martin Heidegger *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, 74.
4. While this observation appear here as a 'throw-away line' it is relevant to the debate on design education in this issue of DDP.
5. Rather than a new idea what is being proposed is the recovery of a very old idea – see for example David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames *Thinking Through Confucius* New York: SUNY, 1987.
6. Some of the beef produced in the vast expanses of the western area of the Australian State of Queensland is exported as 'organic' – because neither the animals nor the land are treated with any kind of chemical. However, ever since beef has been produced in this environment it has been chemical-free. The amount of space the animals have to roam and graze, plus the dryness of the land are not conditions which favour parasites (nor is it economic to administer preventative treatments to such scattered herds).
7. The globalisation of 'consumerism' as an ontology, destroys more sustaining values, beliefs and cultures, while also driving the appropriation and squandering of 'natural resources' to create environmentally harmful processes, products and services.
8. See Marshall Sahlins, 'The Original Affluent Society', in *Stone Age Economics* Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1972.