

# Speaking of Sustainability: Complexity within the language commons and the historical ontology of styles of reasoning for discourse paradigms

J.A. Couey<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

How we describe and communicate 'sustainable technology' to address global environmental governance and social justice initiates from within the communication commons. Complexity in defining 'sustainable technology' from within the communication commons arises due to modes of inquiry through technological specialization. Various specialized discipline perspectives compete by struggling for power to control the communication commons informed by their historical ontological frameworks associated with paradigms of reasoning. This article examines economic discipline development as an example of historical and on-going discourses with styles of reasoning sometimes in contention with commons approaches. Resiliency within the linguistic commons arises in the manner by which truth and falsehood can come into being relative to specific styles of rationality. Implications arise by what we hold to be common, and therefore the dialectic realism and dynamic nominalism for styles of reasoning raises issues of incommensurability with commons approaches seeking sustainable democracy and justice compared to atomistic technological paradigms.

Keywords: commons approaches, environmental and social justice, sustainable technology, dialectic communication, historical ontology, and paradigms.

## INTRODUCTION

"Рукописи не горят" – (Manuscripts don't burn)<sup>2</sup>

*"I wouldn't want what I may have said or written to be seen as laying any claims to totality. I don't try to universalize what I say; conversely what I don't say isn't meant to be thereby disqualified as being of no importance... I like to open up a space of research, try it out, and then if it doesn't work, try again somewhere else"* (Michel Foucault 1980, in Baynes et al. 1987: 101).

The state of contemporary nature-society relations abounds with paradoxes that defy human historical experience and interestingly geological history as well (i.e. society development theory that must contend with persistent & growing inequality and disempowerment; global scale systemic ecological-social degradation; proliferating intergenerational global risks like climate change, nuclear proliferation, ocean

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<sup>1</sup> Address correspondence to Jeremiah Couey, Center for Energy & Environmental Policy, 278 Graham Hall, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware, 19716; e-mail: jcouey@gmail.com. Acknowledgement is due to the star that shines bright in my life – the Earth says hello! (mistakes are herein my own.)

<sup>2</sup> Bulgakov's poetry ringed loud in my ears as I misplaced my final proofread copy on the day of submission. The quote is from Bulgakov, 1967: 300; and thus humbly begins my paper; жили были...

acidification; etc...). In the background of these and other issues the 'sustainability discourse' grows in mainstream momentum as it seeks governance frameworks for the local and global commons, especially for uniquely modern issues like anthropogenic climate change. The intrinsic social nature of governance correctly addresses my shared assertion that "the challenge of sustainability will only be met when there is a consensus on how modernity became unsustainable" (Norgaard, 1994: 32). Governance of the commons in the democratic sense would imply the need to examine humanity's truancy towards the "social and political organization of nature" in mainstream nature-society relations, and the resultant "production of unequal nature" in the course of building the Anthropocene (Byrne et al. 2002).

By the same token, a generalized sustainability discourse analysis entails reflecting on our linguistic inhabitation of sustainability<sup>3</sup>; or essentially what truly sustains humanity and our regeneration capacity towards the 'reciprocity of self and world'. The importance of inhabiting sustainability recognizes the everyday practices of building and inhabiting our dynamic world, and consequently suggests an opportunity to explore the role of technology in the sustenance of the commons. As Aidan Davison noted, "the reciprocity of self and world required for genuine inhabitation of ecological and social places is lost. Any recovery of this reciprocity thus demands that decisions about technology be recognized as nothing less than political and moral, i.e. rational deliberations about what kinds of humanity we want to build and inhabit" (Davison, 2004: 85).

Through my personal deliberation about how we speak about sustainability and the role to technology, and in attempting to combat humanity's willingness to "sleepwalk through the process of reconstituting the conditions of human existence" (Winner, 1986: 10), my aim in this paper is explore the peripheral aspects of 'sustainable technology' by examining contested worldviews and 'object constitution in a discourse' (after M. Foucault)<sup>4</sup>. Peripheral examination offers critical social insight into both the evolution of a discourse, but also illustrates the role of specialization in our technological world. In many regards, a tangential assessment allows for a social critique from within modernity's technological milieu – an underappreciated dimension in sustainability narratives.

This paper subsequently introduces the specialized perspectives struggling for power to control the disciplinary commons through a simplistic example of contesting worldviews (a techno-economic world versus a view of the world as bio-dynamic interconnected living entities). These contrasted worldviews contextualize sustainability's social aspects, each vying for our attention concerning the social inhabitation of discourse narratives. To illustrate discourse narrative dominance and the contested language commons arenas, the historical evolution of economics is explored

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<sup>3</sup> My 'linguistic inhabitation of sustainability' focuses on the social practices of language & object constitution within community practices, and hence is a cultural appreciation of language without the research intension to examine the linguistic semantics of language itself, but instead reflect on sustainability's meaning in our social inhabitation of discourse narratives.

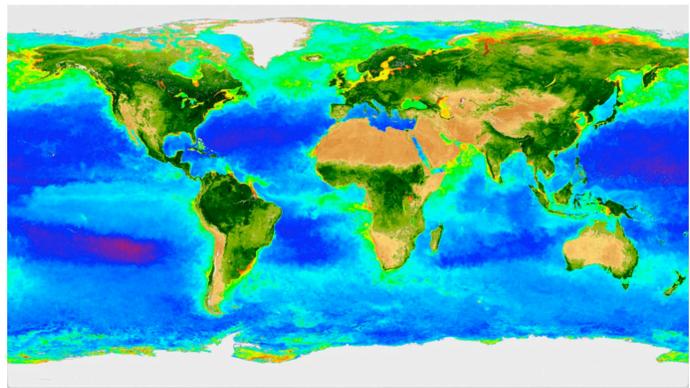
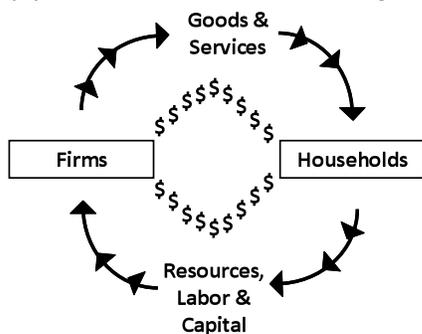
<sup>4</sup> 'Object constitution' demonstrates how I consider the social practices of technology in this research, and Langdon Winner and John Byrne cited above are excellent sources for understanding modernist inhabitations of technology, and the failure to understand the social issues at stake; additional perspectives are given by Willem H. Vanderburg, Jacques Ellul, Herbert Marcuse, Ivan Illich, & Lewis Mumford.

through seven schools of thought – from political economy to commons approaches. My concern relates to the ‘recourse to philosophy’ associated with paradigmatic styles of rationality<sup>5</sup>; where prominent theories in several of these schools replicate technological narratives without reference to dialectic social communications narrating the social continuum of the commons. Overall guidance throughout this paper is facilitated by considering the dynamic nominalism and dialectic realism<sup>6</sup> of the verb form sustaining; a recognition of the “actively normative questions that the idea of sustainability raises. We are required to probe: What truly sustains us? Why? And how do we know? Conversely, we must ask: What are we to sustain above all else? Why? And how may we do so?” (Davison, 2001: 64).

## THE CONTEXT: WORLDVIEWS IN CONFLICT

Humanity’s relation to the world around us has always been contested, and tenuous at best – our relation to “this brave o’erhanging firmament” and the ‘*short history of progress*’<sup>7</sup> demonstrates the need to examine our most basic worldview assumptions and orientations. The contested worldviews pictured below in Figure 1 demonstrate contradicting narratives of humanity’s inhabitation of the world.

Figure 1: (a) Techno-Economic Worldview<sup>8</sup> – contested with (b) A Shared Biosphere  
 (a) *the world viewed through economics*      (b) *a shared biosphere worldview*<sup>9</sup>



The left narrative exemplifies the reductionist economic models that overshadow alternative narratives, and in light of the current ecological crisis (let alone the current

<sup>5</sup> ‘recourse to philosophy’ quotes Thomas Kuhn; the subsequent sections will explore this in more detail.

<sup>6</sup> My use of dynamic nominalism and dialectic realism is taken from Ian Hacking, where dynamic nominalism is the interest in “how our practice of naming interacts with the things we name”, and dialectical realism appraises the “interactions between what there is (and what comes into being) and our conceptions of it” (Hacking, 2002: 2).

<sup>7</sup> Hamlet’s quote is explored in Ronald Wright’s *A Short History of Progress* to illustrate how during Shakespeare’s time they still conceived of the pre-Copernican worldview, and importantly seldom questioned that they were anything other than made in the ‘image of god’ (Wright, 2005: 10).

<sup>8</sup> This contrasting example was modeled after a similar one presented by Peter Victor at the 2010 NCSE’s The New Green Economy conference. Irony is not however lost to myself (and Victor I imagine also) in stating that the techno-economic worldview is ‘common’ knowledge...

<sup>9</sup> Image source is NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center. This picture is one frame of the seasonal variation of the biosphere of the earth; on land color gradated from brown to dark green for high photosynthesis areas, and in the ocean: red, yellow, and green pixels show dense phytoplankton blooms. <http://aes.gsfc.nasa.gov/vis/a000000/a003600/a003638/>

economic crisis as well), are overly simplistic in how it treats the quite dynamic right narrative of a shared biosphere. In the left image, a technocratic worldview has no genuine sustenance or intrinsic valuation account for foundational biological process and life's unique capacity to reconstitute the processes that regenerate itself. Perhaps it is then not that ironic to hear that Alan Greenspan recently admitted that "yes, I found a flaw... Flaw in the model that I perceived is the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works, so to speak" (PBS NewsHour, 2008)...

The conflicting contemporary instrumentalist economic worldview contrasting with a biodynamic living world exemplifies my appreciation of the way we "inhabit technology" and the language that informs our worldviews (after Davison 2004)<sup>10</sup>. And as exemplified in the unsustainable, efficiency driven, growth-centric eco-modernizing practice of economics today, speaking of sustainability opens up a space to deliberate on the historical, discursive, and normative nature of contemporary economic disciplines.

### OUR HOME & THE RULES TO GOVERN THE COMMONS?

The aim of this discourse analysis is to illustrate the historical developments of disciplines<sup>11</sup> by reviewing 'economics', and hence is not an exhaustive treatment of all the divisions, developments and the major thinkers that have pushed researchers in various directions. This historical assessment is illustrative of paradigmatic traditions (in the Kuhnian sense) of academic schools of thought, but likewise instructive in the evolving dialectic nature of our home and the rules we live by (i.e. the roots of the term 'economics'). Tension is likewise acknowledge both within economic disciplines and between them – inherent and necessary to the process of social inquiry and the normative guidance sought in the practice of governance. Furthermore and in light of the current economic crisis, the prevalence of paradigmatic economic analysis and policy formation, and its academic 'imperialism' (see for example Lazear's "Economic Imperialism", 2000; and the critical perspective historically in Byrne 1987, and more recently in Fine & Milonakis, 2009), suggests that understanding the space for participatory commons governance directly relates to the normative and political attributes for the rules that apply to our collective sustenance. In this regard my discourse analysis aims to consider disciplinary categorization and the "particular ways of regulating reference serve certain interests better than others" (McConnell-Ginet, 2008: 512). Therefore, recognizing language communities and how discourses take place within a community of practice<sup>12</sup>, I shall now turn to a historical appraisal of the

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<sup>10</sup> Recognition is due here in the inclusive manner in which I define technology, where instrumentalist or materialistic accounts alone fail to appreciate social technique constructions in how we 'objectify' nature and the rules we codify to govern society – technological systems as well. On the other hand, recognition is also needed that there are a variety of manners to express vastly different worldviews and one's experiences, even for basically the same situation; see for example Kay, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> "As discourses are social cognitions, socially specific ways of knowing social practices, they can be, and are, used as resources for representing social practices in text. This means that it is possible to reconstruct discourses from the texts that draw on them" (van Leeuwen, 2008: 6).

<sup>12</sup> McConnell-Ginet, 2008 states "communities of practice are, roughly, groups of people who interact on a fairly regular basis around some collective endeavor, in the course of which they develop and maintain regular ways of talking and of doing other things, social practices" (pg 506). Kuhn's position for understanding disagreements is also illuminating here, where "[those] who hold incompatible viewpoints

constructed and interactive worldview structure & rules or, that ‘critical functioning structure that defines how the world works, so to speak’...

### Political Economy

*Political Economy* begins my discussion, where prominent theorist like Adam Smith<sup>13</sup>, David Ricardo, Karl Marx and others were paramount in developing a political economy theory of the world centered on production and consumption. In its original etymology, political economy originated in the study of production-consumption, buying-selling, and their association with law, custom, and government for nation-states. Its origination is interwoven within moral philosophy, where cooperation would not require politics per say, but with competition there gives rise for the implicit need of political economy – a social relations and governance discourse for an economy. Theoretically, Marx’s contribution best illustrates in a succinct manner the systemic nature of conceptualizing human social relations (and nature to some extent) through the lens of the ‘metamorphosis of commodities’ (Marx, 1867, 116+). In the course of this discussion, and in light of the current economic crisis, political economy’s continued relevance today is exemplified with reflecting upon the ‘limits’ of valuation so concisely expressed with  $M' > M$ .

First, let me introduce the labor circuit: C - M - C, where each C stands for some commodity and M signifies Money. Laborers for example get paid wages (M), for providing their commodity labor (1st C) to produce some good or service commodities (2nd C). Second, there is the capital circuit: M - C - M', where capital money (1st M) is supplied by investors or the capitalist, who then wants to produce some commodity (C). The commodity is then sold for a profit (2nd M, or M' - “m-prime”). Take notice that the dashes between the symbols are not minus signs; they are simply showing the process of how labor and capital interact to produce goods and services. For Marx, he reasoned that the labor circuit was embedded in the capital circuit to produce the basic structure of capitalism:  $M - \{C - M - C\} - M'$ , where the commodities produced for the capital circuit are due to the labor circuit fulfilling the commodity generation process of the capital circuit. Individually, this analysis makes sense to each of us; we regularly practice it in everyday economic modern life. We have money to invest in our 401k for example, so we loan it out to someone to use for the production of goods. They dedicate their labor to producing this good, paying their own wages along the way. This good is sold to someone else, and the profits made return back to us so that we can gain interest on our original investment. Therefore we desire our total money recouped will be more than we

**Political Economy**  
(A. Smith, D. Ricardo K. Marx, etc.)

$$\begin{aligned} & \underbrace{C - M - C} \\ & M - C - M' \\ & = M - \{C - M - C\} - M' \\ & M' > M \end{aligned}$$

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be thought of as members of different language communities and that their communication problems be analyzed as problems of translation” (Kuhn, 1996 - originally 1962: postscript pg 175).

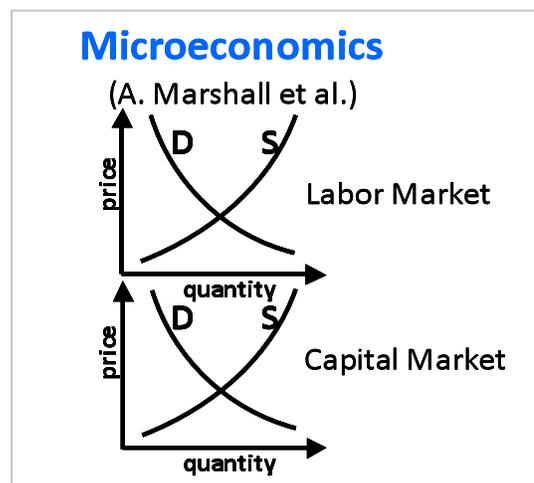
<sup>13</sup> Adam Smith’s contribution to political economy is revealed both in his scope of scholarly research (i.e. he published *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* before his more well know book - *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*), and his reservations towards a capitalistic society. For instance, how many economist today deeply reflect on the illustrative Smith quote: “All for ourselves, and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind” (pg 387).

invested, hence  $M' > M$ ... So, life is grand for us and wealth has been generated by our investment - we are happy with our return on investment and the personal fulfillment of  $M' > M$ . Unfortunately, we will have to "... do to others what you would have them do to you..." (Matthew 7:12), and everyone will need (or want at least want)  $M' > M$ . As a system, this cannot work; for how can we all make an aggregate system level profit from every investment we personally make on the individual level? Someone (laborers, poor class, etc.) or something (environmental pollution, resource depletion, unsustainable growth) must account for the dividend guarantee that everyone receives  $M' > M$ . In a general sense, Marx felt that this structure leads to behavior, which illustrates the exploitation concerns raised by Marx (i.e. see "merely mechanical part of being the moving power," pg 409; etc.) and other political economists.

### Marshallian Economics... Microeconomics

Alfred Marshall point-by-point tackled Marx's theories on the political economy – even the interdependence of politics and the economy. His treatise title hence, is a direct rebuttal of the inclusion of politics in economy - *Principles of Economics*. Broadly speaking, Marshall stated that the system level concerns raised by Marx and others were due to their static view of economics. Marshall's (and others) dynamic behavior driven system is a never-ending search for equilibrium through efficiency, and the long run tendency will always be for the benefit of humanity – codifying a positivist view of human progress.

In Marshall's view, the fluidity of individuals moving through society disproved a class structure, for we all choose to apply ourselves for our own improvement. Given this dynamic state, one cannot sum  $M' > M$  at the system level, for it can never be found at any specific time - as each individual or groups' time reference varies. Therefore, Marshall brought to prominence the concepts of supply & demand and marginal utility. Additionally, with a separate distinction of the Labor Market compared to the Capital Market and their independent supply and demand curves, Marshall positioned himself beyond the static economy, where now structure follows behavior with societal time constants that have no beginning or ending, always searching for efficient utility<sup>14</sup>. Eminence towards Marshallian microeconomics lasted up



<sup>14</sup> Point-by-point and even example-by-example, Marshall built upon these concepts to critique Marx, even to the extent of giving the same example of women & capitalism and their role in the 'labor market'. Recall that Marx spent considerable effort discussing the toil and monotony of women sitting behind the weaving looms (Marx, 1867: 405-478). Marshall's positivist and technological determinist position critiquing Marx is well hidden within his 'economic' language: "Nothing could be more narrow or monotonous than the occupation of a weaver of plain stuffs in the old time. But now one woman will manage four or more looms, each of which does many times as much work in the course of the day as the old hand-loom did; and her work is less monotonous and calls for much more judgment than his did. So that for every hundred yards of cloth that are woven, the purely monotonous work done by human beings is probably not a twentieth part of what it was" (Marshall, 1890: 218).

to the early-to-mid 1930's<sup>15</sup>, where recovering from persistent high unemployment and economic stagnation opened the doors to another economic school of thought.

### *Keynesian Economics... Macroeconomics*

As a social tragedy, the Great Depression was a difficult time, especially for those marginalized before, during, and after through persistent under- and un-employment. Those displaced by the 'Dust Bowl' phenomenon compounding the tragedy.<sup>16</sup>

Advocating recovery through public sector action, John Maynard Keynes brought to distinction macroeconomic theory by the nature and process of government deficit spending to stimulate the economy. The foundation of Keynesian economics entails recognizing *inefficient* macroeconomic outcomes due to private sector decisions.<sup>17</sup> Financial recovery and stabilization occurs through central bank

monetary policy actions and government fiscal policy actions; where the tenuous meeting ground of micro- and macro-econ might be stated as macroeconomic structure is necessary while behavioral microeconomics happens...

### **Macroeconomics**

(J.M. Keynes, etc.)

Monetary policy: interest rates & the money supply

Fiscal policy: government expenditures & taxation

### *Environmental Economics*

The modern economy does not exist in a limitless world full of only 'efficient, rational, utility seeking humans', thus pervasive environmental destruction due to human activities required recognition of the world around us. Entering the discourse scene, *environmental economics* continues the modern enterprise by codifying pollution through

'market failure', and continuing the expansion of commons enclosure by universalizing an individual's property rights. During the rise of this school of thought, cost-benefit analysis becomes techno-deterministic in nature-society relations as required for environmental valuation through 'governance as a consumptive good' (after Byrne, 1987). Comporting its microeconomic heritage, Heller & Starrett's externality definition illustrates the eco-modernization aims of environmental economics, where an externality is "a situation in which the private economy lacks sufficient incentives to create a potential market in some good and the

### **Environmental Economics**

(R. Coase, A. Pigou, etc.)

Externalities priced

Cost-benefit analysis

Property rights universalized  
... microeconomics through natural capitalism

<sup>15</sup> And returns to prominence again; today it dominates most 'economic theories' (see Lazear 2000 for an example of the imperial nature of classical and neo-classical economics).

<sup>16</sup> Contemplative in today's changing climate and present day desertification phenomena, the techno-positivist eco-modern promise from Charles Dana Wilber (1880's) sheds some light: "God speed the plow.... By this wonderful provision, which is only man's mastery over nature, the clouds are dispensing copious rains ... [the plow] is the instrument which separates civilization from savagery; and converts a desert into a farm or garden... To be more concise, *Rain follows the plow*" (my emphasis), see <http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/program/episodes/seven/rainfollows.htm>

<sup>17</sup> where our current economic crises suggests some relevance! See for example:

[http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/17845/why\\_america\\_must\\_have\\_a\\_fiscal\\_stimulus.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/17845/why_america_must_have_a_fiscal_stimulus.html)

nonexistence of this market results in losses in Pareto efficiency” (Heller & Starrett, 1976: 10). In parallel to this process, mainstream recognition of environmental degradation gives enormous momentum to sustainability narratives, begetting the subsequent school of thought with the recognition that ‘sustainable growth is an impossibility theorem’<sup>18</sup>.

### *Ecological Economics*

Braking off from their environmental economics counterparts, Herman Daly, Richard Norgaard<sup>19</sup>, Robert Costanza, and others ushered in the growing economic discipline of *ecological economics*. Formative is their co-evolutionary consideration of human economies and ecosystems, with substantial consideration of the 2<sup>nd</sup> law of thermodynamics and dissipative structures. Their aim is towards a steady-state economics treating the human economy as a subsystem of the larger biosphere (Daly, 1977). In this sense, many ecological economics researchers are to some extent contributing to a critical economics narrative directed against the positive (empirical) theories evaluated beforehand. Recent developments are pushing researchers into the realm of ethics<sup>20</sup> – a clear normative break from the other schools that gives space for another discipline that is likewise coevolving.

**Ecological  
Economics**  
(H. Daly, R. Costanza, etc.)  
2<sup>nd</sup> law of thermodynamics  
Dissipative structures  
Steady-state economies

### *Political Ecology*

Throughout the last several decades of social inquiry, historians and researchers have sought to replace political economy with the term *political ecology*. The study of politics, economics and social dynamics influences political ecology through their interrelated effects on environmental conceptualizations. Furthermore, political ecologists broadly contend that the original political economy framework did not have a broad environmental-ecology context. For instance in a Marxian analysis, a dialectic contradiction must now include the environment as a source for socialism development through an ecological crisis. Consequently, ecological degradation is leading to absolute scarcity that affects socio-political systems, because ecosystem ‘services’ can no longer reproduce themselves – no matter what the capitalistic payment<sup>21</sup>.

According to Diana Davis, “One of the earliest and most enduring attempts at defining political economy was made by Harold Brookfield and Piers Blaikie who wrote that political ecology “combines the concerns of ecology and a broadly defined political

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<sup>18</sup> Herman Daly’s insightful critique of WCED’s 1987 publication of *Our Common Future* – and their global economy 5-10 factor of growth – displays the profound difficulty economics still has with understanding limits (Daly, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Breaking off in the sense Daly & Norgaard having left the World Bank.

<sup>20</sup> See for example the recent publication by Peter Brown, et al. *Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy*, as well as Norgaard’s work.

<sup>21</sup> Intriguing is the debate concerning monetizing all of life (i.e. Costanza et al., 1997), and the associated disagreements within the ecological economics community. In a simplistic sense, one can question monetization ends when all of life would be ‘worthless’ in 10-20 years following modern discount appraisal rates.

economy. Together this encompasses the constantly shifting dialectic between society and land-based resources, and also within classes and groups within society itself” (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987, p. 17). Although criticized as both too atheoretical and too theoretical, this general definition of political ecology has been used by a great many political ecologists since it was written” (Davis, 2009: 285).

My own conceptualization of political ecology finds refuge in contemplating Vandana Shiva’s evaluation of life’s regenerative capacity & ability (Shiva 1992 & 1994), along with John Byrne & Leigh Glover’s confront of modernity’s mainstream sustainability ideology that is in “opposition to the arguments of ecological justice” (Byrne & Glover, 2002: 5).

Shiva for example finds that modernity’s indoctrination “mistakenly identify the sustainable and lasting as backward and primitive, and in perceiving nature’s limits as constraints on productivity that had to be removed” (Shiva 1992: 34). The ‘miracle

green revolution’ seeds came packaged with politics because the seeds were pushed upon the “best endowed farmers in the best endowed areas” and not aimed at the small and poor farmers already struggling to survive. With technology introduction, local social structures were disrupted with the formation of new agrarian knowledge relationships through international cultivators, their profit seeking shareholders and the largest of the large farmers. Conflict and competition resulted by producing “growing disparities between the classes” and commodification of social relations (after Shiva 1992: 173).

Hence, Shiva’s quality of nature-society relations for political ecology is a property of life itself, where “[r]egeneration lies at the heart of life, and has been the central principle guiding sustainable societies; without renewal there can be no sustainability” (Shiva 1994: 129). Addressing the political aspects of her position, she finds that “the politics of connection and regeneration provides an alternative to the politics of separation and fragmentation that are causing ecological breakdown, and is one of solidarity with nature. This implies a radical transformation of nature and culture such that they are mutually permeating, not separate and oppositional” (1994: 142).

Byrne & Glover’s critique challenges the very notion of justice within a political economy discourse, thus uniting the social and ecological dimensions of modernity political structure for a comprehensive political ecology thesis. “Globalization and sustainable development” they find for instance “are not polar opposites they are frequently depicted to be” (2002: 5). These bedfellows share the creed of development and efficiency as ‘tools’ for sustainability. Within the confined discourse of ecological modernity, sustainable development and globalization are ‘tragedies’ from a political ecology perspective specifically in their designed opposition to commons style governance that can “produce solutions to the causes of degradation” (2002: 13).

## Political Ecology

(V. Shiva, J. Byrne, etc.)

Regenerative ability & capacity

Specifically non-apolitical

Social & Environmental Justice

### *Commons Approaches*

As my preceding ecological economics and political ecology discussion illustrates, the demarcation of on-going social inquiry into governance theory and practice are

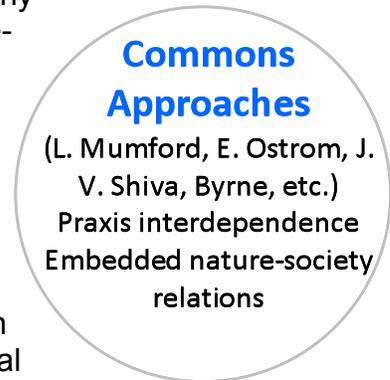
blurred indeed<sup>22</sup>. Transitioning to *commons approaches*, and according to the strangely communal Wikipedia<sup>23</sup>, The Ecologist describes the commons as “the social and political space where things get done and where people have a sense of belonging and have an element of control over their lives”, imparting “sustenance, security and independence.” In my parlance, *commons approaches* holds open the inherently normative discourse analysis qualities for understanding and conceptualizing self & world reciprocity.

Of concern is *what is to be held in common* in community practice for discourse praxis (i.e. theory and practice), and the inhabitation of a worthy common sustainable future. Sensibility towards the normative-linguistic dimensions of sustainability, and the phenomena of economics as a discipline, raises the opportunity to question economic technological conceptualizations. For instance, “to speak about environmental ‘spillover effects,’ ‘externalities,’ and ‘social costs,’ it is *essential to the very logic of the language* in which these ideas are conceived that one can reliably believe in the natural reservoir as, in effect, bottomless; and that the problems of environmental disruption or degradation, eventually, can be internalized within the social structure” (Byrne, Glover & Martinez, 2002: 264).

Contentious it seems in modern times is the engagement in discursive discourse for the very practical practice of the common good, where too often the experience degrades to disciplinary silos and the ‘recourses to philosophy’ – an enclosure of the language commons through styles of reasoning consistent with a historical ontology built upon duality,<sup>24</sup> and a sustenance that equates means with ends.

To conclude my economic discipline discourse analysis, it seems fitting to quote Thomas Kuhn and reflect upon paradigmic styles of reasoning so common when ‘leaving it to the experts’ fills in the shoes of critical analysis...

“Confronted with anomaly or with crisis, scientists take a different attitude toward existing paradigms, and the nature of their research changes accordingly. The proliferation of competing articulations, the willingness to try anything, the expression of explicit discontent, the *recourse to philosophy and to debate over fundamentals*, all these are symptoms of a transition from normal to extraordinary research. It is upon their existence more than upon that of revolutions that the notion of normal science depends” (Kuhn, 1970: 91; my emphasis).



<sup>22</sup> Acknowledgement is also due towards neo-Malthusian, deep ecology, eco-feminism, eco-imperialism, & eco-socialism, and the continuing processes of social inquiry (Byrne; et al.).

<sup>23</sup> Strange in the first sense that I have been an admin of a wiki; second, Wikipedia as a commons is a subject matter for future research; and third, with all due diligence, I could not find the article in my library – a different sort of commons... 31 August 2010, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_commons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_commons)

<sup>24</sup> The technological capacity for objectifying ontology (i.e. deterministic duality) gained modernist momentum through Descartes, although its roots date back to Plato (see Plumwood, 1993: 104-140).

## PROPAGANZING THE COMMONS – COMMUNICATIVE CONFLICTS FOR WHAT IS HELD TO BE IN COMMON

The linguistic engagement of questioning ‘what truly sustains us?’ brings to the forefront the modern enterprise for the technological enclosure of discursive discourse, and the social vacuum many disciplines operate within. In the turn to modernity, a technocratic historical ontology allows for a dichotomous nature-society and self & world, where physical reality has an objective standing outside of social reality (after Byrne, Glover, & Martinez, 2002). In confronting the crisis that is modernity, ‘sustainable development’ is often elevated to the highest reaches of paradigmic tradition. Yet, anti-globalization and anti-‘sustainable development’ critiques specifically challenge the political ecology of the commons and their management. Efficiency, monetization, commodification, and ‘development’ are tools used by modernity enclosure in the form of sustainable development – with an instructive critical accordance such as how “sustainable development ... is not at odds with globalization, but part of a program that enhances its prospects” (Byrne & Glover, 2002: 18) – through the historical ontology of a dualistic nature-society constitution.

The most enduring and equally endeared quality that is modernity is the autonomous technocratic pursuance of efficiency through all means<sup>25</sup> – a propagandistic technique restricting access to the sustenance and inhabitation of our humanity. In a technocratic worldview where “efficiency is a fact, and justice is a slogan” (Ellul, 1964, p. 282), it is worth remembering that “a classic example of incommensurability in economics and one that helps illustrate the role of social practices is having to choose between efficiency and equity” (Dekema, 1981: 527).

### *A Propaganda Framework for a Discursive Language Commons*

In pondering if we have reached a limit in our Faustian bargain with atomistic ontology and a technocratic paradigm of rationality that endows the amoral worldview, I have searched<sup>26</sup> for language’s unique capacity to bring to bear an examination of the interpretive discourses that dominate the intellectual commons. And because I likewise contend that “language constitutes aspects of an object as well as denotes them” (Dekema; where an illustrative example is the historical ontology of ‘consumers’ versus ‘citizens’), at this juncture a review of Jacques Ellul’s categories of propaganda best reflects how I comprehend the sociological phenomena that is technocratic towards the enclosure of the commons that sustains life.

### *Categories of Propaganda*

Important to recognize for Ellul propaganda framework, is how he contends that propaganda has become technique (a sociological phenomena towards efficiency), where he is primarily concerned with it effects in weakening people’s interest in society (Marlin, 2002: 34).

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<sup>25</sup> A definition of technology is due here, where Ellul’s foretells my next juncture in this paper. He finds that the ontology of technology is technique characterized by “*the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency* (for a given state of development) in every field of human activity” (Ellul, 1964: xxv, his emphasis).

<sup>26</sup> This search is by no means over, and is the core of my future dissertation research on the *Ethical Persuasion of Commons Approaches*.

In explaining the overall efficacy of propaganda, Randal Marlin reminds us “Ellul’s message is not to remove oneself from political action and to ‘cultivate one’s garden.’ It is, rather, to free oneself of illusions” (Marlin, 2002: 31). In order to understand propaganda as a sociological phenomena, receptivity for Ellul is through pre-propaganda, or the sociological preparedness for the allowance towards direct propaganda (Ellul, 1965: 15). Myths come to mind for Ellul as the pre-propaganda avenue, where he finds that myths are “an all-encompassing, activating image: a sort of vision of desirable objectives that have lost their material, practical character and have become strongly coloured, overwhelming, all-encompassing, and which displace from the conscious all that is not related to it. Such an image pushes [a man or women] to action precisely because it includes all that [he or she] feels is good, just, and true” (Ellul, 1965: 31; my explanatory brackets<sup>27</sup>).

Introducing the kinds of propaganda Ellul uses throughout his treatise, the grouped pairs shown below in Table 1 represent his categories of propaganda.

Table 1: Categories of Propaganda	
Political	Sociological
Agitation	Integration
Vertical	Horizontal
Irrational	Rational

Source: Ellul, 1965: 61-87.

Broadly speaking, the left-hand column reflects propaganda types consistent with most people’s appreciation for the modes of propaganda. Ellul’s major contribution to the study of propaganda is revealed with the right-hand column – thus shown in contrasting pairs for the overall sociological effects of propaganda.

For the first pair – *political/sociological* – political propaganda is carried out by a definite body, whereas sociological is the aggregate ways in which society aims to “integrate the maximum number of individuals into itself, to unify its members’ behavior according to a pattern, to spread its style of life abroad” (Ellul, 1965: 62). An example of this is the ‘American Way of Life’, a fitting example given my upbringing.

The second pair – *agitation/integration* – reflects how agitation typically is subversive directed at one’s opposition (i.e. hate propaganda), on the other hand integration techniques are directed toward conformity aimed at participatory action in all aspects of society, an “adherence to society’s truths and behavioral patterns” (Ellul, 1965: 75). As one example, Ellul discusses Mao’s ‘political education’ of army cadets once they had joined – which was after Mao’s successful agitation propaganda.

Third on the list, *vertical* propaganda is of the classical type: top-down with a leader (‘the technician’) influencing the crowd. This propaganda is paired with *horizontal* techniques, whereby propaganda is made within the masses and the leader’s role results only in animation<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> The irony is not lost on me for how Ellul uses a gendered conceptualization of humanity throughout his work (i.e. ‘man’). For a linguistic account of gendering, communities of practice, and the socio-linguistic implications see McConnell-Ginet, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> The persistence of falsities surrounding the birth origin and religious leanings of the current US president (Barack Obama) as entrenched in the far ‘right wing’ of American politics come to mind....

The last propaganda grouping pair reveals Ellul's novel appreciation towards what propaganda signifies for contemporary society, and will draw me back out for my concluding reflection of complexity in the language commons. On the left, the familiar sense of emotive appeals and the manipulation of myths or symbols signifies propaganda's *irrational* implementation. Contrasted is the characterization of *rational* communication as propaganda, and despite the appearances the irrational and rational techniques have much in common. Rational propaganda, explains Randal Marlin, "has the appearance of genuine scientific truth, but is often mystification. Citations of facts and figures leave the impression of greater rationality, but often the hearer is unable or unwilling to analyze the figures and is persuaded by the appearance of rationality rather than by coming to grips with factual reality" (2002: 38). Critiquing the former Soviet Union's use of statistics, facts and (importantly for my discussion) economic ideas as propaganda, Ellul states that they are propaganda because it "uses the facts to demonstrate, rationally the superiority of a given system [the Soviet in his case] and to demand everyone's support" (1965: 84) – an emotive appeal which denotes the interconnection of irrational/rational propaganda.

*"The moral: what you say, that is, the content your utterance expresses, is not just a matter of what you mean, of what you intend to say. It can, in some cases at least, depend in part on external factors of which you may be unaware, in particular on the communicative practices of others, to some of whom you may defer because of their status within some relevant community of practice"* (McConnell-Ginet, 2008: 506).

## CONCLUSION

"Wittgenstein (1958) famously enjoined 'don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use', and *certainly the use of a word in social practice is critical for establishing and sustaining its meaning*. At the same time, we cannot simply equate the meaning of a word with its use" (McConnell-Ginet, 2008: 507; my emphasis)

*Is all sustainability created equal, or is some sustainability more equal than others?*

In petitioning to convey comprehension for language commons governmentality through Ellul's categories of propaganda, I am appealing to the question of the extent social inquiry requires 'clearly defined boundaries' for a commons when faced with the difficulty of addressing the indeterminacy of social contingency, or "what does not yet exist cannot now be known" (Shackle 1972, p. 3). Economics as a discipline competes for our conception of sustainability, and the burden of dualistic modernist definitions is heavy indeed<sup>29</sup>. I maintain that sustainability's intersubjective constitution requires a social inquiry by which truth and falsehood can come into being through a 'consilience

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<sup>29</sup> See for instance Lele & Norgaard, 1996; and Davison, 2001.

of equal regard'<sup>30</sup>, and I do so in recognition towards a commonwealth of “techniques and social arrangements which can serve the aims of sustainability and equity” (Byrne, Martinez, & Ruggero 2009: 88). Continued is my own contested meaning of sustainability, and in the interdependence of this light & darkness, I hereby define sustainable technology as discursive discourse producing solutions to the causes of degradation in common good coherence with justice, democracy, equity, and life in the most sincere self & world reciprocity.

Resiliency within the linguistic commons arises in the manner by which truth and falsehood can come into being relative to specific styles of rationality. Implications arise by what we hold to be common, and therefore the dialectic realism (a critical representation analysis), and dynamic nominalism (a critical interactions analysis) for styles of reasoning raises issues of incommensurability with commons approaches seeking the intersubjective domains of sustainability, democracy and justice compared to atomistic technological paradigms governed through the application of efficiency.

Our communication abilities and methods informs our individual and collective sense of identity, and hence our collective ability at self-realization and moral-conviction towards each other and our perceived nature-society relationship. Adian Davison asserts that the reciprocity of self and world require genuine inhabitation of ecological and social places, an inhabitation consistent with Thomas Berry's empathetic communion worldview. “The [Ecozoic Era] can exist” he finds, “only when we understand the universe as composed of subjects to be communed with, not as objects to be exploited” (Berry, 1999: x-xi). Inhabitation in the fundamental sense begins with a discursive discourse towards the theories that inform our worldviews, and the social space where the political and moral deliberations can inhabit a democratic commons future.

I hold to be in common the contested meanings of sustainability and the possibility towards maintaining its disputed means with respect to a commons ends in discursive justice, democracy, equality and humanity's capacity for a sacred balance in nature-society relations. If we moreover hold that which is common to be the foundational principle of democracy, and if we are to find a space for justice, then recovering discursive discourse within our language commons certainly is an endeavor each of us must engage in for the inhabitation of sustainability narratives.

“Can we agree, no matter how far we might diverge at a later point, that *the spinal principle of democracy is to place what is common to all [humanity] above that which any organization, institution, or group may claim for itself?*” (Mumford, 1964: 1; my emphasis).

“Thanks to language alone do we have the forms and logic we call reasoning... This language, which is creative, has its existence and regularity only with tradition and use. The human being who would be original is not the one who has a great private thought within him that he makes public. *The original is the one who can change the very*

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<sup>30</sup> A phrase borrowed from Steven J. Gould's final book (*The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister's Pox*), and well worth diving into; yet as I hint herein, value based reciprocity might strengthen his case.

*language that we share, in which we think, and which is our communal version of the world"* (Hacking, 2004: 139; my emphasis)

Q.E.D. – jeremiah couey

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