

# THE FIRST ANTROPOCENE UTOPIA

---

JOSÉ ELI DA VEIGA<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Instead of adding to the list of contortionisms, frequently seen in unsuccessful attempts to promote the so called “concept” of sustainable development, it is perhaps more prudent to analyze this expression by separating the current scientific arguments about the two main components of this notion: the noun ‘development’ and the adjective ‘sustainable’.

Even if this dissection may lead to the conclusion that we are trying to square the circle, this is not an obstacle to finding an interpretation of the historical meaning of the political fusion of these two terms or explaining the rapid rise in their global acceptance as witnessed over the last three decades.

Discussing what is valid, serious and objective in this notion may also be an excellent safeguard against the illusions it tends to propagate. Separating the wheat from the chaff may result in a more conscious decision to accept sustainable development as one of the most generous civilizing ideals in history.

In a similar way to the much older desire for “justice” (or “social justice”), or even the more recent striving for “human rights”, there is nothing to guarantee that this novel ideal may indeed be possible or achievable. However, these and other values should be the foundations of a future vision to which contemporary civilizations should aspire. This is why they are utopian in the best sense of the word. The values cited above have been incorporated within the ideal of sustainable development, forging a promising utopia, however confusing this polysemy may still be.

It is not a mere coincidence that the sustainable development ideal emerges precisely at the beginning of an epoch when human activities acquire such enormous transformative powers that they can be considered the main factor in the evolution of what we call the “Earth system”.

Those who use this expression argue that it would be possible to interpret the Earth by conceiving it as a single system. For many, this system can be managed by the human species as long as agreement is reached on the most effective way to cooperate and the

---

1. José Eli da Veiga, 68, is senior professor at the Institute of Energy and the Environment at the University of São Paulo (IEE/USP). webpage [www.zeeli.pro.br](http://www.zeeli.pro.br) e seu e-mail é [zeeli@usp.br](mailto:zeeli@usp.br)  
The author would like to thank Ademar Romeiro, Andrei Cechin, Arilson Favareto and Eduardo Viola for their generous comments on the preliminary versions of this text. The author has exclusive responsibility for this text.

best governance practices are adopted. Frank Bierman (2015) provides an excellent example of this perspective. He is the creator, founder and coordinator of the “Earth System” project: <http://www.earthsystemgovernance.net/>.

Awareness of this problem led the largest scientific network in the world, originally entitled “Earth System Partnership”, to change its name after it analyzed the performance of its first ten years. This initiative is now called “Future Earth” (<http://www.futureearth.org/>), a name far more conducive to the idea that what needs to be addressed is the global governance of sustainable development and not the governance of a supposedly immense single system.

Nevertheless, to debate the possibility of effective governance for sustainable development, it is essential to analyze the historical meaning of this expression. This article’s approach is to examine four controversial ideas: development, sustainability, Anthropocene and utopia.

## Development

During the seventy-year interval (1945-2015) from the United Nations Charter to the Agenda 2030, there was such a broad, extensive and far-reaching process for legitimizing development that it could be described as all encompassing.

The most significant events within this trajectory were, undoubtedly, the “Declaration on the Right to Development”, adopted by the United Nations’ General Assembly on 4 December 1986 (Resolution 41/128), and a few years later, on 25 June 1993, the “Vienna Declaration on Human Rights”. This second event can be viewed as the moment when the notion of the indivisibility of human rights was definitively legitimized. Once accepted, its precepts had to be applied to civil and political, as well as economic, social, cultural and environmental rights, with emphasis on the right to development, peace and solidarity.

In contrast, the other significant event was the demise of the journal *Entropy* that published its final edition in 2014. It was the last exponent of an intellectual current that opposed the idea of development. At the start of the 1990s it adopted the banner of “post-development”, and later converted to the “theoretical and political study of degrowth”.

The main arguments of this current wholly depended on the identification of development with economic growth, a cognitive bias which has been relevant since the beginning of the 1990s. It was, however, condemned to extinction once the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) began to disseminate a conception where development is associated with the historical process of the expansion of capabilities, rights and human liberties, a change promoted by Mahhub ul Haq (1934-1988), himself strongly influenced by Amartya K. Sen.

It would not be an exaggeration to say, that from this point forward, the ideal of development could no longer be rejected and, consequently, be described as a controversial notion, as this article aims to do. However, there are still many reasons why it should continue to be seen as controversial. Not only because it is still strongly resisted by environmental education activists, but also because it indirectly or implicitly conflicts with the thesis of “degrowth”.

After all, one of the essential dimensions of the notion of development continues to be precisely economic growth. Nowhere is this more explicit than in the eighth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-8), part of the 2030 Agenda, whose aim is to “promote sustained economic growth...”

It was precisely this issue that led Tim Jackson to launch a book in 2011 entitled *Prosperity without Growth*, in which he avoided the term development. The aim of ecological-economists, whose ideas were brilliantly synthesized in this work, has always been to relativize the role of economic growth within what may be called development, prosperity or progress.

Indeed, one day, it will be essential to “simultaneously grow and degrow”, as stated by Edgar Morin (2011:36). On the one hand, services, renewable energies, public transport and the plural economy (including social and solidarity economy) must grow. In addition, both infrastructure (for humanizing the megalopolises) and alternative means of agriculture and husbandry must also grow. On the other hand, it will be absolutely essential to degrow or reject the intoxicating factors associated to the consumer market such as industrialized foods, the production of disposable goods and/or goods that cannot be fixed or mended, the predominance of intermediaries (in particular supermarket chains) in production and consumption, and the use of private cars. It is also important to prioritize rail over road for goods transportation. Something very similar to what some exponents of European social democracy call “selective growth”.

However, it is also essential to “degrow growing” because very few nations have reached the stage where they can have prosperity without growth. The vast majority of national economies desperately need to grow, whilst others, the so-called “emerging” economies, must face the challenge of improving the quality of their style of growth.<sup>i</sup>

The use of the term prosperity also allows Tim Jackson to move away from a bigger controversy that usually underlies almost all critiques of, and arguments against, development: the idea of progress, which has lost much of its force since the beginning of the 1970s. In fact, there are always those who want to discard the idea of progress as a mere myth (or at most conceive of it as a worthless doctrine). They claim that all that remains of this notion is the vague hope of not going backwards. Thus, it is crucial to conduct a revision of this debate, starting from the Enlightenment, where it originated, allowing for a “reconstruction” of the idea of progress, as proposed by the German philosopher Peter Wagner (2016).<sup>ii</sup>

Last, but not least, the theoretical controversy on the civilizing process must not be ignored. Within this context, the works of the great sociologist Norbert Elias have been attacked by “relativist” researchers who allege that the West cannot claim superiority over the East of Eurasia, among other regions of the world.<sup>iii</sup> However, this relativism can be considered absurd. “No previous civilization was able to dominate the rest of the world as the West does” (Ferguson, 2016:29). In order to assert that there are no differences between the civilizing process analyzed by Elias and development, it is sufficient to consult the first lines of his introduction to the 1968 edition, annexed to the first volume of the Brazilian edition of his main work *The Civilizing Process*.

Development is associated, first and foremost, with the ability of people to live their lives as they choose and be provided with the tools and opportunities so that they

can make their own choices. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the ends that lead to these means, namely, the accumulated economic growth of over twelve millennia, as well as the generalized intensive growth that started over two centuries ago. It would also not make sense to imagine that development can be exclusively defined as distributive economic growth, even if distribution is more broadly defined to include other essential factors besides income, such as access to health and education. Moreover, this formula would still result in a confusion between means and ends. That is why development is the most political of all socio-economic issues.

Finally, a concise way of explaining what development is has been tirelessly repeated since the 1990s in the UNDP's annual reports. Development relates, primarily, to the ability of people to live their lives as they choose and with the provision of tools and opportunities so that they can make these choices.

## Sustainability

Though sustainability became the most recent value to reach the global podium - comparable with much older notions such as justice, liberty and equality - it was also grossly trivialized. In this way, it could be appropriated as the main leitmotiv of business market strategies.<sup>iv</sup> On the one hand, this has certainly contributed to further obscuring the meaning of 'sustainability'. On the other, it is extremely positive to note that within just a few decades this term went from being the butt of jokes to becoming so important that it needs to be ostentatiously displayed, a sort of litmus test of its acceptance.<sup>v</sup> However, despite it being so widely used, it is wrong to conclude that it cannot be contested. In fact, there are considerable problems with this notion.

For example, some argue that the legitimization of sustainability led to a "distortion of the concept", or worse, it allowed those who "continue to ignore the limits of nature" to use it to "avoid responsibilities or even conceal their (harmful) actions". This argument is used by Enrique Leff, a Mexican economist who prefers to be known as an environmental sociologist and environmentalist.

Another academic who is fiercely against the idea of sustainability is the eminent Oxford quantic physicist David Deutsch, author of an excellent book entitled *The Beginning of Infinity* (2011). According to him, there are only two possible conceptions of the world: an optimistic conception - proven to be correct - which claims that human beings are problem solvers; and a pessimistic conception, where the human capacity to solve problems whilst creating others is, in actual fact, an illness for which sustainability is a cure. Furthermore, he also believes that the verb 'to sustain' could only have two, almost opposite, meanings: to ensure that needs are met and to avoid or prevent changes.

Rather more pertinent are the arguments where the notion of sustainability is contrasted with the scientific concept of resilience. Professors Melinda Harm Benson (Geography, New Mexico) and Robin K. Craig (Law, Utah) argue that the constant appeal to sustainability in political discussions ignores emerging realities, characterized by unprecedented and extreme complexity, uncertainty and radical transformations. In such a world, it would be impossible even to define - much less pursue - sustainability.

Not because it is a bad idea, but because it is doubtful as to whether it remains useful for environmental governance.

In the same vein, the Dutch physicist, Roland Kupers, emphasizes that he has always preferred the idea of resilience because it seems to him a far more appropriate concept to further analytical knowledge of complex systems. Although he does admit that sustainability has a much wider intuitive and emotional appeal.

To assess whether it is possible to oppose sustainability and resilience, it is important to remember that the concept of resilience used to be confined to engineering (more specifically naval engineering) and was only adopted by ecologists (1973) and psychologists (1974) approximately 40 years ago. In both cases, it was used to describe a system's overall capacity for recovery after a shock, or a system's capacity to absorb shocks and its subsequent reorganization so it could operate as efficiently as before.

Today, it seems that the most affable explanation is given by psychologists: it is the ability to "bounce back", argues the journalist Chris Bueno.<sup>vi</sup> Resilient people can both face adversity and manage to benefit from it by learning and growing emotionally. They display the ability to overcome crises, traumas or losses, turning these events into positive opportunities for transformation. Thus, resilience cannot be identified with "resistance". A resistant person "holds the fort" when there is pressure, instead of showing flexibility to adapt and creativity to move forward.

Ecologists, on the other hand, see resilience as "the system's capacity to absorb perturbations and reorganize itself, essentially maintaining the same function, structure and feedback systems, as a way of conserving its own identity". At least this is the definition adopted by the *Resilience Alliance*, a global network that brings together scientists and academics who believe that the resilience of socio-ecological systems should be the basis for sustainability.<sup>vii</sup> The Chairman of the Board of this excellent global network, Brian Walker, also agrees with a more succinct and less formal definition: "the capacity to deal with shocks in order to continue to function without too many alterations".<sup>viii</sup>

The psychological discourse certainly appears more elucidative because it has a reasonably well-defined system as common reference: human beings. Indeed, among ecologists there is not even a consensus on the definition of "ecosystem", let alone on the definition of "socio-ecological systems", the main object of the research conducted by the *Resilience Alliance*.

It is, nonetheless, important to note that as sustainability establishes its usefulness, it becomes a cocktail of ideas from various disciplines, areas of knowledge, literature and journalism, among others. That is why it is important to consider Brian Walker's contributions, available in two excellent compilations (Kupers, 2014; Costanza and Kubiszewski, 2014). Another important source is an article available on the Project Syndicate website.<sup>ix</sup> Walker usually points to the contradictions that tend to emerge between the scientific concept and definitions alluded to in the practices of companies, the third sector, governments and international organizations. First, resilience is not always positive. Dictatorships and salty environments, for example, are systems whose resilience should always be combatted. The same is true of criminal networks, or volcanos, where lava destroys all life in its proximity and the atmospheric repercussions can have disastrous consequences,

affecting even distant continents. These four examples reveal that a reduction in resilience can sometimes have positive and not negative effects.

It is also not possible to understand and manage resilience within a single scale, because it is determined precisely by the connection between different levels. For instance, a loss of resilience frequently comes about due to the undesirable consequences of a search for “optimization” when this optimization is narrowly focused. This is what happens when we prioritize “efficiency”, an idea that tends to be idolized by all companies and almost all economists.

Walker also highlights that it is often dangerous to believe that resilience is the same as a lack of change. Resilience cannot be confused with stability. Contrary to expectations, attempts to avoid disruptions in order to keep the system constant may lead to a reduction in resilience.

The nine chapters written by executives of large companies in Kupers’ book (2014) are a good sign that this understanding is gaining ground, even though they are much more geared toward practice than theory. The problem is that none of these chapters seem to agree with the proposals put forward by Brian Walker’s organization, which holds the belief that it is important to consider research on resilience as the “basis” for sustainability. The only person to address this issue is the editor, Roland Kupers, who disagrees with Walker. He even asks which of these two concepts - resilience or sustainability - is “the best”, only to subsequently opt for the former, as mentioned above.

This attitude is extremely common among those who do not perceive that sustainability is not a concept, but is instead a value. Nevertheless, ignoring the crucial difference between values and concepts is not Kupers’ chief oversight, or of those who think like him. Their greatest error is their historical analysis. In the 36 years since the project of sustainable development began to inspire the global strategy for conservation (IUCN-UNEP-WWF, 1980) or, indeed, a new political way of thinking (Brown, 1981), sustainability has grown exponentially, as can be observed from the launch of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals).

Resilience is a scientific concept that is understood to be one of the main pillars of sustainability. That is, it is one of the means of reaching this objective. In fact, a far-reaching study published in 2013 by the NRC (National Research Council), a commission made up of renowned researchers and coordinated by Professor Thomas Graedel (Yale, industrial ecology), described resilience as the third of the four most important clusters of sustainability determinants.

All approaches to resilience are systematically geared to reacting to “shocks”, whereas sustainability is a far broader phenomenon, because it also addresses erosive or cumulative processes, such as a loss in biodiversity or an overload of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Both deal with an increase in the frequency of extreme events, but sustainability is not restricted to a reaction to the shocks caused by these events.

Therefore, the notion of sustainability cannot be rejected in favor of resilience. This is not because of an intuitive or emotional appeal inherent in the idea of sustainability which, according to Kupers, prevents it being replaced by a more “technical” and “pre-

cise” concept, such as resilience. The fact is that, compared to sustainability, resilience is a restricted notion. Its logical and cognitive reach is narrower.

However, adopting a naive reductionism to address this issue exclusively from a semantical point of view is worse. Even if sustainability reflected a pessimistic vision of the world, as David Deutsch wrongly argues, or going against the scientific consensus the term resilience was more “appropriate”, it would be absurd to ignore or dismiss the political relevance of attempting to intellectually overcome the catastrophism of pioneering ecologists such as Garret Hardin or Paul Ehrlich.

Besides rejections of the sustainability notion cited above, some academics are excessively optimistic about having evidence in the future of the potential limits of the world. That is limits which, when surpassed, would lead to catastrophes or devastating setbacks. This is true even in the case of global warming where there are volumes of research findings available in comparison to biodiversity or the oceans.

There are no better references to analyze these uncertainties than the two excellent articles by the main exponent in this area: Will Steffen (2015a, 2015b). The “Great Acceleration” that began in the 1950s is explicitly revealed in a new series of socio-environmental trend graphs covering the 1750-2010 period. Except for the hole in the ozone layer and methane concentration in the atmosphere - that have remained somewhat stable in the last decade - all the other ten degradation indicators have grown exponentially. The problem is that despite producing plenty of evidence, scientists have not been able to go beyond mere speculation: by 2050 “we will almost certainly know” whether the “Great Collapse” has been avoided.

Furthermore, in 2015, a new approach to “Planetary Boundaries” (first conceived in 2009 by the SRC), was published by another group headed by Steffen (2015b) in the periodical *Science*. This article updates nine global system risk indicators that threaten long-term prosperity and identifies two issues just as (or even more) serious than climate change. If one uses a traffic light system, it can be said that the erosion of biodiversity (more specifically genetic) and the disruption of bio-geo-chemical flows (especially the nitrogen cycle) were on red lights.

On the cusp of green to yellow were other major global ecological issues, namely: the acidification of the oceans; aerosol accumulation in the atmosphere; the ozone layer; fresh water consumption; and chemical pollution. Meanwhile deforestation, the main conveyor of “changes in land use systems” had progressed to yellow.

Unfortunately, in these two excellent articles there are no answers to questions that have been accumulating since 2009. Basically, two types of obstacles: the great difficulty in projecting local/regional impacts to the global level and the unavoidable arbitrariness in choosing parameters to determine “uncertainty zones”.

There is no doubt that six of the nine “planetary boundaries” mapped by SRC aggravate climate change. However, it is questionable whether these phenomena - deforestation, the use of nitrogen/phosphorus, biodiversity erosion, fresh water consumption, the accumulation of aerosols in the atmosphere and chemical pollution - can be monitored in the same way as other boundaries. For example, it is extremely doubtful that we can calculate, or even estimate, the past, present and future rates

of biodiversity loss. Thus, global maximum percentages of genetic and function reductions are arbitrary.

Furthermore, the cost effectiveness of these ecosystemic changes can only be assessed under very concrete (local/regional) circumstances. The most obvious example is perhaps the use of nitrogen in crop fertilization. The ultra-excessive use of these products in the most modern agricultural systems are literally causing the death of large areas of the ocean, but only at a very localized scale. By contrast, the lack of nitrogen fertilizers is one of the main reasons for the low productivity of many agricultural systems in the so-called peripheral rural areas of the world. Within this context, does establishing a global ceiling for the use of nitrogen fertilizers make sense?

As the SRC's actions clearly show, none of this should be used as pretext for ceasing to look for criteria that will enable us to more accurately measure the actual bio-geo-physical limits of human activity expansion. However, these limitations must be recognized. Only two of the boundaries proposed are sufficiently acceptable to form a consensus in the scientific community: climate change and the resulting acidification of the oceans. Given that the main idea that underlies sustainability is that future generations deserve as much attention as present ones, the weight of current scientific evidence is adequate. There is no need to move toward catastrophism. And nothing changes the fact that the use of the term "sustainable" to describe development has always expressed the possibility and hope that humanity can indeed have a relationship with the biosphere in which the collapse prophesied since the 1970s is avoided.

Sustainability is, therefore, incompatible with the prognosis that the world is on the brink of collapse, and also incompatible with serious doubts about the real possibility of human progress. In its essence, it is a vision of a dynamic world in which transformation and adaptation are inevitable, but depend on a high level of consciousness, restrained prudence and a considerable amount of responsibility vis-a-vis the risks and, in particular, the uncertainties faced.

## Anthropocene

For some time now, the geological sciences have divided the history of the Earth into Eras, Periods and Epochs based on fossil markers. This convention has been frequently improved and has always been very well accepted by the other natural sciences, in particular, paleontology and evolutionary biology.<sup>x</sup> According to this interpretation of the history of the Earth, the Holocene has lasted for almost 12 millennia, the most recent "Epoch" of the Quaternary "Period" (1.6 million years) which belongs to the Cenozoic "Era" (65 million years).

Unfortunately, "Epoch" and "Era" are frequently used indiscriminately, regardless of meaning, generally justified by convenient communication practices. A prime example is the shocking error committed by the brilliant young historian Yuval Noah Harari (2015:80). Perhaps this may be explained by his use of poetic freedom in playing with the ideas of "anthropization" and Anthropocene. According to Harari, a new "Era" began approximately 70,000 years ago when *Homo Sapiens* rewrote the rules of the game, radi-

cally changing the global ecosystem in an unprecedented way. “The impact that we have caused is already comparable with the ice age and tectonic movements” (Harari, 2015:81).

However, in the natural sciences, the idea of a post-Holocene Epoch has a very different meaning. It is no coincidence that it was an atmosphere expert who suggested the possibility of calling this new epoch Anthropocene. In 2000, when Paul Crutzen - 1995 Nobel Prize winner in Chemistry for his work on the Ozone layer - launched the same proposition which, twelve years earlier, the Armenian geologist George Ter-Stepanian had called “Technocene”, he could not have imagined that it would be the basis of serious scientific controversy for at least twenty years (Crutzen, 2002; Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000; Ter-Stepanian, 1988).

The 35th International Congress on Geology that took place in Cape Town, South Africa, between 27 August and 4 September 2016, did not welcome the idea of a new Epoch. The assembly, consistent with the positions of geologists such as the Americans, Stanley C. Finney and Lucy E. Edwards (2016), and the French geologist Patrick De Wever (2016), simply confirmed its opposition to Anthropocene instead of choosing one of the many proposals for dating its beginning. The next congress will only take place in 2020.

According to these scientists, the essential argument against the adoption of a new Epoch is that stratigraphic records presented by the supporters of Crutzen’s proposals are only “potential”. They accept that these may be confirmed in the future, but for now, they are only predictions. Thus, formalizing a new Epoch would be a “political attitude” and not a “scientific decision”. This argument is entirely rejected by a large group of researchers for whom not only is there a distinction between the Holocene and the Anthropocene in stratigraphic terms, but also in functional terms (Waters et al., 2016; Zalasiewicz et al., 2016). However, this current of thought has so far not been able to convince the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS), made up of 16 sub-commissions, each with 20 votes and steered by an executive committee of only three researchers. Officially, the Earth has remained in the Holocene.

Furthermore, as it was 12,000 years ago that the human species started to practice agriculture, it is extremely likely, indeed almost certain, that its long cultural evolution - with so many rises and falls of civilizations - would have benefitted from the natural and particularly the climate conditions that characterize the Holocene. The recent acceleration in the degradation of the biosphere marks a sufficiently large rupture, distinguishing this period from anything previously seen. It is, therefore, reasonable to conceive - at least in the human sciences - that a new period has already begun and that it may as well be called Anthropocene.

However, this does not mean, of course, that this idea has already been assimilated by all the academics in the fields of humanities, as Viola and Basso (2016) show in an opportune review of academic production in international relations. They argue that this area of studies will need to redefine some of its traditional concepts, such as threat, security and national interest.

There is no doubt that, since the middle of the 20th century, human beings have exerted enormous pressure on some of the most crucial bio-geo-chemical cycles, such as the carbon and the nitrogen cycles. The Earth also saw the general unprecedented

escalation of other impacts caused by man, in particular on the biosphere. Some argue that the planet itself (or the so-called “Earth system”) is being seriously threatened by so much degradation.

It is a fact that of all the carbon dioxide released in the atmosphere and produced by human activities, three quarters was emitted in the last seventy years. In historical terms, it all happened in a blink of an eye. In only three generations the number of motor vehicles grew from 40 million to 850 million, while the production of plastics rose from 1 million tons to 350 million tons. At the same time, the amount of synthetic nitrogen (in particular from fertilizers in agriculture) increased from 4 million tons to over 85 million tons. All this, in addition to the erosion of biodiversity and the acidification of the oceans, characterize the “Great Acceleration” already cited above (Steffen et al., 2015a; McNeill and Engelke, 2014).

It is extremely unlikely that this phenomenon can continue for much longer. Advances in global environmental governance have managed to halt some trends, such as the loss of stratospheric ozone. The number of large electric dams being built has been reduced and it seems that the total exploitation of fishing resources has also diminished. Nevertheless, it is true that however close we may be to the end of the strong acceleration period that started between 1945 and 1950, human beings will continue to exert pressure on ecosystems that do not have many opportunities to react, even in ways that are not described by the conventions established in the geosciences.

Furthermore, discussions in a number of scientific journals - in particular the nine editions of the *Anthropocene Review* - tend to suggest that it will be difficult to put off the convention of a new epoch, even if the geosciences and paleontology as a whole remain reticent.

## Utopia

Half a millennium after the publication of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), the most pertinent question seems to be the following: is it possible to be faithful to the original idea by stating that the role of utopia is to allow us to distance ourselves from the *status quo*, so as to assess and make judgements about what we do in light of what we could or should do?

This is how some philosophers interpreted the text, in renowned works by Ernst Bloch (1959), Paul Ricoeur (1997) and André Gorz (1997). This interpretation was consolidated in the works of the great sociologist Norbert Elias.

In 1979, when Elias was already in his eighties, he joined a topical literary-based research group on utopia at the University of Bielefeld. In the 1980s, Elias, who died in 1990, produced a long report, an essay and a conference on this theme. These works were very well received, in particular on More’s *Utopia*, but also his writings on H.G Wells, seen by Elias as a turning point toward the “undesirable” utopias, because the author speculated about the possible outcomes of scientific advances (Deluermoz, 2014).

Indeed, it was exactly in H.G Wells’ work that the transition to what is today called “dystopia” occurred, despite the fact that scientific breakthroughs happened much

earlier. It is important to remember that three centuries before, in 1623, Francis Bacon had already written his unfinished work *The New Atlantis*. It must also be noted that there was no “science” per se in Plato’s work.

However, the aim here is to highlight the exponential increase in the theoretical difficulties that emerge when moving on from analyzing Thomas More’s work specifically, and instead address what has been understood, in the last five hundred years, by utopia/ utopias and dystopia/dystopias.

Two examples illustrate the sensation of “all cats being grey in the dark”. One is a very interesting website in which utopia is simply a “literary genre” and nothing else: <https://projetoutopia.wordpress.com/>. The other is a dictionary of utopias, whose purpose is to demonstrate that utopia is not only confined to political criticism, but equally encompasses other areas such as dance, fiction, theatre, music, art, architecture, philosophy and technology. Nevertheless, as a dictionary, with only 122 entries, it seems rather incomplete (Riot-Sarcey et al., 2006). This wide range of meanings, the result of arguments for and against the very idea of utopia, cause enormous confusion, as can be seen, for example, in Berlin (c1959) and Popper (c1984), or even in Hinkelammert (c1984).

The safest way of attempting to find a way out of this tortuous labyrinth would be, therefore, to adopt a /conception such as “utopia as political criticism”, or “utopia as a philosophical exercise”. Given the enormous number of meanings the term has acquired in half a millennia of usage, it seems almost impossible to have a reasonable discussion without prior definition, and this will inevitably become a “reductionist” exercise.

A plausible “way out” was proposed by ten historians in an anthology published by Princeton University Press entitled *Utopia/Dystopia* (Gordin et al., 2010). The editors hoped to provide a specific perspective and argued in the introduction:

*“After all, utopias and dystopias by definition seek to alter the social order on a fundamental, systemic level. They address root causes and offer revolutionary solutions. This is what makes them recognizable”.* (p.2)

They have a very different understanding of this term when compared with other historians, in particular Samuel Moyn, law and history professor at Harvard University. In his 2010 book *The Last Utopia, Human Rights in History* he proposes a much more concrete – and equally disciplined - list of the great utopias of the last century. There is no doubt that his meticulous method of empirical investigation is much more persuasive and convincing than countless other philosophical and/or literary speculations on the meaning of utopia, many of which are overtly arbitrary.

Moyn goes totally against the trend of interpreting the current conception of human rights as an ancient phenomenon that may have originated in Greece or even Persia. In this way, he distances himself from the common uses of the term utopia when referring to human rights, as does for example, Herkenhoff (1997).

What today is understood by human rights may have been a clear reaction to the misery brought about by the two world wars that occurred in the last century and, in particular, the Holocaust. However, it still needed three decades to be fully legitimized

due to the “competition” between this concept and others such as the right of peoples to self-determination, the right to national sovereignty and even the right to development.

Despite the fact that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, it was only in the 1970s that it gained legitimacy in civil society movements (NGOs) and particularly in the field of international rights. Strictly speaking, this change can be pinpointed to around 1977, with the impact of the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 (International Women’s Year) and the end of Jimmy Carter’s (1977-1981) short administration. Furthermore, 1977 was also the year Amnesty International received the Nobel Peace Prize for its campaign against torture.<sup>xi</sup>

According to Moyn, it was precisely the collapse of the great utopias during the Cold War, together with the late process of decolonialization, that subsequently led human rights to become the current great utopia, also considered by him as the “last” utopia. Although he is careful to admit that others may emerge in the future:

*“No one knows yet for sure, in light of the inspiration they provide and the challenges they face, what kind of better world human rights can bring about. And no one knows whether, if they are found wanting, another utopia can arise in the future, just as human rights once emerged on the ruins of their predecessors. Human rights were born as the last utopia – but one day another may appear”* (Moyn,2010:10).

However, Moyn (2010) failed to consider a new event. In 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment took place in Stockholm. Since then, people have become increasingly aware of their responsibilities toward the rights and opportunities of future generations.

The idea of eco-development emerged. An innovation that needed almost fifteen years to be transformed into sustainable development, the fundamental basis of the 1987 document “Our Common Future”, also known as the “Brundtland Report”. The first 22 legal principles described in this document claim that all human beings have the fundamental right to an environment adequate to health and well-being.

Although it was well received at Rio-92, in the following year this new ideal only just managed to be included in the Vienna Declaration and Program of Actions on Human Rights. Something similar occurred in 2001, when the eight MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) were launched during the Millennium Declaration. Incredibly, it was only in 2015 - with the 2030 Agenda and its seventeen SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) – that there was a move toward bringing human rights and sustainability closer together.

## Final Synthesis

The 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals can certainly be understood as another chapter in the affirmation process of the recent utopia of human rights. After all, it even overstates the fact that human rights are “ensured”, “realized”, “guaranteed”, “fully respected” and “promoted”.

However, in this important document (unfortunately as of yet little divulged in Brazil) more emphasis is given to a single human right: the right to development. Furthermore, the adjective 'sustainable', when applied to development, is always conditioned to the need to ensure and guarantee that future generations can have even more rights and opportunities than current generations. Therefore, it could be said that this is not a mere chapter in the history of a recent utopia, but rather constitutes the first chapter of a new utopia, which not only includes but strengthens the former utopia.

If the basis for this decision is the rhetoric of international relations, and in particular within the framework of the United Nations, then it can be concluded that sustainable development is already the great contemporary utopia. However, if the criterion is global governance, then this conclusion is not yet valid, because however much environmental forums and institutions of governance have evolved, they have not yet reached the level of those that promote the governance of development. Strictly speaking, therefore, there is no real global sustainability governance, unless we understand this notion as being restricted to the environmental question.

What prevents the utopia of human rights giving way to the utopia of sustainable development is, without a doubt, international law. It is true to say that the "New Delhi Declaration of Principles of International Law Relating to Sustainable Development", adopted at the 70th Conference of the *International Law Association*, in April 2002, was very promising on this issue. However, case law in this area has been timid, even when taking into account the decisions that have become emblematic precisely because they were so rare.

If psychosocial aspects are also considered, then even human rights cannot be perceived as the great contemporary utopia. Worse is the fact that less utilitarian perceptions, attitudes and behaviors in relation to nature are rare and still restricted to only a few segments of society. This can no doubt change for the better if the international community does not deploy its arsenal of atomic and biological weapons, refusing to participate in the race to put these weapons in outer space. Nevertheless, cognitive inertia in terms of the adaptation of human evolution throughout the last twelve millennia will certainly delay the emergence of a more adequate consciousness to face extremely serious contemporary threats such as global warming, the acidification of the oceans and the erosion of biodiversity.

By contrast, an optimistic conclusion is the expectation that future generations will be more predisposed to altruism than current ones, due to their greater scientific knowledge of the worsening crisis. This could certainly make it possible to apply the so-called "Principle of Precaution".

However, for now, international case law points in the opposite direction, even considering the exceptional European advances (Bocchi, 2016). It is not possible to ignore the very rapid evolutionary changes that occur when life conditions change drastically. However, this is a different and controversial thesis that goes well beyond the scope of this article.

## Notes

- i Broadly speaking, at least the 48 countries classified by the UN as “less developed” (LDCs) desperately need to grow. Countries more likely to prosper without growth are no doubt among those other 48 “highly developed” nations. The remaining one hundred or so consist of countries that may in time become “emerging” economies.
- ii An interesting indicator of this “weakness” can be observed in Google Books’ “Ngram Viewer” [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Progress&year\\_start=1916&year\\_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2CProgress%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Progress&year_start=1916&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2CProgress%3B%2Cc0)
- iii Led by the German ethnologist Hans Peter Duerr, relativists believe that Elias’ theories legitimize the cultural tendency that reached its peak with the colonialist ideology, which has not yet been overcome (Linhardt, 2001:153). In the same vein, there is a chapter dedicated to Elias in *The Theft of History*, published in 2006 by the great sociologist Jack Goody (2015: 177-205).
- iv A recent example is the *Sustainability Special Edition*, published in one of Brazil’s main newspapers, *Estadão*, in December 2016 in the section “*Estadão Projetos Especiais* (Estadão Special Projects), where special mention was given to the Coca-Cola’s “130 years of history... based on sustainability”.
- v The use of the noun sustainability sky-rocketed from the 1990s, though it has always been used less frequently than the adjective sustainable, which gained popularity two decades earlier. [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=sustainable%2C+sustainability&year\\_start=1980&year\\_end=2016&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Csustainable%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Csustainability%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=sustainable%2C+sustainability&year_start=1980&year_end=2016&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Csustainable%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Csustainability%3B%2Cc0)
- vi See: <http://sustentaculos.pro.br/assets/ods11-resiliencia.pdf>
- vii See: <http://www.resalliance.org/>
- viii It is important to highlight that Brian Walker is a researcher working in three of the most renowned socio-environmental scientific organizations: the CSIRO (The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization), the SRC (the Stockholm Resilience Center) and The Beijer Institute for Ecological Economics, at the Swedish Royal Academy of Sciences.
- ix <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/what-is-resilience-by-brian-walker/> [Not to mention a number of other publications written in partnership with eminent ecologists such as Crawford Stanley (Buzz) Holling and David Salt].
- x Many paleontologists prefer to use another periodization based on “fauna stages”, as seems to suggest “PaleoBioDB”: <https://paleobioodb.org>
- xi In one of the annexes to Moyn’s book is a graph on the evolution of the expression “human rights” in the *New York Times* and the UK’s *Times*. Another example is found in Google Books’ “Ngram Viewer”, cited earlier: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Human+Rights&year\\_start=1940&year\\_end=2016&corpus=20&smoothing=3&share=&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2CHuman%20Rights%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Human+Rights&year_start=1940&year_end=2016&corpus=20&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2CHuman%20Rights%3B%2Cc0)

## References

- BERLIN, Isaiah (1991) (c1959) *Limites de Utopia; Capítulos da história das ideias*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- BIERMAN, Frank (2015) *Earth system governance; world politics in the Anthropocene*, MIT Press.
- BLOCH, Ernst (2005) (c.1959) *O princípio esperança*. Ed. Contraponto.
- BOCCHI, Marco (2016) “The reshaping of the Precautionary Principle by international courts: judicial dialogue or parallel monologues”? *Geneva Jean Monet Working Paper* 02/2016; Université de Genève: Centre d’études juridiques européennes.
- BRANCO, Samuel Murgel (1989) *Ecológica; uma abordagem integrada dos problemas do meio ambiente*. São Paulo: Ed. Edgar Blucher.

- BROWN, Lester (1981) *Building a sustainable society*. Washington D.C./Nova York: Worldwatch Institute/W.W. Northeon.
- CIORAN, E. M. (1993) (c1960) *História e Utopia*. Editora Rocco.
- COSTANZA, Robert e Ida Kubiszewski (eds) (2014) *Creating a sustainable and desirable future*. Ed. World Scientific.
- CRAIG, Robin Kundis e Melinda Harm Benson (2013). “Replacing sustainability”. *Akron Law Review*, nº 46, pp. 841-80.
- CRUTZEN, Paul J. e Eugene Stoermer (2000). “The Anthropocene”, *IGBP Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000): 17-18.
- CRUTZEN, Paul J. (2002) “Geology of mankind”, *Nature*, v. 415, p. 23
- De WEVER, Patrick e Stanley C. Finney (2016). “Antropocène: sujet géologique ou sociétal? *Le Monde*, 14 de setembro.
- DELUERMOZ, Quentin (ed.) (2014) *Norbert Elias, L'utopie*. Paris: La Découverte. (Three works published by Elias in English in 2009, in Volume 14 of his complete works organised by University College Dublin Press),
- DEUTSCH, David (2011). *The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations that Transform the World*. New York: Penguin Books.
- ELIAS, Norbert (1994) (c1939) *O processo civilizador*. Ed. Zahar.
- ELIAS, Norbert (1968) “Introdução à edição de 1968”. Apêndice ao primeiro volume de *O Processo Civilizador* (c1939), RJ: Zahar, 1990, p. 206-41.
- FERGUSON, Niall (2016) *Civilização; Ocidente X Oriente*, 2ª ed. – São Paulo: Planeta (c2011).
- FINNEY, Stanley C. e Lucy E. Edwards (2016). “The ‘Anthropocene epoch: Scientific decision or political statement?’” *GSA Today*, v. 26, n. 3-4, p. 4-10.
- GOODY, Jack (2015) *O roubo da história; Como os europeus se apropriaram das ideias e invenções do Oriente*. S. Paulo: Editora Contexto (2ª. Ed.) (c2006).
- GORDIN, Michael D.; Helen Tilley; e Gyan Prakash (eds.) (2010) *Utopia/Dystopia; Conditions of Historical Possibility*. Princeton University Press.
- GORZ, André (2004) (c1997) *Misérias do presente, riqueza do possível*. Ed. Annablume.
- HARARI, Yuval Noah (2015) *Homo Deus; uma breve história do amanhã*. S.Paulo: Companhia das Letras.
- HERKENHOFF, João Baptista (1997) *Direitos Humanos; A construção universal de uma utopia*. Aparecida, SP: Editora Santuário.
- HINKELAMMERT, Franz (2013) (c1984) *Crítica da razão utópica*. Chapecó, SC: Argos (Unochapecó University Press).

IUCN-UNEP-WWF - International Union for Conservation of Nature; United Nations Environment Programme; World Wild Fund for Nature (1980) *World Conservation Strategy; Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development*. Gland, Suíça: IUCN.

JACKSON, Tim (2013) *Prosperidade sem crescimento; Vida boa em um planeta finito*. São Paulo: Planeta Sustentável, Ed. Abril (c 2009).

KUPERS, Roland (org.) (2014). *Turbulence: A Corporate Perspective on Collaborating for Resilience*. Amsterdam University Press.

LEFF, Enrique (2010) Entrevista a Amália Safatle. Página22, nº 43, julho. See: <http://pagina22.com.br/2010/07/06/entrevista-enrique-leff/>

LINHARDT, Dominique (2001) “Le procès fait au Procès de civilisation. A propos d’une récente controverse allemande autour de la théorie du processus de civilisation de Norbert Elias. In: *Politix*, vol. 14, nº55, p. 151-181.

McNEILL, J.R. and ENGELKE P. (2014). *The Great Acceleration – An environmental history of the Anthropocene since 1945*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

MANNHEIM, Karl (1956) (c1929) *Ideologia e Utopia; Introdução à sociologia do conhecimento*. Porto Alegre: Editora Globo.

MORE, Thomas (1516) *Utopia* - Available for free download the Fundação Alexandre de Gusmão site, Itamaraty. Part of the “Clássicos do IPRI” (International Relations Research Institute) collection, co-edited in 2004 Brasília University Press.

MORIN, Edgar (2011) *La voie – pour l’avenir de l’humanité*. Paris: Fayard.

MOYN, Samuel (2010) *The Last Utopia; Human Rights in History*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

NRC – National Research Council (2013) *Sustainability for the Nation: Resource Connection and Governance Linkages*. Washington D. C.: National Academy Press.

POPPER, Karl R. (2006) (c1984). *Em busca de um mundo melhor*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, selo Martins.

RICOEUR, Paul (2005) (c1997) *A ideologia e a utopia*. Ed. Autêntica.

RIOT-SARCEY, Michèle; Thomas Bouchet; Antoine Picon (orgs.) (2006, 2ª ed.) (c2002) *Dictionnaire des utopies*. Paris: Larousse.

STEFFEN, Will; Wendy Bradgate; Lisa Deutsch; Owen Gaffney e Cornelia Ludwig (2015a) “The trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration”, *The Anthropocene Review*, 2 (2015): 81-98.

STEFFEN, Will; Katherine Richardson; Johan Rockström; Sarah E. Cornell; Ingo Fetzer; Elena M. Bennett; R. Biggs; Stephen R. Carpenter; Wim de Vries; Cynthia A. de Wit; Carl Folke; Dieter Gerten; Jens Heinke; Georgina M. Mace; Linn M. Persson; Veerabhadran Ramanathan; B. Reyers; and Sverker Sörlin. (2015b) “Planetary boundaries: Guiding human development on a changing planet”. *Science*, v. 347, n. 6223, p. 1259855, 2015.

TER-STEPANIAN, George (1988) "Beginning of the Technocene", *Bulletin of the International Association of Engineering Geology*, 38 (1988): 133-142.

VIOLA, Eduardo e Larissa Basso (2016) "O sistema internacional no Antropoceno", *RBCS* vol. 31 nº 92, outubro, p. 1-18.

WAGNER, Peter (2016) *Progress: a reconstruction*. Polity Press.

WATERS, Colin N. et al. (2016) "The Anthropocene is functionally and stratigraphically distinct from the Holocene". *Science*, 8 de janeiro, vo. 351, issue 6269.

WELLS, H.G. (2012) (c1896) *A ilha do doutor Moreau*. Ed. Alfaguara Brasil.

ZALASIEWICZ, Jan et al. (2016) "Scale and diversity of the phisycal technosphere: a geological perspective". *The Anthropocene Review*, 28 de novembro, p. 1-14.

Submitted on: 05/01/2017

Accepted on: 27/04/2017

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/1809-4422ASOCEX002V2022017>

---

---

# THE FIRST ANTHROPOCENE UTOPIA

---

JOSÉ ELI DA VEIGA

**Abstract:** This article proposes an *aggiornamento* of the “sustainable development” ideal. It addresses four controversial terms, which enable us to foresee that “sustainable development” will very likely become the first utopia of the Anthropocene epoch. Taking into account the Agenda 2030, if the decision criteria are based on the rhetoric of international relations, particularly as used within the framework of the United Nations, it can certainly be concluded that sustainable development has already become the great contemporary utopia. However, if global governance is used as the criterion, this may not be the case, since environmental governance institutions are not yet comparable to development governance institutions. Strictly speaking, there is no global governance of sustainability, unless this notion is restricted to environmental issues.

**Key-words:** Anthropocene, development, human rights, sustainability, utopia

**Resumo:** Este artigo propõe um *aggiornamento* desse ideal que se tornou o “desenvolvimento sustentável”, mediante abordagem de quatro controvérsias que permitem vislumbrar que muito provavelmente será essa a primeira utopia do Antropoceno. Considerada a Agenda 2030, se o critério decisivo for a retórica das relações internacionais, particularmente aquelas que ocorrem no âmbito das Nações Unidas, com certeza pode-se concluir que o desenvolvimento sustentável já é a grande utopia contemporânea. O mesmo não ocorre, contudo, se o critério for a governança global, já que as instituições de governança do meio ambiente permanecem bem distantes daquelas que promovem a governança do desenvolvimento. Por isso, a rigor, nem chega a haver governança mundial da sustentabilidade, a menos que se entenda essa noção como restrita à questão ambiental.

**Palavras-chave:** Antropoceno, desenvolvimento, direitos humanos, sustentabilidade, utopia.

**Resumen:** Este artículo propone una actualización del ideal en el que se transformó el “desarrollo sostenible”, abordando cuatro controversias que permiten darse cuenta que, muy probablemente, ésta es la primera utopía del Antropoceno. Considerando la Agenda 2030, si el criterio decisivo fuere la retórica de las relaciones internacionales, particularmente aquellas que tienen lugar en el ámbito de las Naciones Unidas, puede concluirse

con vehemencia que el desarrollo sostenible ya es la gran utopía contemporánea. Sin embargo, no ocurre lo mismo si el criterio fuere la gobernanza global, ya que las instituciones de gobernanza medioambiental permanecen muy distantes de aquellas que promueven la del desarrollo. Por lo tanto, estrictamente, no existe una gobernanza mundial de la sostenibilidad a menos que se entienda esta noción como restringida a la cuestión ambiental.

**Palabras clave:** Antropoceno, desarrollo, derechos humanos, sostenibilidad, utopía.

---