

Five easy pieces

Marc Angéilil and Cary Siress

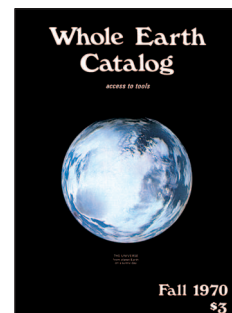
**“...no one, after all, can be in favor
of ‘unsustainability’...”**

David Harvey¹

Alluding to a beginner’s primer for piano, the film classic *Five Easy Pieces* from 1970 – featuring Jack Nicholson as a concert pianist cum oil-rigger – eventually makes clear that these so-called pieces are anything but easy." As a matter of fact, the film juxtaposes two sets of five musical scores, in effect making a total of ten. What becomes evident here is that we are witnessing a multiplicity in which no one piece is given priority. Instead, a network of interrelationships results. No sooner does one relationship take hold than it gives way to yet another one. A similar case can be made for those attempts to frame sustainability in *five* categories. Such attempts actually conceal a more unruly group of *ten* objectives to be met. Not so easy after all.

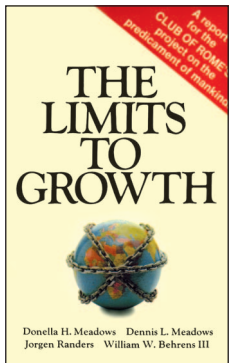
But before cutting to the chase, the story must first be unraveled. The theme of sustainability has quite a complex lineage, in which each declared objective has stood for an agenda vehemently defended by a particular interest group. Not surprisingly, it all began in the 1960s, in the country with the largest ecological footprint, a country whose environmental deterioration led to its being dubbed a *junkyard*.¹¹¹ This set the stage for the first piece of a series of propositions about what sustainable development might entail. Fueled by sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, groups operating on the fringes of society made an appeal for a quantum leap in our understanding of the environment, which amounted to a direct attack on the Establishment. A wake up call had been sounded, a plea for a revised social con-

tract had been made. What today would be considered an activist stance was then a petition for a new direction for planet earth. Such a position was made more than clear by the publication of the first volume of the *Whole Earth Catalog* in 1968.¹¹² Depicted on the cover was a rather fragile, solitary globe set against a foreboding black background – and yet we were promised a sunny day on “Spaceship Earth.”¹¹³ But words alone were not enough. Deeds were called for. The catalog served as a manual of instructions and offered tools for attaining what today would be called a sustainable world. Though the catalog may have seemed like a mixed bag of techniques and devices, it was used to advance a holistic view suggesting that everything is ultimately connected, and thus transferable to everything else.

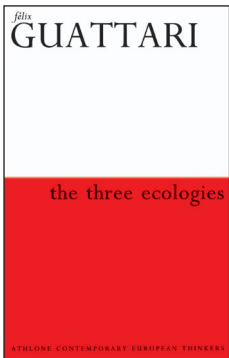


Whole Earth Catalog, 1968–1972.

Soon to follow was a second strike, albeit from a different position. This time the academic community took front stage, in the form of an “invisible college.” Following a clandestine meeting held in Rome in 1968, representatives from various disciplines formed the Club of Rome. The underlying melody of this piece was scientific in tone. Whereas the new agenda overlapped with some of the views of the free-thinking younger generation, the “tools” were altogether different. Systems analysis with its graphs, charts, and statistics was deployed to project the relationship between exponential growth and the depletion of natural resources, a relationship made more complex when plotted against the factor of time. The prognosis was rather bleak: Humanity was exploiting the



Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jorgen Randers, William W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth*, 1972.



Félix Guattari, *Les trois écologies* (1989), *The Three Ecologies*, 2000.

earth at an unprecedented rate. The response was summed up in the call for a shift from unrestrained expansion to a state of ecological equilibrium underwritten by a mandate for energy conservation. This became the basis of the Club of Rome's famed report *The Limits to Growth* published in 1972, which was harshly criticized from the outset as "a piece of irresponsible nonsense" by advocates of unbridled progress.^{vi} On the cover, planet earth appeared again, this time as a globe shackled with chains – a straitjacket of sorts – projected to drive the point home. Such iconic drama notwithstanding, the report profiled patterns of consumption around the world. These were modeled in terms of discrete flows of energy and material resources as so many parts of an interconnected system. To maneuver

within this intricate web required a new perspective geared toward restraint, for the earth as a source was now understood to be finite. A warning had been issued. Choices would have to be made.

The plot thickened as the scene shifted to Paris. We move on to yet another piece. Here, amid the student uprisings of May 1968, new trajectories for thought were charted – with a premium placed on ethics and social equity. One protagonist who spearheaded this cause was the psychoanalyst and social theorist Félix Guattari, whose novel theoretical constructs were wielded to break open hitherto closed logics and narrow-minded presuppositions that privileged certain groups or themes over others. Contradicting top-down social and political models, his concept

of *transversality*, for example, was advanced as an alternative mode of thinking that sought to abolish traditional hierarchies and advocated action on multiple fronts simultaneously.^{vii} Merging ecological concerns with those of philosophy, Guattari coined the term *ecosophy* in his book *The Three Ecologies* in an effort to bridge still untheorized relationships between the environment, the social body, and the human subject.^{viii} A field of potentialities was laid bare. To navigate this field required a sensibility premised on negotiation. No one domain could assume priority: *environmental ecology* forms a plateau undergoing constant transformation; *social ecology* is the terrain of collective exchange; the *mental ecology* of the subject is the site of ethical accountability and aesthetic desire. As if engaged

in a *ménage à trois*, the three ecologies intermingle. The environment could no longer be considered an isolated or neutral datum. Instead, it was elevated to the status of a cultural construction, a context whose definitional terms are as socially driven as they are ethically and aesthetically motivated. Wary of images, Guattari – a staunch critic of global capital – offered no depiction of planet earth, underscoring his mistrust of unified entities. Nevertheless, a disturbing portrayal of the globe in the grip of what he termed “integrated world capitalism” was invoked.

Whereas the previous piece had treated economic matters with disdain or reproach, the next piece foregrounded the economy. Under the aegis of the United Nations, the *World Commission on Environment and Development* was formed in 1983 under the leadership of Gro Harlem Brundtland, Prime Minister of Norway. Members from the fields of politics, environmental sciences, and economics came together to reexamine the state of the planet. Presented in 1987 to the general assembly, their report entitled *Our Common Future* sent shockwaves throughout the international community.^x The nations of the world were rallied under the banner of sustainability. Sustainable development was defined as that which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” To this challenge, the report responded that humanity possessed the ability to make development sustainable. In effect, this suggested that control over the course of human action could be

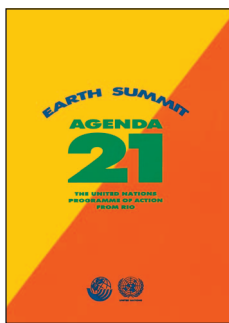
maintained. Under the cloud of a doomsday scenario, the world was portrayed as a bad place that could be made good, a dangerous place that could be made safe, a grey place that could be colored green. Whereas these premises were advanced in the name of ecological modernization, the question remained as to how such a process might be set in motion. Management, governance, and policy-making were considered key at the national and international levels, as was the role of private enterprise – from small businesses to multinational corporations. The future of the environment was viewed from the vantage point of political and economic performance. Thus, the issue was how to strike a balance between the two, and thereby achieve a more compatible condition. The report – intensively debated at the United Nations in view of increasing disparities between the North and the South – was a watershed for subsequent discussions on environmental sustainability. It paved the road for the by now legendary Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, where a comprehensive blueprint for action was drafted. With the 21st century at our doorstep, yet another number entered the game: “Agenda 21” was ratified by representatives from more than 170 nations who attended the conference.^x On the cover of this publication appeared a new image of mother earth gently cradled in a reassuring hand. A master plan for achieving sustainable development worldwide had been launched.

With economy now on the map, the business community added another

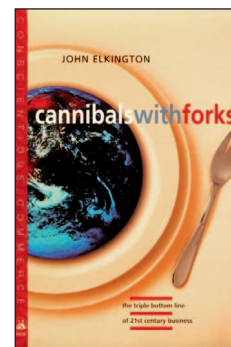
refrain to the score. The tenets of the agenda were disseminated, widely quoted, adopted, and, in spite of their significance, in some cases abused. But to paraphrase David Harvey, everyone had to be in favor of sustainability; everybody wanted a piece of the cake; green made the world go round.^{xi} *Agenda 21* gave countless organizations “a veneer of accountability and respectability,” and confirmed that the planet could be managed indeed. “Planetary management,” dispatched as a new disciplinary orientation, spread around the world.^{xii} Taking on a new color, corporations redirected some of their efforts and *green business* was born. The question was raised whether the commercial sector could apply the principles of sustainable development and still succeed. With an affirmative response, the premises of *Agenda 21* were reduced to the level of a slogan and summed up in what John Elkington, entrepreneur and founder of the company *SustainAbility*, labeled the “triple bottom line.” Following the adage “keep it simple,” sustainability was abridged to three factors: economy, society, and ecology. This abbreviation implied a necessary shift of attitude. Whereas in the past business was primarily concerned with financial performance, contemporary corporations now also had to consider their impact on communities as well as the environment, while not neglecting the bottom line of profit. Corporate responsibility was a double-edged sword. When carving up the cake, the benediction of greenness and sustainability had to accommodate the pursuit of capital gains. On the cover of Elkington’s book



The World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future, 1987.



United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Agenda 21, 1992.



John Elkington, Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business, 1997.

entitled *Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business*, the earth was flattened and served up on a plate, a telling image of straightforward honesty.^{xiii} In what followed, the issue of sustainability transcended professional borders, reframing many disciplines in the private sector, including the construction industry. While engineers redirected their efforts to define standards of performance and evaluation that bear upon the built environment, architects were driven by the idea of a new sustainable aesthetic – thus providing both fields with a new *raison d'être*. Countless competitions and awards fueled the never-ending quest for innovation and creativity.

And yet, the story is easier told than put into practice. Sustainability is hardly

reducible to simple targets. On the contrary, sustainability plays across a network of contradictory relationships and fluctuating exchanges, across a veritable mine field of actors and agents, across varying scales of parameters and rates of change – none of which are necessarily aligned. Whether 3, 5, 10, or 21, the issue at hand is not a matter of basic arithmetic, but of multiplicities and numerous trajectories within those multiplicities. Irreducible in its complexity, the theme of sustainability cannot provide a cure-all for the ills of the world. Priorities must be set that may conflict with others. This most often results in a clash of interests. We should not fool ourselves into thinking that ideology does not play a significant role in this debate. The motivating force of contemporary ideology is driven

by capitalism, which by the way currently conditions every move in the game. Suggested here is that capital is *the* primary ecological variable with which we are confronted. So what in fact is being sustained? It is not a question of endorsing an approach to the environment that is based on an idealized conception of nature – the impetus behind so many calls for a literal greening of the globe. Rather, as Harvey proposes, sustainability concerns environments radically transformed by several centuries of capitalism.^{xiv} Money is in fact the engine of the world. There is no outside of capital. And if this is the case, the call for sustainability is above all a call for the retooling of capitalism, more precisely, of its modes of operation as well as attendant patterns of accumulation and circulation. It is these

patterns that have fueled disparities between developed and developing countries, between the rich and the poor, between the haves and have-nots. Concerning the underprivileged majority, it is legitimate to ask whether our present is indeed their future, or is our future their present? The current state of capitalism actually works to sustain asymmetries of resources and power. If the environment is shaped by capital flows, then environmental justice requires a rechanneling of these flows, where accumulation gives way to distribution. This calls for sustained political action rather than a return to paradise lost, one irreversibly altered by human life on earth. Nothing short of a new social contract must be written. And this by any means will not be easy. In contrast to the protagonist of *Five Easy*

Pieces, who drove in the fast lane on the road to nowhere. Contemporary strategies need strong direction, even though they will most likely have to be developed on the run.

The authors thank Marion Kalmer and Denise Bratton for their tremendous support which made this work possible.

I. David Harvey, "What's Green and Makes the Environment Go Round?," *The Cultures of Globalization*, Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 337.

II. Bob Rafelson, Director, *Five Easy Pieces* (Columbia Pictures, 1970).

III. Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape* (New York: Rinehart & Winston, 1964). Mathis Wackernagel and William E. Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth* (Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 1996).

IV. Peter Warshall and Stewart Brand, eds., *Whole Earth Catalog: access to tools*, published twice a year from fall 1968 to 1972, and sporadically afterward (Menlo Park, California: Portola Institute).

V. The following year, R. Buckminster Fuller published his *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), referencing

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Barbara Ward's *Spaceship Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966).

VI. Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jorgen Randers, William W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Associates, 1972). Quote by Yale economist Henry C. Wallich, *Newsweek Magazine* (March 13, 1972), p. 103.

VII. Félix Guattari's essay "Transversalité" dates from 1964. It was first published in *Psychanalyse et transversalité: essais d'analyse institutionnelle* (Paris: François Maspero 1972).

VIII. Félix Guattari, *Les trois écologies* (Paris, 1989); *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: Athlone, 2000).

IX. The World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

X. United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, *Agenda 21*, Rio de Janeiro, June 3–14, 1992 (Geneva: United Nations, Division for Sustainable Development, 1992).

XI. Op. cit., David Harvey, "What's Green and Makes the Environment Go Round?," p. 337.

XII. Ibid., p. 332 and 329.

XIII. John Elkington, *Cannibals with Forks: The Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business* (Oxford: Capstone, 1997).

XIV. Op. cit., David Harvey, "What's Green and Makes the Environment Go Round?," p. 332.