

# STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE MEANING OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT<sup>1</sup>

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This presentation addresses the question: “Is there a lack of trust in the concept of sustainable development?” In Brazil, it seems that there is such distrust among many Brazilian thinkers, as pointed out by Nascimento and Griffith in their review of environmental philosophy in Brazil (forthcoming 2012). Evidence of distrust in the Brazilian education sector is presented, using results of a university classroom exercise on attitudes about sustainable development. Applying a Clarifying Attitudes Design questionnaire (Mouton & Blake, 1984), 78 undergraduates of an environmental management course at the Federal University of Viçosa, Minas Gerais State, Brazil, first identified personal attitudes and then critiqued these attitudes in small groups. The objective was to reach an agreement on which of the attitude alternatives represent the soundest action in the particular circumstance of sustainable development.

Of the seven alternative attitudes presented, the students, working in 11 teams, achieved consensus for two items and relative concordance for one other. However, for four other alternatives, the students showed considerable variation in their attitudes, suggesting uncertainty and possible mistrust of sustainable development. The students agreed that sustainable development should not be regarded as a passing fad. They also do not see sustainable development as weakened by its simultaneous “triple bottom line” of economic, environmental and social considerations.

With the exception of one team, the students gave a very high ranking for the following statement: “In my opinion, sustainable development can be an interesting strategy because, through it, you can gain advantages not only from developmentalist groups but also from environmental and social groups.” Such a strong collective affirmation raises a red flag. While students may see something to be “gained” (a strong word in Portuguese) from playing to both developmentalists and environmentalists, one might ask if this attitude does not represent outright opportunism (double-talk). In Brazil, such an attitude of “take advantage of anyone and anything you can” is popularly known as “Gerson’s Law”. Or is this consensus-building politics? This raises doubts about the environmental ethics of sustainable development (or about our present understanding of the concept). And it also presents a challenge for educators, particularly those teaching ethics and environmental epistemology including the “understanding” aspect of sustainable development.

What can we do about this? Two suggestions are presented: 1) Adopt the panarchy model of Gunderson and Holling (2002) as a clear and concise explanation of sustainable development. These authors explain that the panarchy loop, as they have conceived it, involves both creation and conservation and that sustainable development combines these two dynamics in a logical partnership; 2) Let sustainable development be understood as a strange loop (a “Hofstadter Moebius strip or band”). What Gunderson and Holling have not said, but we might have, is that their model of sustainable development strongly resembles a strange loop. According to Hofstadter (1979, 2007, p. 102), “a strange loop is a paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop.” Strange loops are useful and intellectually interesting because they imitate nature well, generate paradoxes appreciated in the arts and in humor, underlie the dynamics of translation, inject richness and resonance into symbols, generate selfhood and decentralized (not “hive”) intelligence, and free us from being “the economic man.”

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