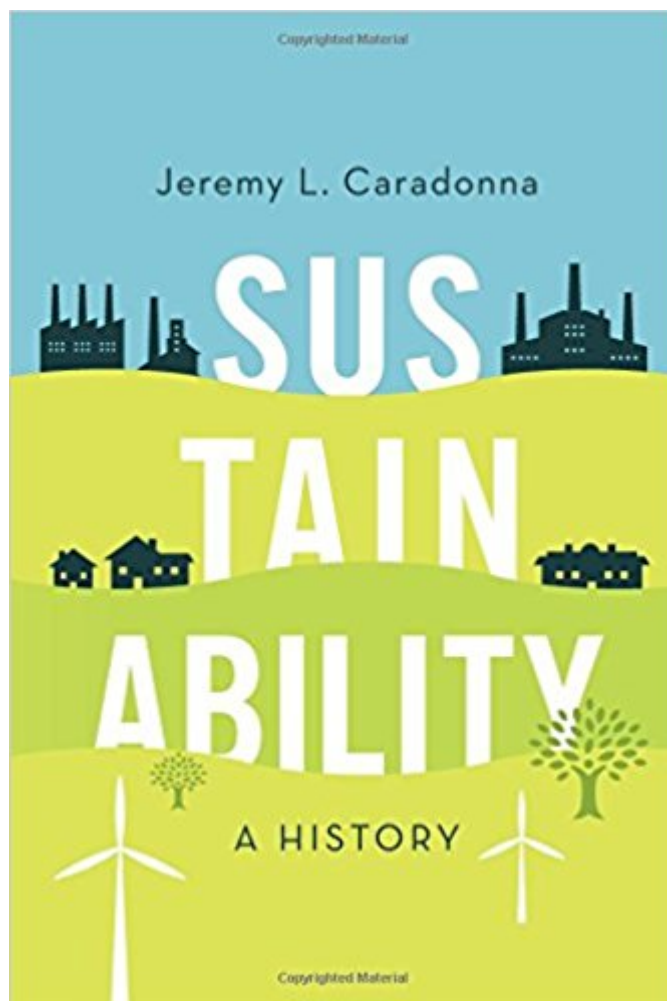


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# Sustainability: A History



## Synopsis

The word is nearly ubiquitous: at the grocery store we shop for "sustainable foods" that were produced from "sustainable agriculture"; groups ranging from small advocacy organizations to city and state governments to the United Nations tout "sustainable development" as a strategy for local and global stability; and woe betide the city-dweller who doesn't aim for a "sustainable lifestyle." Seeming to have come out of nowhere to dominate the discussion-from permaculture to renewable energy to the local food movement-the ideas that underlie and define sustainability can be traced back several centuries. In this illuminating and fascinating primer, Jeremy L. Caradonna does just that, approaching sustainability from a historical perspective and revealing the conditions that gave it shape. Locating the underpinnings of the movement as far back as the 1660s, Caradonna considers the origins of sustainability across many fields throughout Europe and North America. Taking us from the emergence of thoughts guiding sustainable yield forestry in the late 17th and 18th centuries, through the challenges of the Industrial Revolution, the birth of the environmental movement, and the emergence of a concrete effort to promote a balanced approach to development in the latter half of the 20th century, he shows that while sustainability draws upon ideas of social justice, ecological economics, and environmental conservation, it is more than the sum of its parts and blends these ideas together into a dynamic philosophy. Caradonna's book broadens our understanding of what "sustainability" means, revealing how it progressed from a relatively marginal concept to an ideal that shapes everything from individual lifestyles, government and corporate strategies, and even national and international policy. For anyone seeking understand the history of those striving to make the world a better place to live, here's a place to start.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A superb survey of the most important concept of the 21st century. Thoughtful, cogent, and essential reading." --David W. Orr, Oberlin College, author of *Down to the Wire* "Caradonna rapidly traces a thread through centuries of thinkers and political movements. Along the way he ably documents the fact that interest in environmental quality has grown over the last three centuries and that government has as often been used to undermine environmental quality as to support it."

--EH.Net

Jeremy L. Caradonna is Associate Professor of History at the University of Alberta. He is the author of *The Enlightenment in Practice*.

Perfect introduction of sustainability to anybody willing to listen. Also very detailed in each concept.

This is a review of the hardcover edition of the book. Contrary to what I expected from the title, this isn't primarily an intellectual history of the expression "sustainability" and the various contradictory shades of meaning it has acquired. Rather, it's a work of advocacy, in which the author (JLC) argues for a particular interpretation of the word, and draws on history to show the roots of his preferred definition. Although some of the controversies around the word's meaning are alluded to, they aren't at all explored thoroughly [more on this below](#). For a general reader who's interested in history and who has little idea of what sustainability is, this could be a useful introduction. The writing is clear and with relatively little jargon. The book has endnotes and a 17-page bibliography (praise to the publisher), though the index is inadequate: e.g., you won't find an entry for "growth" or "economic growth" even though it's discussed frequently. Nonetheless, considering it as a work for newcomers, I might add back a half-star or a touch more to my rating. However, I've been a researcher involved with this field for 8 or 9 years now, and I found this book frustrating for its blurring over of some distinctions and for some glaring omissions. Not that those aspects are entirely academic: in fact they're quite relevant for understanding how "sustainability" is used in contemporary political discourse. The rest of this review is from the perspective of readers who already have some familiarity with the literature. I'll focus on five terms or distinctions: sustainable development, sustainability economists, weak sustainability, green economy, and degrowth.

1. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A key problem with the word

"sustainability" is its ambiguous connection to the concept of economic growth. JLC seems to take the position that "sustainability" is against growth, while "sustainable development" is pro-growth; e.g., he alludes to "the disagreements over growth between the backers of, respectively, sustainability and sustainable development" (@175). Yet he himself wobbles on this distinction when he points out how scholars of "sustainable development" are divided into pro- and anti-growth camps (@159), and when he remarks "By the turn of the twenty-first century, sustainability was firmly entrenched within academia, the UN and numerous governments. In 2000, Switzerland became the first country in the world to incorporate 'sustainable development' into its constitution" (@174). I'm not aware of any such distinction as JLC seems to suggest. E.g., the World Bank, which is definitely pro-growth, pats itself on the back in its the 2015 "Sustainability Overview" when it notes "By leveraging its strengths, expertise, and resources, the World Bank helped countries and other partners make a real impact on development • by driving economic growth, promoting inclusiveness, and ensuring sustainability." This seems to suggest that growth is something compatible with sustainability • which, BTW, comports with my personal understanding of the word "sustainability" and the presentation in other works, such as Kent Portney's *Sustainability* (The MIT Press Essential Knowledge series) (2015). It seems pretty clear from the book that JLC himself is anti-growth and pro-sustainability, so I could understand why he might want there to be a growth-based distinction between the two terms. But looking at the literature more dispassionately, one finds: (i) the terms are often used interchangeably in English, (ii) if there is a distinction between them, it's often based on contrasting a goal (sustainability) with a path toward the goal (s.d.), and (iii) the situation is even more of a mess in some other languages. E.g., French speakers need to struggle to tease apart "développement durable," "durabilité," "soutenabilité," and "développement soutenable," among other terms. In any case, someone who encounters the word "sustainability" in the wild would be risking a serious misunderstanding if he or she assumes that the person using the word is opposed to economic growth.

2. SUSTAINABILITY ECONOMISTS: What, then to make of JLC's declaration that "sustainability economists all deny the developed world's need for more economic growth" (@209)? I believe this is very mistaken • though I admit I'm not really sure of what a "sustainability economist" is. I'd never heard the term before reading this book, so I looked it up in a search engine. The one person I found to whom this moniker was applied was Jeff Sachs, the Columbia University economist famous for proposing the UN's Millennium Development Goals (mentioned by JLC as a "sustainability measurement tool," @180). But Jeff Sachs is very much in favor of continued US growth: see, e.g., his February 2016 Boston Globe review (available online)

of Robert Gordon's "The Rise and Fall of American Economic Growth." JLC seems to suggest that "sustainability economists" are "ecological economists" (@208). But here we wade into another distinction, which this time does have widespread support in the literature: that between \*environmental\* economists and \*ecological\* economists. The former adhere to the ideas of neoclassical economics (NCE), the dominant theory you learn in Econ 101. It was an apostate NCE economist, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, who first pointed out around 1970 that NCE fails to consider any environmental impact of economic activity (environmental economics at the time being mainly concerned with resource depletion and its effect on prices). NG-R's insights were further developed in the hands of his student, Herman Daly, and other followers, who called themselves "ecological" economists to distinguish their heterodoxy from the "environmental" point of view. (None of this history is in the present book, BTW.) NG-R, Daly and at least many ecological economists were or are quite critical of growth. Environmental economists remain far more numerous in the profession, however, and indeed one of the economists JLC cites in this section of the book, the pro-growth Sir Nicholas Stern (cited @210), is squarely in this camp.

### 3. WEAK SUSTAINABILITY:

If anyone is qualified to be a "sustainability economist," it ought to be Robert Solow. Aside from winning a Nobel Prize for his NCE model of economic growth (still in all the textbooks after 60 years), Solow is a prominent environmental economist, and is responsible for a concept known as "weak" sustainability. That's the notion that we don't need to leave any specific natural resources for our descendants, but that we merely leave them \*something\* equal or greater in value than what we take. As Solow put it in a 1991 talk entitled "Sustainability: An Economist's Perspective," "it's none of our business" to assume what our descendants would prefer -- so we could just as easily leave them stock portfolios or concrete parking lots as coral reefs, if the values are right. In contrast, proponents of "strong" sustainability hold that we ought to preserve certain natural assets in their own right, and not just because of their use to our generation. Weak sustainability remains the dominant view among mainstream economists and policy-makers. But the book isn't exactly clear on what it means. Here's everything JLC has to say about it: "Many sustainists differentiate between 'weak' and 'strong' sustainability. Weak sustainability means that humanity moves away from its destructive habits and manages to stabilize ecosystems, the climate and the human population. Strong sustainability goes a step farther and demands that humans actually repair the environmental damage they have done." (@243.) Again, "sustainists" was a new one on me, and I can't vouch for what they do or don't believe. But economists don't take that view of weak sustainability at all. And despite his historical importance, Solow (who is still alive at this writing, in his 90s) is entirely absent from this history of sustainability. All this is evidence that the

book is less a proper history than a work of advocacy for what JLC and some of his fellow "sustainists" would like sustainability to be.<sup>4</sup> GREEN ECONOMY: The book often refers to the "green economy," which is described as being "low carbon, democratically decentralized and environmentally sustainable and that promotes equality, well-being and life satisfaction. Backers of a green economy also tend to reject growth for growth's sake," (201-211). A later footnote tells us that proponents of the green economy fall into several schools, and distinguishes among "ecological modernization theory," "anti-growthists" and ecological economists (292n4). From this one could infer that the green economy can involve economic growth, at least under certain circumstances. So is "green growth" part of the "green economy"? This book won't clarify that point for the reader, since it never even mentions "green growth," despite the term's prominence in political discourse internationally, particularly since the onset of the financial crisis in 2008. The interested reader should look at the excellent volume edited by G. Dale et al., "Green Growth: Ideology, Political Economy and the Alternatives" (Zed Books 2016), whose editors have a much more pessimistic take than JLC's on the meaning of "green economy" (Dale et al. eds. 4), and whose contributors show over and over that green growth is neoliberal to the core. Again, given that the present book calls itself a history, it would have been more useful if the author had highlighted such controversies about the meanings of buzzwords like "green economy," before letting us know which point of view he prefers.<sup>5</sup>

DEGROWTH: Degrowth, a literal translation into English of the French 'décroissance,' is a term designating a variety of positions critical of economic growth. (See my review of *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* for a fuller description.) Perhaps because JLC regards an anti-growth position as something of a norm within the "sustainability movement," degrowth is presented as no big deal: "As an antidote to the growth obsession, 'degrowth' has become a commonplace word and concept within the world of sustainability" (238). Again, I can't speak for the attitudes of JLC and other "sustainists" with whom he travels. But if the sustainability world includes the UN and "numerous governments" (see quote above), then the statement might be true mainly because the idea of degrowth is widely ridiculed in such circles. In actuality, the relationship between degrowth and sustainability is a fraught one. It's precisely because "sustainability" has been co-opted by organizations, governments, various Green Parties and others to mean something congenial to economic growth that many degrowth advocates, of which I am one, are at pains to \*distinguish\* degrowth from "sustainability." When companies like BP, ExxonMobil, Japan Tobacco, Monsanto and others promote their own sustainability online, it's no wonder that most degrowth proponents would share the view of Wayne Ellwood in *The No-Nonsense Guide to*

Degrowth and Sustainability (No-Nonsense Guides) – that "the word sustainability has become an empty buzzword" (Ellwood @171). JLC's narrative suggests that the word may have been empty around the end of the 20th Century (see @137, 175), but not now (@2); yet Ellwood's book came out the same year as JLC's. JLC's glib eradication of the distinction is a step backwards from the goal of a political vocabulary very different from that of business as usual. The topic of degrowth is also a good opportunity to mention the sources for the book. JLC, who is based in Canada and has written previously on the French Enlightenment, is pleasantly exceptional for including a few French and even one or two German cites in his bibliography. Unfortunately, virtually all of these relate to matters before 1800. The vast Francophone literature on degrowth and sustainability is ignored. Even authors who are well-known in the English-speaking world, such as Serge Latouche (e.g., *Farewell to Growth*) and André Gorz (e.g., *Ecologica*), are absent – though to be fair, so are prominent Anglophone authors such as Juliet Schor (*Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth*) and fellow Canadian Thomas Homer-Dixon (*The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization*). Also missing are Sylvie Brunel's skeptical *Qui profite le développement durable ?* (Larousse 2008) and her volume in the *Que sais-je* series on the same subject, which criticize the sustainability idea; the school of thought spearheaded by Latouche and Gilbert Rist that contests the notion of development even for the poorest countries (see Rist's *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*, 4th edition (Zed 2014)); and some works that explicitly contrast degrowth and sustainability, such as Romain Felli's sardonic *Les deux faces de l'écologie : Une critique du développement durable* (L'Harmattan 2008), Bernard Christophe's excellent treatment of the same theme at a microeconomic level, *L'entreprise et la croissance soutenable* (L'Harmattan 2007), and a volume by Y.-M. Abraham et al., *La croissance versus développement durable*, published in, of all places, Canada (Montréal: Écosociété 2011). Surely some of these works, or at least the themes they broach, ought to be included in a work with the title of the present book. Let me be clear: I don't have strong problems with some of the goals or ideals for which JLC is advocating, and I expect we'd agree about a lot. My criticism of the book is mainly about its impact on the discourse surrounding these topics. I think it's valuable to maintain certain distinctions, or at least – since no one person can control the usage of any term or phrase – to be very conscious about when they're getting blurred. Clarity in terminology is important not only for academics, but for political activists who wish neither to mislead their audience nor to be

co-opted by their opponents, as has definitely happened with the neoliberal adoption of "sustainability." This book, on the other hand, often seems unaware of important distinctions between certain terms, and a bit loose and optative about the meanings of others. A careful, comprehensive history of the notion of sustainability remains to be written.

This book is thoughtful, informative and has helped me understand the philosophical and intellectual origins of the concept of sustainability. After a decade of hearing the term sustainability used as a buzzword in business, economics, politics and community discourse, it's refreshing to have a noted historian like Caradonna give this critical topic the attention it is due. A thorough and insightful exploration of sustainability. Highly recommended.

Great book, easy read! Let's fix the world :)

There is so much banter about sustainability. The word is used so often that its meaning has been diluted. Thank you Jeremy Caradonna for going into the history and sharing a complete understanding in an easy to read book, that I will remember enough to quote.

A must read for anyone interested in the past and present of the sustainability movement. Well researched and written.

Amazing quality. Awesome book.

Quick shipping, book is in good shape. As advertised. Thanks

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