

# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: Conceptual foundations

**Prof. Richard Janda**  
**Richard Lehun, Teaching Assistant**

| Credits | Semester | Classes                    | Readings per Week  | Evaluation  | Language |
|---------|----------|----------------------------|--|---|----------|
| 3       | Fall     | Tues-Thurs:<br>11:30- 1:00 | Ca. 30 pgs @<br>250 words and<br><br>occasional film<br>screenings | Short theory<br>presentation<br><br>and paper:<br>75%.<br><br>Participation in<br>practical<br>exercises: 25% | English  |

## 1. Short Description

This course focuses on the conceptual foundations of sustainable development in relation to critical approaches to post-Marxist justice theory. In the paradigmatic 1987 Brundtland Report, sustainable development is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainable development has been erected as a unifying conceptual matrix tying together regulation, technology, and society. This it purports to do by staking out three dimensions of justice that are insufficiently articulated in conventional, market-driven deployments of regulation and technology: inter-generational justice and the alignment of incommensurable goods, and the distribution of burdens with respect to risk and uncertainty. The working hypothesis of the course is that sustainable development is a post-Marxist emancipatory justice claim that emerged as a consequence of the sublation of the opposing assertions contained within the ideological conflict at the core of the cold war.

The course will seek to explore how sustainable development is conventionally understood and to contrast this with elements of post-Marxist theories of justice. To this end, the contemporary legal deployment of the concept will be contrasted against avant-garde theories of justice focusing on what in fact we mean when we affirm sustainable development as a norm.

## 2. Course Outline

Sustainable development invites us to affirm that the existing normative order should allocate resources and capacity to future generations, thereby realigning conceptions of economic, social, scientific, and environmental entitlement. This implies the assumption of responsibility for risks that are not fully cognizable. Sustainable development can be linked to the concept of emancipation on at least two levels; it acknowledges the claims of future generations relating to their freedom, and it requires our distancing from widely accepted and entrenched social fetishes, notably economic rationality. At the same time, the risks and uncertainty to be borne by the present must necessarily constrain our choices: sustainable development is a composite of positive and negative freedom, a form of self-bound emancipation.

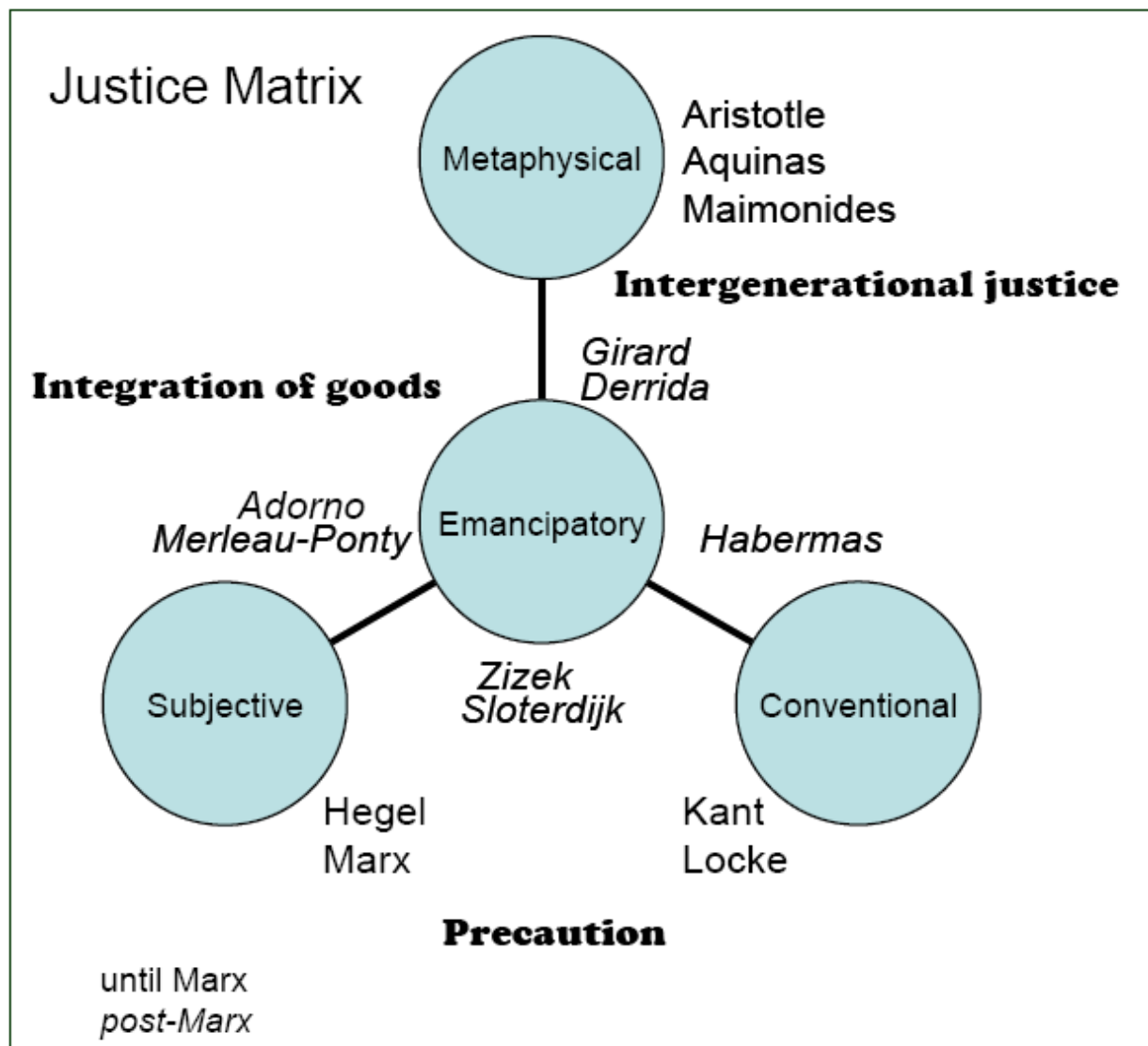
The first part of the course will explore the origins, development, and normative entrenchment of sustainable development drawing on a short list of canonical texts. Each of these sources presents sustainable development in a different light, underscoring its contingent positioning between subsets of public goods, including amongst others, human rights, the environment, and biodiversity. The examination of the spectrum of claims

involved will necessarily touch on the related academic paradigms, such as developmental and environmental studies, economics, sociology and philosophy. Key questions addressed include:

- What are the conceptual origins of sustainable development?
- How are public goods understood within the existing legal archetype?
- What is the overlay between conventional conceptions of justice and sustainable development?
- How does the above relate to justice claims of future generations?
- How have inter-claim conflicts been identified and managed up until now?

We will use a leading book on international sustainable development law as well as examples of contemporary legal deployment of sustainable development norms to frame this preliminary overview of the subject. Having identified a set of problems and questions concerning the concept of sustainable development, the second part of the course focuses on a critical analysis of how sustainable development can be articulated as an emancipatory justice claim. It will do so by outlining a justice matrix consisting of four dimensions: metaphysical (that imbuing justice from without – originally the sacred), subjective (that ascribed to justice by our own lights through reason), conventional (that given to justice by society), and the emancipatory (that which is linked to nonidentical, non-affirmative epistemologies). The course will involve student explorations of aspects of this justice matrix as tested against specific examples of how the sustainable development concept is deployed to unify regulation, technology, and society. In order to perform this assessment, the course will review significant moments in the historical evolution from Marxist to post-Marxist theories of justice as well as their deficits. To begin with, the relationship between Hegel and Marx will be explored in order to define the emancipatory justice claim. This will be further refined through readings from Adorno, Derrida, Merleau-Ponty, Sloterdijk, and Žižek. Each student will be asked to take one essential theoretical question confronting sustainable development (e.g. what is inter-generational justice? how can incommensurable public goods be rendered commensurable?), and to pose it through the lens of a selection of key readings. By the end of the course we will thereby have assembled a prismatic account of the conceptual underpinnings of sustainable development as a justice claim.

### 3. Concept Map



### 4. Course Objectives

- i. To explore justice claims underpinning sustainable development.
- ii. To sketch out a theoretical and historical basis for understanding and engaging in dialogue about sustainable development and justice theory.
- iii. To permit the students to understand the epochal challenges confronting justice theory in the post-Marxist era.
- iv. To prompt students to contemplate the close relationship between justice theory and epistemology.
- v. To begin charting a meta-theoretical justice matrix so as to situate both the legitimacy and the shortfalls of the justice claims of sustainable development.

### 5. Pedagogical Method

- i. To reduce the time and the investment necessary for students to acquire adequate conceptual knowledge by reducing the quantity of readings in order to focus on theoretical comprehension.

ii. To structure the class around encouraging the highest degree of active participation by the students, so as to illustrate how theoretical work can involve an active dialogic process and not only a process of quiet contemplation.

## 6. Obligatory Materials

Will be made available on WebCT or distributed in class handouts

## 7. Bibliography

1. *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development* available at <http://habitat.igc.org/open-gates/ocf-ov.htm> (Excerpts)
2. Marie-Claire Cordonier Segger and Ashfaq Khalfan, *Sustainable Development Law Principles, Practices, and Prospects* (Oxford: Oxford, 2004) (Excerpts)
3. “World Summit Outcome 2005” (Excerpts)
4. Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Excerpts)
5. ILA New Delhi Declaration of Principles of International Law Relating to Sustainable Development (Excerpts)
6. Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981) (Excerpts)
7. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) (Excerpts)
8. Karl Marx, *Capital: a Critique of Political Economy* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1929) (Excerpts)
9. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (Владимир Ильич Ульянов), *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (Excerpts)
10. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (New York: Continuum, 1995) (Excerpts)
11. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror; an essay on the Communist Problem*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) (Excerpts)
12. Jacques Derrida, *Les Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993) (Excerpts)
13. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectic* (New York: Continuum, 1987) (Excerpts)
14. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: U. of Minn. Press, 1987) (Excerpts)

5

## 8. Films

1. *The Corporation* (2003) directed by Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott.
2. *Oberst Redl* (1985) directed by István Szabó
3. *Taxi Driver* (1976) directed by Martin Scorsese
4. *Themroc* (1972) directed by Claude Faraldo
5. *Броненосец Потёмкин* (1925) directed by Sergejs Eizenšteins
6. *W.R. - Misterije organizma* (1971) directed by Душан Макавеев
7. *La Battaglia di Algeri*, (1966) directed by Gillo Pontecorvo
8. *El Laberinto del fauno* (2007) directed by Guillermo del Toro
9. *Rashômon* (羅生門) (1950) directed by Akira Kurosawa (黒沢 明)
10. *Dekalog* (Parts 1 and 5) (1988) directed by Krzysztof Kieślowski

## **9. Professorial Contact**

My telephone number is: (514) 398-5097. My FAX number is: (514) 398-2498. My McGill e-mail address is: richard.janda@mcgill.ca. I would however prefer that you communicate with me via the Course Web page. This will allow me to centralize all course communication and to keep better track of the course. I have scheduled office hours for Tuesday afternoons from 14h45 through 17h00. Students should feel free to drop by without appointment during these Office Hours. If possible, I would be grateful for a brief note in advance concerning the matter you wish to discuss. Normally I should also be available to meet students for a few minutes immediately after each class. Students may arrange an appointment to see me at some other time, either by speaking to me after class, or by telephoning or sending an e-mail.

## **10. Teaching hours and class cancellations:**

- Classes will be held Tuesdays and Thursdays: 11:30-1:00
  - Anyone missing class is requested to send me a one line email as advance notice.
- To receive full marks for participation students must attend 70% of classes.

## **11. Preparation and Evaluation**

The course will proceed in a modified colloquium format. I will introduce a topic with the cooperation of Richard Lehun (TA). After that students will be asked to do presentations from the course materials. Presentations are to be no more than 10 pages (around 20-30 minutes) and will be focused on specific questions related to course content. The presentations can make use of PowerPoint in order to facilitate the accessibility to the main themes. The PowerPoint presentation may simply consist of significant quotes from the presentation text.

Attendance at the film screenings is mandatory. Students will be expected to enter a short commentary or analysis after the screenings on WEB CT indicating how the film illuminates the issues dealt with in the week's readings. Failure to provide commentary for at least 70% of the screenings will lead to a reduction in the grade attributed for practical exercises.

The paper and PowerPoint presentation will be available for our review no later than three days before the class is to take place. Neither the text nor the presentation will be marked at this stage. If necessary, a meeting will take place at that time to suggest any changes to the text or PowerPoint presentation. The presentation will be marked on the day it is made. The paper will be marked at the end of the semester after submission in essay form. No legal footnoting is required. References can be made to the page numbers of the texts used for the course. No outside reading is required. Each presentation will be followed by a student commentator, who will have the specific task of leading the discussion on the presentation. 75% of the grade will be determined by the presentation, paper, and commentary and 25% will be determined by exercises.