FONDATION LOUIS ROEDERER

THINKING SUSTAINABILITY PRIZE

Author's perspective

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Original version

Sustainability is a concept that has taken the world by storm in recent years, even though it only recently emerged from relative obscurity as a technical term related to the calculation of timber yields.The basic concept is thought to be rooted in 18th-century German forestry practices (Nachhaltigkeit)—where it was used to determine how a forest could be managed to avoid diminishing returns. In other words, the concept is inextricably linked to a worldview in which forests were regarded as factories for the provision of timber, where profits and losses could be calculated with mathematical precision in order to standardize timber production and maximize fiscal revenue. This, in turn, led to the emergence of German forestry science (Forstwissenschaft) — which was at the forefront of Western modernity in that it conceived of the entirety of the Earth as an inert, machine-like entity, subject to human management for the purpose of maximizing profits. Within this frame, primary, virgin forests—with their profuse undergrowth and jumbled mixture of tree species—were regarded as obstacles to the efficient extraction of timber. The prescribed solution was to cut down these tangled, messy forests and replace them with monocultures of fast-growing tree species, such as Norway spruce, planted in geometrical rows, with the distance between trees mathematically calculated to facilitate the felling and extraction of timber. It would be hard to overstate the extent of the impact of German scientific forestry upon the world in the 19th and early 20th centuries. British imperial administrators, for instance, were fervent believers in this science, which meant that much of the forests of colonial India fell under the influence of German foresters. In the United States as well, German foresters exerted enormous influence. But nowhere were German forest scientists more powerful than in Europe. All across the continent, primary forests were cut down and replaced by carefully managed plantations of productive trees like Norway spruce. This is why only 3% of Europe's forested land now consists of virgin forests, and even these are under increasing threat. This is also one of the many reasons why Europe is now warming at twice the rate of the global average. The utter folly of replacing genuinely biodiverse forests with monocultures of 'productive' trees has never been more dramatically demonstrated than by the wildfires that have scorched so much of Europe this year. As a recent op-ed in Le Monde notes: "The fires currently ravaging the Landes de Gascogne forests are not just climate accidents. These heatwaves call into question a historical model – this vast forest in Landes, the largest planted forest in Europe, is as much a human creation as a natural landscape. It is the product of economic history, planning choices and a particular way of conceiving land. So what is burning today is not just a forest, but a way of inhabiting the land that is no longer possible."1 Needless to add, 'a planted forest' is not a forest

at all but a plantation. The conceptions that underlay German forest science were, of course, completely contrary to those held by most people in the world. Everywhere on the planet, people—and specifically Indigenous peoples and forest dwellers—have always known that a forest is much more than a plantation of trees; and that once trees have been cut down, they cannot simply be replaced and replanted—something essential is lost. It is well known now that forests are, in fact, living entities composed of millions of beings that communicate with each other in such complex ways that it can even be said that forests are capable of conscious thought. In other words, German forestry science was based on radically flawed principles. The fact that the concept of sustainability emerged from this constellation of ideas should serve to caution us about how we use it, keeping in mind that its fundamental orientation is toward efficiency and the maintenance of profit margins — business as usual, in other words. Today, sustainability has become an industry in itself. MIT, for example, offers a nine-month program leading to a professional certificate in sustainability at a cost of $13,557—eleven times more than the average annual per capita income in a country like Ethiopia, where most people follow lifestyles that are actually sustainable.

I use the word 'sustainable' here assuming that, no matter what its etymology or definition, most of us have a basic understanding of what is intended by the term — which is to tread as lightly as possible on the earth. So what if we were to try to think of this possibility outside the economistic and efficiency-oriented parameters that are taught in courses like the MIT program on sustainability? Answers to this question are almost always framed in terms of restrictions and regulations. But I would like to suggest that one, perhaps paradoxical, answer can be found not by restricting, but rather by deepening the pleasure we take in the best things that life has to offer — that is to say, in the cultivation of a genuine Epicureanism.

The key to this lies in cultivating precisely those faculties that allow us to appreciate simple, ordinary pleasures and pursuits. I remember when I was a child, Durga Puja, which is the most important festival of the year for Bengali Hindus (just as the Eids are for Muslims), was an occasion for buying new clothes, especially for women. For weeks ahead of the festival, we children would be dragged off to sari shops with our mothers and aunts, and would be made to sit still while they examined and evaluated dozens, maybe hundreds, of saris. The shops were not chosen at random; they each had a connection with our families and ancestral villages. As our mothers and aunts pored over the saris, stories would unfold about the weavers, about the patterns that were woven into the textiles, and about the meaning of each piece. Hours would go by, and we would often leave the shops without having bought anything. The shopkeepers would be told to keep a few pieces aside, so that they could be examined and compared before one was chosen. Back home, the merits of each piece would be remembered, discussed, and argued over for days; the shops would then be revisited time and again until finally a decision was made about how best to spend their limited means, and one or two saris were purchased. Once bought, the saris would be treated with exquisite care and would last for decades, being passed on from hand to hand through the generations. The idea was to acquire something beautiful and lasting at the best possible price. Today, all of that is gone. No shopkeeper is willing to take out dozens of saris for clients who may not purchase them; most saris are of unknown provenance; shops that sell hand-woven saris now charge huge premiums and cater only to the well-heeled. In the West, the average number of times a new garment is worn is exactly six; after that, the garment is usually discarded. What happens to them is unclear, because there are now very few takers for second-hand clothes. And yet, other possibilities do still exist,

where Epicureans take ever deeper pleasure in good food, fine wine, close friendships, entertaining company, and an absence of the fear of death.

Amitav Ghosh, October 13, 2026