

## The Discourse of Unsustainability in U.S. Culture: Regaining Salience in the Post-Truth Era?

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**ABSTRACT:** Centered around the notion of ecological unsustainability, a complex socio-economic phenomenon, this article discusses institutional discourse on the environment in contemporary America. It argues that, contrary to the seeming rupture associated with the Trump administration in regard to environmental policy, his agenda and political actions inscribe themselves in a narrative preceding his government, underlining the pervasive character of unsustainability in US culture.

**KEYWORDS:** unsustainability; discourse; representations of the environment; presidential speeches

### Introduction

In spite of the US's enduring relationship with the natural world, and the prevalence of nature in its visual and literary culture, ecological issues have remained largely absent from the American political debate and agenda. The disinterest for and neglect of environmental matters, I contend, derive from a prevailing discourse which transforms an unsustainable development path into a seemingly viable and enviable socio-economic alternative. The US developmental course, however, is undeniably unsustainable. One of the major contributors to environmental degradation, the US ranks second as world polluter with 5,903 tons of greenhouse gases released each year,<sup>1</sup> contributing to 30% of the total of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions for a mere 4% of the world population.<sup>2</sup> It uses almost "a quarter of the world's resources – burning up nearly 25% of the coal, 26% of the oil, and 27% of the world's natural gas."<sup>3</sup> What singles it out as a particularly unsustainable state, though, is its resource consumption which far exceeds the rate at which they are reproduced. To use a more speaking image, this means that the American lifestyle would in effect require four planets, were it adopted by all countries. In order to supply its high demand for energy and resources, the US draws on an ever-growing ecological credit from developing states and future generations. Unsustainability is a multifaceted phenomenon manifesting itself through a growing range of interrelated

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<sup>1</sup> In comparison, China emits about 6,018 million tons of greenhouse gases per year, for a population exceeding that of the US by 1 billion people. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/datablog/2009/sep/02/carbon-emissions-per-person-capita>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33133712>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/810>

ecological issues, such as the pollution and depletion of natural resources, biodiversity loss, and climate change, to name but a few. While these represent some of its physical manifestations, unsustainability itself is best characterized as a social phenomenon in the sense that it is deeply embedded in the socio-economic fabric: unsustainability, which forms a system amalgamating a number of environmental issues, results from a particular socio-economic and political structure, namely a system based on the idea of perpetual and expanding growth. As such, environmental issues are not tangential but central features of the socio-economic structure.

While Trump's stance may appear as a critical rupture with its predecessors, I argue that, on the contrary, his ideological construction of the environment inscribes itself in an established discourse of unsustainability. Discourse, as defined by Foucault, refers to a system of thoughts which defines the beliefs, ideas and practices that construct subjects by shaping their understanding of social reality and its objects, such as the environment. Nature, indeed, is as much a physical entity as a social construction. In order to trace the continuity between Trump's discourse and this underlying text of unsustainability, I will examine how both mobilize similar tropes and myths relating to national identity. The discussion establishes a comparison by drawing on two types of source material: Trump's representation of the environment is analyzed in the speech announcing his intention to pull the US out of the Paris Climate Agreement, while contemporary environmental narratives are examined in presidential speeches and statements delivered on the occasion of Earth Day, a national commemoration instituted in 1970 after demonstrations were organized in response to a major oil spill on the Californian coast. These speeches, which read as a continuous text, offer valuable insight into the institutional discourse on the environment, as they present a general reflection on nature and the US's relationship to it.

In shedding light on the performativity of the prevailing discourse on the environment, this paper seeks to underline the pervasive character of unsustainability in US culture, providing an overview of the cultural obstacles faced by one of the chief ecological debtors and exposing some of the reasons behind the current environmental gridlock.

From the beginning of his political tenure, Trump's environmental agenda has proven extremely controversial, attracting a lot of criticism. After almost a year in office, his environmental policy can be summed up as a systematic revision of key aspects of Obama's legacy, whether it be by allowing the construction of the Keystone pipeline, focusing on reviving the fossil fuel industry as outlined in his "America First Energy Plan," reviewing national monument lands for coal mining and drilling activities, or attempting to drastically reduce the EPA's field of action. While the Trump administration's agenda certainly worsens the situation, his representation of the environment echoes that of his predecessors. As figures and graphs attest, the US never acted as an environmentally enlightened political biotope, and his discourse on the environment is but an extreme version of a longstanding discourse of unsustainability building on a similar mythology and features of the national self-understanding. By looking at speeches and statements related to the celebration of Earth Day, I propose to locate the contemporary emergence of this discourse of unsustainability and show how its recurrent topoi and images paved the way for Trump's unsustainable definition of and approach to the environment, underlining how his political actions and intentions acquire their full meaning when replaced within the broader text in which they inscribe themselves.

#### **"GOD-GIVEN GIFTS": NATURE AS HOLY PLACE**

Sociologists have long pointed out the importance of nature, and of the landscape in particular, in the forging of the US national identity. Resorting to nature as the common ground on which to inscribe the nation's legitimacy and distinctiveness was prompted in part by the impossibility for the newborn nation to appeal to a sustained tradition or common history, having emerged from a revolution propelled by a shared willingness to repudiate its former source of unity, namely its connection to the British Crown. A fundamental characteristic of the US's self-understanding, nature soon found itself at the center of a network of ideas, such as the frontier, the pastoral and the wilderness, all of them of "historic importance" to the American imagination (Buell 15). The pregnancy of the idea of a symbiotic relationship between nature and the American identity explains the longevity of the myth of the US as "nature's nation" (Miller, cited by Coates 104). The central place granted to the natural world explains the quasi-religious cult which gradually developed around it. This

national reverence for nature proliferates in Earth Day speeches, which exalt “America the Beautiful.”<sup>4</sup> Mirroring the perfection of the divine through its “breathtaking beauty and order” (George Bush, 1990),<sup>5</sup> nature has been celebrated on this secular observance with words recalling religious fervor. Clinton spoke of “[Americans’] devotion to the rich and expansive land” and recalled the experience of “people [who] have lived in awe of the power, the majesty, and the beauty of the forest, the rivers, and the streams of America” (1993), while Trump invited his compatriots “to give thanks for the land we all love and call home,” reminding a civil congregation to be “grateful for these God-given gifts” (2017). In similar terms, Nixon enjoined Americans “to love the land and to cherish that which has sustained our people both in body and spirit” (1974). A place allowing direct access to the divine, nature allowed the nation to grow both physically and spiritually. The land’s “rich blessings” (George W. Bush, 2001) also came to be viewed as contributing to setting the US as a nation apart, reinforcing its exceptional character.

Despite Americans’ conception of themselves as “an organic community” (Goodbody 3), as if their birth as a nation owed to the land itself, the history of the US’s relationship to nature is a tortuous and highly paradoxical one. As is often the case with myths, and as Moseley explains, the sentiment of embodying nature’s nation sought to reconcile a paradoxical progression, characterized on one hand by a posture of devotion towards nature, and by the intense and inexorable industrialization of the land on the other hand (Moseley 44). In that regard, the setting aside of large patches of land for preservation through the creation of national parks or protected areas, far from illustrating an environmentally enhanced conscience towards nature, implicitly betrayed a dualistic perception holding the latter as either pristine and untouched or irremediably soiled by human dwelling and activity. Preservation was thus a response to the overexploitation of much vaster portions of the land during the rapid industrialization of the nation in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and these natural sanctuaries came to subsidize regions which were intensely put to use (Moseley 44). Despite nature’s sacred essence, exploiting and degrading it became possible, provided some portions

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<sup>4</sup> A well-known patriotic song first published in 1910, it’s also the name of the annual pass to all US national parks.

<sup>5</sup> All subsequent presidential citations are taken from Earth Day speeches, unless mentioned otherwise.

be kept intact, true to their original state. Nature's perceived duality allowed for its differentiated use. As Clinton argued in his 1994 Earth Day address, "everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in." In other words, physical sustenance was interpreted as running along and separately from spiritual nourishment, and both needs were to be met by dividing the land into distinct areas: while a small stretch would remain as close as possible to a wilderness, the vast majority of the territory would provide its people with the resources upon which their existence depended.

This dualistic view of nature prevailed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well, and gained in importance as the notion of the environment came to replace that of nature in the 1970s, ironically but certainly not coincidentally at the same time that environmental issues entered the arena of political affairs (Marx 8). In adopting the concept of "environment" instead of "nature," humanity consecrates the divide between itself and the substrate of its very existence, regarding it as a separate entity. Indeed, and as Alston points out, "early moderns understood 'environment' as a noun – 'the state of being encompassed or surrounded' – or as a verb – 'the action of circumnavigating, encompassing or surrounding something'" (93). The dichotomous understanding of nature suppresses the reality of the extreme intertwining of nature and culture, erasing the intimate connection uniting the environment's and a given society's health. In other words, environmental collapse, to borrow Monbiot's concept,<sup>6</sup> is seen as an extraneous issue having no consequences on human communities.

### **MYTH OF THE VIRGIN LAND AND THE EDENIC GARDEN**

The images of a land of "awe-inspiring beauty" (Trump, 2017) and that of nature as a sacred abode respond to the deeply ingrained conception of America as the New Eden, echoing the first colonists' desire to regain a lost Paradise. The reverence for nature led to one of the most potent representations of the environment which, although it is never termed as such, forms the subtext of the national environmental imagination. This portrayal of nature as a well-kempt garden, a safe haven set apart from the turmoil of civilization and requiring only a

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<sup>6</sup> George Monbiot. "Urge, Splurge, Purge". <http://www.monbiot.com/2017/09/15/urge-splurge-purge/>. Accessed November 27, 2017.

combination of efficient management and conscientious maintenance. In his Earth Day Proclamation, George Bush insisted on the importance “to treat this magnificent yet fragile planet with commensurate care and attention” (George Bush, 1991), an appeal reiterated by the second Bush administration, when the President exclaimed: “This Earth Day finds us on the right path, gaining in appreciation for the world in our care” (George W. Bush, 2002). Used in the environmental context, these words bear a specific connotation aligning the political management of nature with the tending of a garden. In a similar vein, Clinton remarked that “garden- and park-making goes on everywhere in civilization” (1994), as if environmental matters came down to landscaping and upkeep. The understanding of nature as the sacred house of God also explains the proliferation of allusions to the purity and cleanliness of conservation areas. Heir to the transcendentalist impetus towards nature in looking for a place of recreation for the body and the mind, these preserved patches of land are sought after for the purity found in this new Virgin Land. The recreational character of most conservation areas, which are often national or regional parks, reinforces the image of the tending of one’s household, thereby emphasizing the private caring for the land, as opposed to a policy prompted and led by the government. The environment’s relocation within the private sphere underlines the limited importance granted to it by political actors, and the corresponding policy developed in that respect, which has limited itself to regulating levels of pollution, as attested by its twin beacons, the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts. George Bush referred to this as he evoked the necessity for “America [to] pa[y] its debt to the past by reclaiming the purity of its air, its waters, and our living environment” (1990), and so did Clinton as he invited citizens to assume “the work of cleaning up America's environment” (1993).

The preservation of small areas in a seemingly pristine state has translated into an abridged environmental policy keeping some areas safe from pollution – or at least, the latter’s most visible manifestations. Trump does not depart from his predecessors’ stances as he hammers the image of a healthy environment being a matter of cleanliness: “We’ll be the cleanest. We’re going to have the cleanest air. We’re going to have the cleanest water.” In doing so, Trump and his predecessors justify the need for a mere clean-up of the environment and the irrelevance of a comprehensive policy, whose implementation would be further complicated by the extreme decentralization of the US’s environmental policy, which rests in the hands of

numerous agencies besides the Environmental Protection Agency. Yet by relegating ecological issues to a question of addressing pollution, or the most palpable issue, Trump remains on the surface of the problem. While most developed nations have relatively low levels of pollution when it comes to water or air, this does not make them any more sustainable, as they burden less endowed states with the costs of their waste and overconsumption of resources. The cosmetic character of Trump's agenda, far from marking a turning point in environmental policy, perfectly aligns with that pursued by previous administrations. In depicting the land as a well-kempt garden, Trump and his forerunners effectively turn ecological concerns into peripheral questions, denying them prioritization when weighed along other political issues.

### **STEWARDSHIP AND THE NATURAL COMMUNITY**

The conception of nature as a garden implicitly acknowledges a community tending to the garden, and indeed one of the most recurring images in relation to the environment is the notion of stewardship, which celebrates individuals' and communities' involvement in natural conservation and restoration projects. In keeping with US civil religion, Paradise is once more regained, as a congregation of "faithful stewards" (George Bush, 1990) works to restore its former beauty. The gain resulting from the care towards nature is double, benefiting both the community and the individual. On a personal level, the tending of nature is akin to an act of hygiene fortifying body and soul, associated with the sacred place that natural surroundings constitute. Working on restoration or conservation projects in a park responds to a similar desire for fortitude, similarly to what one would find in a holy space. The sense of equanimity deriving from nature abounds in American literature, an idea on which presidents quite naturally insist, such as when Carter reminded his audience that on passing the National Environmental Policy Act, "the Nation affirmed the fundamental importance of the environment to our well-being" (1980). The imperative to "be good stewards of our home" (Obama, 2010) stems from the perceived benefit for both individuals and communities at large. In his 1994 address, Clinton remarked: "As we renew our environment, we renew our national community." The image of the nation coming as one in its tending of nature and the revival of the natural community is a pregnant one that reinforces the relationship between the land and the nation.

Personal initiative is lauded as it echoes the government's willingness to rid itself from environmental matters, a posture observed across all administrations, democrat and republican. Clinton's claim that "governments alone cannot save the environment, people and communities must" (1994) speaks to the government's disavowal of far-reaching policies or overarching legal frameworks. Environmental policy becomes a set of small-scale measures preserving a few patches of public land, allowing the plundering of natural resources in places safely guarded from constraining regulations, at odds with the need for sustained efforts and comprehensive actions well beyond the cosmetic arrangements that have been undertaken since the rise of the global environmental movement some four decades ago. If Trump's ideological representation of the environment is heavily influenced by his nationalistic stance and extreme appeal to patriotism, a crude expression of American exceptionalism, his insistence on the US's right to self-governance regarding the environment taps into previous administrations' repudiation of comprehensive top-down policy and encouragement of bottom-up initiatives. The broader context which Trump inherited explains his rejection of international binding agreements as "a reassertion of America's sovereignty" (Remarks, 2017), as he made clear in his speech on the US's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord. Concluding his tirade against the Paris Accord on his campaign slogan and hazy promise to "make America great again," Trump vowed to give free rein to business, justifying his eagerness to avoid interference from foreign governments by framing international treaties as an obligation to implement extensive regulations, and the impossibility, in his view, to achieve sufficient economic growth if subjected to allegedly constraining environmental rules. His pledge to put "America First" has also translated into a ruthless political agenda in which the US stands as a metonymy for the US economy. The latter overwrites all areas of policy-making, casting environmental regulations as unnecessary costly constraints at best, and as genuine impediments to the conduct of business at worse. The environment is seen as yet another attempt by "very foreign capitals and global activists" to jeopardize the US's freedom of trade and production, and apprehended only through pejorative and exclusively economic notions of "lost jobs, lower wages, shuttered factories, and vastly diminished economic production" (Remarks, 2017). That a common legal and binding framework should override the US's sovereign right to do business is simply unthinkable.



## THE NATION OF NEW BEGINNINGS AND ETERNAL RENEWAL

A final element of continuity between the Trump administration and its predecessors is the reference to the mythic idea holding the US as the nation of new beginnings and renewal, epitomized by Earth Day's springtime celebration. By drawing a parallel between the nation's eternal rebirth and the cyclic renewal of natural resources, these speeches effectively picture a place of abundance seemingly inexhaustible, by virtue of its self-regenerating power. Reagan evoked the "abundant natural resources" (1983), while Clinton spoke of the "miraculous bounty of our land" a decade later (1993). A central feature of the process of national self-determination, the myth of abundance has worked against notions of self-imposed restrictions, limitations and other constraining measures, which are hallmarks of a sustainable development path. Sustainability is indeed fundamentally averse to ever-expanding growth and the unconstrained consumption of natural resources, which this ideology implicitly entails. The framing of the US as a land of abundance and seemingly infinite or quasi-infinite resources is another myth to which the current administration subscribes. The fact that Trump should open his statement for Earth Day by referring to the "Nation . . . blessed with abundant natural resources" is not a coincidence, but a carefully calculated move. The myth of abundance is indeed what allows Trump to insist on the privileged position occupied by the economy, as it organizes and distributes resources according to what is deemed as the greatest efficiency. Why restrain it indeed, when resources abound and what needs to be done is to best allocate them, a task usually perceived as best carried out by market mechanisms. Trump repeatedly conjures the notion of the wasted abundance of energy and natural resources through an extended metaphor of the crippling effect of the Paris Agreement, as it "handicaps" and "hamstrings" the US economy, "keep[ing] [a] magnificent country tied up and bound down." Nature is but a vast monetary reservoir, threatened "to be put under lock and key" by such international framework and from which the US would be unjustly deprived by greedy competitors rejoicing at the prospective of "taking away the great wealth of our nation" by way of what he terms "a massive redistribution of United States wealth to other countries" (Remarks, 2017). The idea of the private ownership of natural resources is limp, as is the notion that a country's use of resources should not be limited or hampered by considerations external to the fair dynamic of supply and demand.

In pointing to the “miraculous bounty” of the American land (Clinton, 1993), institutional discourse also rationalizes the country’s right to perpetual growth, obliterating the question of resource scarcity. To entirely dismiss the environment as a political object, denying it any legal status, Trump adheres to a deep-seated conception of the US as the nation of constant growth, ceaselessly thrust forward. The ideology of progress and expansion is a defining trait of an empire in search – and need – of constant growth. The idea of the economy as the vital pulse of the nation perspires in that same allocution, and indeed Trump is obsessed with growth, as he almost compulsively announces: “We’re going to grow; we’re going to grow rapidly.” Trump describes his main task as that of “mak[ing] America the most prosperous and productive country on Earth, and with the highest standard of living and the highest standard of environmental protection.” Productivity and prosperity are essential to America’s well-being, and the environment, if taken into consideration at all, is to be subordinated to them. Citing the environment as the last item of his political concerns further underlines its trivial character. In his statement on Earth Day, Trump affirmed that “economic growth enhances environmental protection,” insisting on the peripheral position of the environment within the socio-economic system, namely as beneficiary of the ripple effect actuated by a robust economy. If money can be allocated to conservation projects, the environment, while standing at the core of the economic sphere, becomes its muted component, banned from the realm of the organizing principles dictating the use and trade of natural resources. Presidents go as far as outlining a strong compatibility between economic growth and environmental conservation, such as when Clinton talked of how the US can “out-conserve and out-compete anyone else on Earth” (1993). Yet the current global environmental crisis is in great part induced by the political and economic system. Environmental degradation is one of capitalism’s intrinsic features, and not a contingent or peripheral by-product awaiting the upcoming successful combination of market mechanisms and advancement in research and technological innovations. As Newell highlights, “the fate of the planet’s ecology is increasingly bound up with the fate of contemporary capitalism” (3). Ecological issues are undeniably tied to the economy, for consumer capitalism’s reliance on perpetual and accelerating growth fosters the overexploitation and degradation of natural resources. Moreover, this constant thrust forward, unrestrained by any sort of built-in self-limiting

device, is predicted to go on for a long time, as Schnaiberg's concept of "the treadmill of production" aptly illustrates (Buttel 38).

Trump's and previous presidents' insistence on the central position granted to the economy responds to the imperative of remaining in office, by maintaining constant economic growth. As Fairhead and Leach explain, "political authority in many societies has been upheld and legitimated through the capacity to ensure the productivity of environments and the prosperity derived from them" (280), underlining political institutions' instrumental role in enabling the conditions leading to resources depletion. Capitalism does not operate as an anonymous hand, but requires the conscious decisions of identifiable actors, among whom politicians. Yet the people responsible for furthering trade expansion and ensuring economic growth, activities at odds with ecological principles, also happen to be in charge of implementing environmental measures. Responding to ecological issues proves particularly thorny if "the structures that literally create environmental change [also] shape the context in which it can be responded to" (Newell 1938). Western states' involvement has therefore proven contradictory, having consisted in both preserving the environment and as such responding to citizens' wants, and privileging economic expansion and access to resources. This Janus-faced approach, which best characterizes the US and most European states' relation to the environment, has been qualified by scholars as liberal or "reform environmentalism" (Clark 2), an ideology deriving from the concept of sustainable development. Also understood as "weak ecological modernization" (Stevenson 51), this discourse favors a techno-managerial approach towards the natural environment. A blending of scientific industrialism and belief in the progressive transition towards a dematerialized economy has earned it the rather unflattering title of "the gospel of eco-efficiency" (Martinez-Alier 5).

Subscribing to "a religion of utility and technical efficiency" (Martinez-Alier 5), this discourse views environmental scarcity as an object to be approached through a combination of greater efficiency in resource management and technological advancement, occulting environmental issues' deep ties with the socio-economic system. Yet this line of thinking erases the intricate connection between environmental issues and social injustice, which cannot be solved through technological modernization. Unsustainability indeed refers to "the

exploitation of people and planet” (Barry 7), and environmental ailments reveal the grave injustice fostered by the current politico-economic organization. As Martinez-Alier observes, increased economic growth not only builds up pressure on natural resources, it also displaces – read outsources – carbon sources and sinks (10). Economically advanced nations’ domestic resources may not be as endangered, but the upsurge of global spaces of production and the intensification of international trade bolster the exportation of environmental degradation to already struggling nations. While political and economic inequality accelerates environmental destruction in developing countries, inequality in the US translates in the uneven distribution of environmental costs among citizens, as poor and ethnic minorities suffer greater exposition to ecological hazards. In view of this, it becomes clear that what is at stake in tackling environmental issues is not the rescuing of nature, but our ability to address existing economic and social inequalities.

## **CONCLUSION**

While Trump’s take on the environment has translated into a series of political actions meant to dismantle any legislation allegedly impeding the conduct of business, this paper has shown how the broader context paved the way for what merely constitutes the exacerbated form of a continuing discourse of unsustainability. If Trump’s mandate marks an assertion of what should be a bygone era from an environmental point of view, his political statements and actions are embedded in a national text of unsustainability predating him. Drawing on a similar national mythology, Trump’s ideological representations of the environment draw on a culture which has read it in an unsustainable light for a long time. In other words, the discourse of unsustainability cannot be said to have gained salience in US culture; it has only become more visible because of the current president’s especially thunderous mode of communication. The discourse of unsustainability may have been propelled onto a louder arena, but it certainly did not come to existence with the advent of the Trump government, and his take on the environment, whether it be expressed in words or political actions, did not introduce a rupture.

Nature is as much a physical entity as it is a social construction whose value, or valuation, proceeds from particular cultural readings. The onset of the Anthropocene, whereby human beings have seen their status evolve from “objects of nature [to] subjects in the co-evolution

of socio-ecological systems” (Swyngedouw 132), places the production of nature as a focal point on the political agenda, as citizens must decide what sort of environment they want to live in. Foucault’s triadic entity of discourse, knowledge and power highlights how imposing one’s discourse, or succeeding in informing, namely in giving form to the environment, results in the perpetuation of unsustainable environmental practices. The production and dissemination of environmental knowledge is indeed a central aspect of the governing of nature, as vested interests and conflicting views of what is happening to the environment and why threaten the current political and economic establishment.

If environmental unsustainability and other critical social issues may have gained in urgency since the last election, as Americanists we need not revise our paradigms, but we should certainly strive to connect the current configuration of our object of inquiry to the broader text from which it emerges, for it is anything but topical. The US remains the world’s leading economy and a pivotal global actor. As such, its national stance impacts measures concerning international environmental law, while its model of development, emulated by emerging economies, only multiplies the problem. The time may have come for a reappraisal of such an object as the environment, which does not occupy a central place in American Studies scholarship, yet appears worthy of investigation for its potential in enlightening certain critical features of the US culture.

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