



## National sustainabilities

Rhys Jones <sup>a,\*</sup>, Andrea Ross <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth SY23 3DB, UK

<sup>b</sup> School of Law, University of Dundee, Dundee DD1 4HN, UK



### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 11 January 2016

#### Keywords:

Nationalism  
Sustainable development  
Wales

### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the potential for developing a stronger connection between the two significant discourses of sustainable development and nationalism. While there has been limited academic enquiry into the relationships that might exist between these two discourses, we draw on the case study of Wales since 1999 to show how policy-makers are increasingly examining the potential for promoting a more fruitful dialogue between them. We examine how nationalist discourses in Wales have led to the development of a form of sustainable development that is allegedly more attuned to Welsh national values and identities. We also show how sustainable development is being used to imagine new and possibly more inclusive kinds of futures for the Welsh nation. We conclude by reaffirming the fruitful synergies that might exist between sustainable development and nationalism while acknowledging the tensions that arise in seeking to make connections between them.

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### Introduction

Our aim in this paper is to examine the potential for developing a stronger connection between two of the most prominent political and public discourses in existence today; namely those of sustainable development and nationalism. In general terms, little effort, at least in academic contexts, has been made to examine explicitly and in a sustained manner the connections that might exist between these two sets of discourses. Developing a stronger connection between these two sets of ideas, we contend, is a significant development in both academic and policy contexts and could lead to (1) a more transformative and effective version of sustainable development being adopted in different regions and states; (2) potentially more open and inclusive versions of nationalist discourses being developed.

First, by developing a better understanding of the connections between discourses of nationalism and sustainable development, one might be able to promote more effective and transformative interpretations of sustainable development (Happaerts, 2012). Part of the problem with sustainable development to date has been the low levels of adoption of sustainable practices by individuals, groups and organisations. The present human population is currently using the equivalent of one and a half planets to support its activities; high income countries have a ecological footprint five times greater than that of low income countries and 'business as usual' projections estimate that we will need the equivalent of two planets by 2030 to

meet our annual demands (WWF, 2014). We suggest in this paper that connecting sustainable development discourses to the group senses of identity associated with the nation has the potential to address these issues by (a) increasing public *comprehension* of sustainable development, i.e. making sustainable development something that is more meaningful and accessible to particular groups of people, (b) increasing public *commitment*, in a practical sense, to the principles of sustainable practices, as groups of people are exhorted to make their nations/countries more sustainable.

Second, coupling discourses of sustainable development to those of nationalism also has the potential to lead to the development of more inclusive and emancipatory versions of national discourses. Much has been made of the exclusionary and 'regressive' nature of national discourses in academic and policy literatures (Ignatieff, 1995; Massey, 1991). Although there has been some attempt to question the viewpoint that nationalist discourses are necessarily exclusionary in character (e.g. Anderson, 1983), in general terms, such a viewpoint prevails within academic, political and popular conceptions of the nation. Although this is in no way straightforward, we contend that the intermeshing of sustainability and nationalist narratives and discourses has the potential to promote a more progressive and less parochial interpretation of nationalism, not least because of sustainable development's emphasis on considering the global and future impacts of place-based practices.

We have adopted a purposefully broad interpretation of nationalist – and indeed, sustainability – discourses in this project. Nationalist discourses refer to the words and practices of a range of different individuals and organisations involved in promoting a 'group-making project' of the nation (Brubaker, 2004; Calhoun, 1993). Nationalist discourses extend well beyond the policies and practices of nationalist parties. As Billig (1995) has shown, we are

\* Corresponding author. Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth SY23 3DB, UK. Tel.: +44 (0)1970 622594; Fax: +44 (0)1970 622259.

E-mail address: [raj@aber.ac.uk](mailto:raj@aber.ac.uk) (R. Jones).

all – whether we like it or not – bound up in the discourses of nationalism. Nationalist discourse can be articulated by a suite of different organisations, ranging from political parties of all kinds, governmental organisations of different sorts, as well as NGOs engaged in different aspects of social and environmental activism. Similarly, sustainability discourses are those words and practices promoted by a range of different individuals and organisations, which focus attention on the need to consider the interrelated impacts of current practices on environmental, economic and social futures (cf. [WCED, 1987, 43](#)).

The article is organised into three main sections. In the next section, we discuss previous work on sustainable development and nationalism, paying particular attention to the contradictory temporal and spatial imaginations contained within it. In the following section, we elaborate on the work that has begun to examine the potential connections between discourses of sustainable development and nationalism. We argue that it has been characterised by a certain myopia because of its tendency to focus on the links between nationalism and sustainable development in ‘other’ places, most notably postcolonial and postsocialist states. In the final substantive section, we elaborate on a case study, which examines the link between Welsh nationalist discourse and sustainable development in the period after 1999. The discussion shows how nationalist discourses have been used to shape distinctive interpretations of sustainable development that are more attuned to an alleged Welsh national culture, as well as the way in which sustainable development discourses are being used to imagine alternative futures for the Welsh nation. We conclude by reflecting on the broader implications of examining the links between discourses of nationalism and sustainable development or, what we term, national sustainabilities. We argue that this is not merely an academic exercise but also one that has the potential to invigorate the politics of sustainability and nationalism.

### Timing and space sustainable development and nationalism

We contend that there has been little systematic and sustained examination, to date, of the potential dialogue that can exist between discourses of sustainable development and nationalism. Key academic texts on nationalism, whether textbooks or research monographs, make little reference to sustainable development. While there is some discussion of the significance of nature and the environment to nationalist discourse, little attention is paid to the concept of sustainable development (e.g. [Herb & Kaplan, 2008](#)). A similar story can be told in relation to the lack of engagement with nationalism in key texts on sustainable development. One of the most popular textbooks on sustainable development in Geography, for instance, discusses at length the contributions that states and regions can make to the promotion of sustainable development but is far more silent on the impact that state and regional forms of group identity – such as nationalism – have on sustainable development ([Whitehead, 2007](#), though see the very brief discussion on p. 208). Similarly, [Lafferty and Eckerberg's \(1998\)](#) review of the kinds of sustainable development being developed and implemented in various countries illustrates how sustainable development is refracted through different state bureaucracies but does not explore the extent to which these differences may also possibly derive from particular national identities, cultures or values. In short, while space/place and states are seen to matter for sustainable development, the contribution that nationalism may make to sustainable development remains under-explored. We suggest that part of the reason for the lack of dialogue between these two sets of discourses lies in the fact that they have been largely characterised by contradictory forms of temporal and spatial imagination.

The temporal imaginations contained within sustainable development tend to focus on the interrelationship between the present and future generations. The well-rehearsed definition of sustainable development provided by the World Commission and Environment and Development in 1987 ([WCED, 1987, 43](#)), whereby sustainable development is viewed as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, illustrates how sustainable development has been used to connect present and future generations, particularly in relation to resource use and to ideas of inter-generational equity. Sustainable development can be viewed as a discourse that is predicated on a care of distant others; in particular those future others who are said to bear the consequences of our unsustainable practices and lifestyles in the present (cf. [Massey, 2004](#)). Discourses of nationalism largely possess different temporal imaginations. Much of the explicit focus in the academic literature, at least, is on examining national pasts, as well as the way in which these can inform national presents (see [Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983](#); [Kedourie, 1960](#); [Smith, 1998](#)). There are, admittedly, some exceptions to this general tendency, including the kinds of temporal imagination that characterise nations that exist, to use [Keating's \(2001\)](#) words, “against the state”. Nations that exist in opposition to established states often possess a vision of a national future, based on greater autonomy and self-determination ([Keating, 1998, 187](#)).

The spatial imaginations that characterise the discourses of sustainable development and nationalism are also, at first glance, contradictory. At heart, sustainability is viewed as a discourse and practice that operates at the scale of local communities and internationally/globally. The significance of the local scale within discourses of sustainable development has been the subject of considerable discussion and critique, with especial attention being directed to the notion of sustainable cities (e.g. [While, Jonas, & Gibbs, 2010](#)), sustainable communities (e.g. [Raco, 2005](#)) and regions/city-regions more broadly (e.g. [Counsell & Haughton, 2006](#); [Krueger & Gibbs, 2010](#)). Moreover, as [While et al. \(2010, 76–77\)](#) maintain, sustainable development does not merely take place over particular local and regional scales. The discourse of sustainable development, rather, is an active agent in a process of so-called ‘eco-state restructuring’, which helps to reproduce the local/regional scale. And yet, part of the significance of sustainable development is its emphasis on encouraging various actors to think about the global environmental, social and economic challenges facing humanity (e.g. [Agyeman, Bullard, & Evans, 2003, 2](#)). The issue of climate change has only added to this global construction of the environmental, social and economic challenges facing humanity ([Demeritt, 2001](#)) and of the potential role that sustainable development can play in mitigating them.

Significantly, sustainability discourses also make much of the need to connect these different scales – the global and the local – witnessed most clearly in the sustainability exhortation to “think globally and act locally”. Sustainable development, in this regard, is viewed as a particularly powerful discourse since it combines an accepted global definition of the term, while at the same time providing a degree of fluidity, which enables more local interpretations of the discourse to emerge in different places ([Whitehead, 2007, 187–210](#)). The connections between these global and local visions of sustainable development were made more concrete as a result of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in 2002, where an emphasis was placed on developing multi-stakeholder partnerships that would cross, and moreover, connect different scales of engagement with sustainable development ([Hale & Mauzerall, 2004](#)). Similarly, the Rio+20 conference sought to encourage different states to accelerate progress towards the goal of sustainable development but, crucially, in ways that were specific to those states. Geographers and others have used understandings of the politics of scale and of ‘scale jumping’ in order to

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