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Document Version

Final published version

Published in:

Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology

DOI:

[10.3167/fcl.2020.072001](https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2020.072001)

Publication date:

2021

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Citation for published version (APA):

Archer, M. (2021). Navigating the Sustainability Landscape: Impact Pathways and the Sustainability Ethic as Moral Compass. *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, (91), 85-99.
<https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2020.072001>

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Download date: 04. Jul. 2025



Navigating the sustainability landscape

Impact pathways and the sustainability ethic as moral compass

Matthew Archer

Abstract: Sustainability professionals believe their work has positive social and environmental impacts in the “real world,” but they recognize that their impactfulness is contingent on a number of other factors, especially the willingness of other, typically more powerful actors to consider their findings and implement their recommendations. In this article, I develop the notion of “impact pathways” to think about the relationship between paths, maps, travelers, terrains, and ethics in the context of what my informants regularly refer to as the sustainability “landscape.” I show how the interpretation of a map and the choice between different possible paths can be partially explained by an actor’s particular ethical framework, in this case something I identify as the sustainability ethic.

Keywords: corporate sustainability, ethics, impact, impact pathways, work

People who work in sustainability are usually motivated, to some extent, by a desire to generate positive impacts in the “real world.” These social and environmental impacts are one of the main reasons they choose to pursue careers in sustainability rather than consulting or banking jobs that do not have an explicit sustainability component, jobs in which they might have made more money but would have felt unfulfilled. In order to make an impact, however, sustainability professionals have to navigate a number of different obstacles, from recalcitrant investors who believe sustainability is a waste of time and money, to various contradictory claims and values associated with their work. For example, many of the sustainability professionals I met during my fieldwork are committed to mitigat-

ing the effects of climate change on vulnerable communities and ecosystems, even though their work often legitimizes a system of extractive capitalism that exacerbates climate change and its negative impacts. Others promote corporate sustainability and sustainable development initiatives that they admit, citing IPCC and other scientific reports, will do little to actually avoid catastrophic global warming. As a consequence of this, sustainability professionals’ sense of their own impactfulness is fragile and contingent, requiring constant maintenance and support. What we find is a profession in which people must navigate a number of different contradictions—passion versus pragmatism, morals versus markets, and so on. Anthropology, as “the science of contradictions” (Berliner 2016),



is particularly well-suited to studying these tensions and the ways in which they are navigated.

This article is based on a year of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Geneva, Switzerland, between September 2015 and August 2016, as well as participant observation and interviews I conducted in the United States, Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Denmark, and the UK. Most of the semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts from these interviews are the source of the longer quotations in this article, and I use pseudonyms throughout. I refer to most of my informants as “sustainability professionals,” which I define as a person who is explicitly responsible in a professional capacity for some aspect of their organization’s sustainability, or is tasked with developing and maintaining the sustainability of some other organization. This would include someone who has the word “sustainability” in their job title; someone who works for a company or organization that promotes or relies on sustainability and its primary purpose or as a main source of revenue; people working in traditional financial institutions whose jobs require the explicit consideration of sustainability indicators (such as investment banks or university endowments); people who teach and research sustainability in academic institutions, who might be sustainability professionals in their own right (through consulting work, for instance) but are also instrumental in the production of sustainability professionals outside the academy; and people whose work at various levels of government involves crafting or negotiating sustainability regulations, designing sustainability frameworks, overseeing sustainability initiatives, and so on. Some of the sustainability professionals introduced in this article might more accurately be called sustainability near-professionals, that is, they are training to be (or hope to become) sustainability professionals, but are still in school, or in some cases “stuck” in jobs where they do not feel like they have a real impact, hoping and waiting for an opportunity to present itself. Although it is difficult to provide a reliable estimate, one

sustainability-focused career consultant I spoke to in the fall of 2016 estimated that there are over 100,000 sustainability professionals working today, a number that she claims is growing rapidly. As of April 2020, the LinkedIn group “Sustainability Professionals” had more than 196,000 members. Despite claiming that sustainability is impossible to define, nearly all of my informants, when pushed, defined it as the integration of social, environmental, and economic considerations in business and financial decisions (what is often referred to, following John Elkington [1997] as the triple-bottom-line or people-planet-profit approach to sustainability), and they typically invoked the so-called business case for sustainability, which is the idea that the consideration of each of these three dimensions (people, planet, and profit) will ultimately lead to bigger profits.

To understand the way sustainability professionals conceptualize their impactfulness and its contingency on various other actors and factors, I adapt Paul Kockelman’s (2010) metaphor of maps, travelers, and terrains to theorize the relationship between “impact pathways” and contemporary sustainability “landscapes,” terms that my informants frequently use and encounter in the course of their work. In particular, I imagine sustainability professionals as travelers through or across a sustainability landscape, whose mental maps of that particular terrain have to account for the various obstacles and checkpoints they might encounter and pass through in order to generate positive social and environmental impacts, with their ethical frameworks functioning like a legend or compass that helps them interpret their maps and choose between the different possible paths they might follow from an origin to a destination.

I have already introduced my informants (*qua* travelers) above. The next section develops the map metaphor in more detail, connecting it to the way sustainability professionals deploy and engage with notions of impact pathways and sustainability landscapes. I then move through some of the different elements of this metaphor, describing some of the obstacles, toll

booths, and detours sustainability professionals have to consider as they pursue certain impacts. The penultimate section introduces what I refer to as the sustainability ethic, which helps sustainability professionals interpret their maps and choose a specific path (among many possible options). I show how different ethical frameworks and moral convictions explain why two people using similar maps to cross the same terrain end up taking very different paths. I conclude with some thoughts on impact and ethics in the anthropology of sustainability.

Impact pathways in the sustainability landscape

Similar to the sustainability professionals I observed in Geneva, the “cleantech” entrepreneurs Jesse Goldstein (2018) studied in New York used the word impact “mainly to refer to the social and environmental implications of external effects,” such as “transform[ing] their customers’ operations, or society more broadly” (Goldstein 2018: 42). According to Goldstein, impact “is an abstract and thoroughly aspirational concept,” difficult for sustainability professionals to define “without recourse to tautology” (2018: 40–41). Despite the huge literature on measuring and evaluating the impacts of sustainability programs (known as social and environmental impact assessment, which is an increasingly important component of lifecycle assessments or LCAs), sustainability professionals only refer to these more technical approaches to impact when the situation demands it, for example, when talking to skeptical investors or executives. In most cases, when they talk about impacts, they are referencing a less concrete and more ethically charged belief that their work is somehow causally related to something “good” happening in the world.

Among the different methods for conducting an LCA of a particular product or service, one of the main ones is “the impact pathway approach,” which “attempts to quantify the ‘actual’ effect resulting from the exposure to a burden

at a specific place and time, rather than estimating a ‘potential’ impact” (Krewitt et al. 1998: 86). Impact pathways help analysts visualize the “cause-effect chain” (Rosenbaum et al. 2018) of social and environmental mechanisms and are often represented in the form of complex flow charts. These kinds of graphic representations are familiar to sustainability professionals who see them in almost any report or presentation that deals with impacts. Indeed, the notion of impact pathways features prominently at corporate sustainability, sustainable finance, and sustainable development conferences, as well as practitioner-focused reports published by consulting firms like EY (EY 2016), banks like DBS (Liang and Nguyen 2020), NGOs like the Rainforest Alliance (Newsom and Milder 2018), and even LinkedIn bloggers (Kerai 2017), and it is central to the way organizations communicate about their social and environmental sustainability (Impact Institute 2019). Although it is not a term sustainability professionals use too frequently in casual conversations (unless they were trying to shift into a more technical and authoritative register), the concept’s ubiquity and subsequent familiarity has undoubtedly affected the way they think about their own impact. They often describe their own impactfulness precisely in terms of cause-effect chains, tracing their impact from a deliverable they worked on (a report they helped write, a presentation they delivered a conference, etc.) to some impact in the real world (a company’s decision to become a signatory of the United Nations Global Compact, for example). At some point along these pathways, the product of their work encounters someone who is more powerful and influential (such as an executive or a wealthy investor or a politician) and who is able to amplify their findings or implement their recommendations.

Another term I often encountered during my fieldwork was “landscape,” which sustainability professionals typically use as a way to denote the complexity of a given topic. Sometimes, they referred explicitly to the “sustainability landscape,” but more often they would refer to particular sustainability landscapes, such as

the “sustainability reporting landscape” (which is dominated by the Global Reporting Initiative’s reporting guidelines), the “ESG [environmental, social, and governance indicators] landscape,” and so on. These landscapes have particular topographies dominated by specific features, infrastructures, and points of interest, which sustainability professionals have to be able to traverse. The rest of this article explores the relationship between impact pathways and the sustainability landscapes, re-interpreting these concepts through a metaphor of maps and the tools travelers use to navigate a path across a particular terrain.

Maps are one way that paths and landscapes are brought into relation with each other. According to Kockelman:

To understand the nature of value, one must understand the relation between maps, terrains, and travelers. As used here, a *terrain* is . . . a modal and meaningful space—one that turns on commitments and entitlements to signify and interpret. More concretely, it is a space of social statuses and mental states that could be inhabited: a set of possible mediations between selves and others, and minds and worlds. A *map* is an understanding of what the places are in, and paths through, such a terrain. Such an understanding may be tacit, such as an embodied topography; it may be explicit, like a mental map; or it may even be enclosed and objectified, like a bound atlas. . . . And a *traveler* is some kind of self-mind situated in such a terrain; someone who inhabits a set of social statuses and has a set of mental states; someone who semiotically and socially relates as a self to others and as a mind to world; someone who may both orient the map relative to the terrain (via the existential equivalent of a compass) and orient the self relative to the map (via the existential equivalent of a you-are-here spot). (Kockelman 2010: 149–150)

The path a traveler ends up taking is often just one of a number of possible routes between an origin and a destination. A map relates these paths to one another as a set of choices a traveler is able to make in order to navigate the terrain a map supposedly represents. In this metaphor, sustainability professionals are travelers who, in the process of describing the impact pathways that connect their work to a real world impact, are not only describing how they move from an origin to a destination, but also implicitly choosing from a set of possible pathways. Their maps of the sustainability landscape indicate various landmarks, points of interest, infrastructures, and so on, areas that travelers must navigate between, around, and through in order to move from an origin to a destination. Sustainability professionals, *qua* travelers, must also navigate different landmarks and obstacles, passing through, between, and around other human and non-human actors, and in deciding which path to take, they must reflect on their moral convictions and ethical frameworks to “make judgements that are qualitative, multi-dimensional, and contextual,” since a “map is not so much a framework as a patchwork, not instrumental but existential, not monochromatic but kaleidoscopic” (Kockelman 2010: 157). Indeed, as Jorge Luis Borges (2004) famously reminds us, cartographers with the ambition of producing perfectly detailed maps risk suffocating the sites they are trying to understand. James Scott’s (1998) chapter on authoritarian high modernism opens with a similar observation.

Making an impact

Melanie is a sustainability professional working in a large international organization in New York, where she writes reports about the business case for sustainability and gives talks and lectures at conferences promoting the private sector’s role in sustainable development. When I asked her during an interview about her impact, she responded:

I don't want to sound like I'm super big headed, but I can definitely see some traces of things that we did here, for instance in the Paris Agreement, or in some of the articles that are being pushed out. As long as you see you can have some kind of influence, and as long as you can have those small moments where you can think "Wow, that's cool," or even seeing that you made a connection between a decision maker and someone, and something happened, and there's an outcome. It's definitely a good feeling.

She immediately contrasted this against her previous career in "on-the-ground" development work where "it's more right up in your face and you can see that you're actually making an impact." But she felt like those impacts were limited to particular geographies and particular groups of people, and while they might make you feel good, she found her current work more fulfilling because of its broader scope.

Melanie was proud that her work had been cited by students, policymakers, and, crucially, "decision makers," which, for her, was evidence that people were taking her (and, by extension, her organization's) ideas seriously. I had read some of the reports she had authored and co-authored before interviewing her, and she pointed to the fact that I was so familiar with her work as yet more evidence of her impact. In tracing a causal relationship between a report she wrote and some desired outcome, Melanie's impact depended not only on chance (i.e., the possibility of her report being read and cited), but also on an assumption about the way other, more powerful actors thought about their own impactfulness—precisely the "policymakers" and other "decision makers" she was trying so hard to convince.

Sustainability professionals may have one pathway in mind, such as Melanie's claim that her research had influenced the outcome of the COP21 (Conference of Parties) negotiations in Paris, and that they would in turn make decisions and take actions (generate deliverables)

that would make her "carbon footprint" worth it. But there are also alternate routes to generate an impact, a sort of built-in contingency plans should things go awry. In Melanie's case, for instance, if a powerful executive hears and is inspired by her presentation at a sustainability conference, it might lead to the kind of positive impact that Melanie hopes for, but if not, there are other paths her impact can take via consumer groups, academics, policymakers, etc. Maybe an influential journalist was also in the audience. Those possibilities remain open, even if they are hard to predict.

The people a sustainability professional's work might encounter and influence are important points in the sustainability landscape, points they need to pass through in order to have the kinds of impacts they are pursuing. Sometimes their maps are wrong. Many of my informants imagined executives as precisely the kind of powerful actors they need to influence, but the executives I talked to about their own impacts expressed doubt about their ability to effect the kinds of consequential social and environmental changes their less influential colleagues think they can. Instead, they diverted the paths of their own impactfulness through other, still higher-ranked executives or, in the case of the director of one organization, dispersing it across lower-ranked employees, who he argued are responsible for developing, implementing, and managing the initiatives that generate those impacts.

A trip to Beantown

After I left Geneva in the fall of 2016 and returned to my university in the United States, I reached out to the sustainable finance student group and described my research, asking if any of their members would be interested in meeting with me to talk about their future career plans. They invited me to join them on their bi-annual job trek to Boston, which I gladly accepted. We left for Boston at 6:15 a.m. on a chilly Friday morning. We had been instructed

by one of the funds we were planning to visit to wear business formal, which turned out to be a strange requirement since none of the employees who actually worked there were wearing business formal.

On the drive up, I talked with the other people in my carpool about their motivations for pursuing careers in conservation finance and impact investing. I explained a bit about my research, and was forthcoming about my own reason for participating in the trek, which was to observe how aspiring sustainability professionals “sell” themselves to financial institutions (and vice versa). I learned that the job market for sustainable finance puts recruits between a rock and a hard place: on one hand, they have to be convincing capitalists, trained the “right” way, quantitative, motivated by profits, productivity, and efficiency; on the other hand, they have to be ethical, but only if their ethics are attenuated by an underlying commitment to market-based solutions. It is an uncomfortable position, one that is difficult to articulate and navigate. Richard, whose previous experience in banking had left him “unfulfilled,” decided to go back to school and study something he could be passionate about—conservation. An avid outdoorsman, he felt an obligation to help protect “nature,” which had given him so much joy. Nevertheless, while he felt that finance was almost certainly capable of developing ways to optimize conservation efforts, he was not convinced that conservation finance as a niche investment strategy had developed a “compelling” case for its own existence. He was worried he would find a career in conservation finance frustrating and equally unfulfilling, and as we continued driving, he ruminated on the possibility of pursuing jobs in more traditional fields of finance and devoting himself to conservation in a personal (rather than a professional) capacity, via private philanthropy and activism. Shawn’s motivations were similar. He had felt unfulfilled in his previous position as a public utilities regulator, stifled by the bureaucracy and inefficacy of the public sector. At the same time, it was difficult for him to imagine a life in

the private sector, which he had grown to distrust after years of being tasked with regulating many of its activities. For him, impact investing was a “middle ground” where he could shed the bureaucratic weight of his former job without foregoing the affective benefits of working to improve the world.

At the different investment companies we visited, students pitched themselves as “passionate” about social and environmental issues, on one hand, but “pragmatic” about the challenges of solving them, on the other, especially when it came to the financial challenges. Those who had previous work experience in NGOs or non-profits emphasized the inefficiencies that plagued their former organizations and professed a desire to continue that nonetheless important work in a setting where efficiency and rationality were more appreciated, a hedge fund, for instance. Conversely, those who had worked in banking or consulting before going back to school talked about the invaluable skills and knowledge they had acquired, but complained about feeling unfulfilled, emphasizing their intention to use these practical skills to do some good in the world. For everyone there, the aim was to strike that delicate balance between passion and pragmatism, to convince their potential future employers that they were committed to pursuing some social or environmental goal without threatening the financial prerogatives of a for-profit investment fund, and vice versa, and that they were committed to achieving ambitious financial targets in a way that did not require them to forgo certain ethical commitments.

Even sartorial decisions were made to reflect this balance. After I complimented Susanne on her bracelet, a thin piece of cloth with colorful, detailed beadwork, she chuckled and told me that she was hesitant to wear it at first, but thought that if someone asked about it, it would give her a good opportunity to talk about a mission she had undertaken with the World Bank to Latin America, where she had bought the bracelet from an indigenous artisan, a trip that had crystalized her passion for harnessing the

“entrepreneurial spirit” of local people to help them improve their socio-economic standing in the world. She had chosen her accessory that day for the purpose of potentially signifying (if they asked about it) to potential employers (if they eventually hired her) that she had the right background and orientation to be a successful sustainability professional.

For these would-be sustainability professionals, their main task on the job trek was to navigate the safest path between passion and pragmatism, between moral values and market values, in order to secure a job that would pay well (they would be working in finance, after all) while also letting them generate positive social and environmental impacts. In order to do that, my informants’ maps of the sustainability-related recruitment landscape have to be detailed enough to let them know when they are approaching a danger zone (Too impassioned! Turn around!), a toll booth (That’s one of the firm’s partners. Ask a technical-sounding question.), or any number of other points and places in that landscape, a representation, in other words, of the way their relationships with other actors are mediated. In the next section, I describe what happens when sustainability professionals sense that they are getting too close to a hazardous area, in this case, the risk that an overly critical tone might alienate the people they believe their impact pathways must encounter in order to be effective.

“It has to make sense for business”

During a bout of (unpaid) consulting work I undertook in Geneva as part of my participant observation within a sustainable development organization, I was tasked with reading the sustainability reports of around half a dozen companies and drafting short case studies for each one. In one of these drafts, I wrote that the report advocated for the use of “already available data from national statistics, while noting the challenges of collecting accurate data from rural, underdeveloped regions and the possibility

of statistical manipulation that skews results.” Later, I received feedback from a colleague, who had used track changes to edit this sentence, noting in a comment: “Language is a bit harsh—maybe recognizing the potential variability in statistical analysis? Or the need for sensitivity analysis to understand potential variability in results?”

Over coffee the next afternoon, I asked her about this comment, since, in my mind, the summary I had written had offered a pretty faithful overview of the report’s conclusions. She asked me if the report itself had used the phrase “statistical manipulation that skews results.” It had not, of course. She responded that the combination of “manipulation” and “skews” so closely together implied some kind of nefarious agency, as if the company had suggested that people were actively manipulating data with the intention of skewing the results. “Had the report really implied that?” Well, of course not. “Alright then, let’s not leave room for interpretation.” I accepted her edits, but was still a bit confused about the purpose of the case study, if not to highlight the strengths and the weaknesses of different sustainability strategies. That’s fine, she told me, but weaknesses need to be presented only insofar as they can be improved. Underneath this claim was the implication that weaknesses not only have to be improvable, but improvable in a specific way that does not negatively impact a company’s financial performance. She emphasized the importance of writing objective case studies, and only presenting true information, assuring me that it was not meant to be an advertisement, even if it was not meant to be a piece of critical scholarship, either. Ultimately, she said, “it has to make sense for business.” In traversing the path between writing a report and having an impact, this informant’s map told her that the risk of offending a private-sector collaborator was an area that was off-limits.

Where I had drafted the case study with the intention of accurately representing the company’s sustainability report, my colleague had interpreted my summary as overly critical. This

makes sense in light of Michael Dove's (1994: 347) observation that when the ethnographer and his informants share "an organizational and intellectual culture," their relationships tend to be "more collegial and, hence, potentially more threatening." Citing Talal Asad (1986: 156), Dove argues that taking a "critical stance" toward the social and cultural texts of the "distant savage" or some apparent other is seen as an act of translation, while that same stance is considered a contestation when taken in the context of the "immediate neighbor" or colleague. And indeed, from social texts to actual texts, oftentimes when I thought I was engaging in an act of translation, my interlocutors interpreted my comments or actions as an act of contestation, bristling at a perceived threat or slight. In one particularly harrowing encounter, I had drafted a series of short, paragraph-long blurbs for another one of Geneva's many international organizations in exchange for "backstage access" to their meetings and research projects, which I sent off to the analyst tasked with overseeing my work for final approval. A few hours later, I received a hastily written email: "Come see me when you get a chance." I packed up my things (it was mid-afternoon and sunny outside, so I wanted to take off early and read by the lake) and took a tram to the office. I signed in with reception, picked up my visitor's badge, and waited for my manager/informant to come down and fetch me.

I could sense my informant's frustration as soon as we met in the lobby. In the stairwell he laid into me: "What were you thinking? No one wants to read this!" The problem, as it turned out, was that I had not painted a rosy enough picture of the efforts that governments, companies, and industry groups were making to combat human rights abuses in their supply chains, having opted instead to write about the challenges they were facing in implementing various programs meant to achieve (relevant) SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals). I found all this quite trivial, shrugging it off as a stylistic difference, but he belabored the point until I retorted that, frankly, I was not aware that his

organization was meant to function as a corporate mouthpiece, there simply to greenwash the minimal efforts of businesses and other institutions. "You just don't get it," he responded. According to him, I was "naïve" for failing to appreciate the "incremental progress" that sustainable development requires. "Enough," I said. We parted ways, and I was not asked to do any more consulting work for this particular organization, bringing an abrupt end to my participant observation in that particular field site.

At first, I was not sure how to interpret my informants' contentions. In both cases, they struck me as such minor points, and ones that would not improve the main message of the case studies I had drafted. As my fieldwork progressed, however, it became clear that the effectiveness of corporate sustainability in the minds of its practitioners is premised to a huge extent on being able to convince executives and investors that their "business case" for sustainability is valid, of not offending their corporate and financial sensibilities. To put it differently, in my informants' maps of the various ways their work might generate a positive social or environmental impact, one of the conditions of possibility for an impact to occur is a more powerful actor's perception of the impact-generating "deliverable" as legitimate and valuable in the context of their own work, that is, in whatever maps they are using to chart a path across the landscape(s) they are trying to traverse. Thus, my colleague's insistence on reducing the alleged harshness of my case study's wording reflects an ingrained assumption that the only way that a case study will have any impact—perhaps it will encourage a less sustainable company to bring their operations in line with the company we were profiling—is if it is not only convincing but also palatable. More than just captious supervisors, these interlocutors perceived my minor critiques as major threats because in their view, anything that risked alienating the readers of these reports and frameworks and guidelines could undermine everything they were working toward not only in their professional lives, but in their ethical lives, too. In these situations, the

exigency of elite acquiescence was especially pronounced, where my interlocutors' perception of their own impactfulness was significantly influenced by the perceived or expected reactions of anonymous (and maybe even imaginary) powerful corporate actors who stand sentinel at the entrance to areas through which their impact pathways have to pass.

Anti-environmentalism and the sustainability ethic

One thing that sustainability professionals more or less consistently reject is being identified as an environmentalist. For example, when I asked Mildred, who is in charge of the sustainability strategy at a private bank, whether she considered herself an environmentalist, she responded:

I wouldn't say "environmentalist." I mean, I'm passionate about the subject. I'm not an activist, but I realize that in many cases the people that have the role that I have in a company are like the in-house NGO. So it's about bringing a fresh view, a fresh perspective, and challenging companies to go further in how they manage many of these subjects. And you can do that better from inside than from outside, and you have to find a way of being constructive rather than antagonistic, because that's not going to get you anywhere either, and you have to find a way of making it compatible with the business objectives.

Mildred's response does two things. First, it puts forward the argument that working with (rather than against) the incentive structure of the bank is the most effective way to improve the way companies (that her bank invests in) manage their environmental impacts, with the implicit claim that more radical approaches (such as those associated in the business community with NGOs like Greenpeace) are counterproductive. Second, she is affirming her personal commitment to helping mitigate environmen-

tal degradation vis-à-vis her role as a sustainability manager within an organization that, in her own worldview, is better positioned to "go further" with regards to social and environmental impacts. She thus offers a thinly veiled critique that stereotypes environmentalists (activists working in anti-business NGOs) as antagonistic rather than constructive, as idealistically opposed to the reality of corporations and their profit motives. Robert, who oversees sustainability at a multinational consumer bank, shed that veil completely, remarking of environmentalists that:

It's ok to be personally passionate about it, but I don't think that's necessarily enough to convince people, because they just look at you like you're some flaming lentil-eater. Actually, you need to have the facts. You need to have a strong business case. . . . I think being passionate about it is not enough, you actually have to have the facts, you have to have a good solid insight, and as the person who's bringing the change to the table, you have to work from the other person's perspective to where you are, as opposed to saying "I'm here. You're there. You need to come here."

Like Mildred, Robert is implicitly contrasting his own objective, rational, level-headed approach against that of lentil-eating environmentalists. (Another informant used the phrase "granola-munching.") He is not saying that being passionate is necessarily a bad thing, just that it is not sufficient on its own, at least not to achieve the kinds of impacts that he thinks are important, things like expanding the availability of online banking in rural communities. People and organizations that are unwilling to work with (rather than against) businesses are seen as too passionate at the expense of pragmatism. Patrick, an analyst at an international organization, asked me if by "environmentalist" I meant to refer to people who riot, in which case he was emphatically not an environmentalist. Susan, a corporate sustainability manager in Geneva, surprised me by confidently respond-

ing, “Of course!” when I asked if she considered herself an environmentalist, telling me that “I’ve always had a lot of respect for the environment we live in, and I’ve always felt that, very strongly as a kid. I used to have my Body Shop [a cosmetics brand that made its name by advertising its stance against animal testing] bag and my Greenpeace mug.” As it turns out, she meant that she *had* identified as an environmentalist when she was young, growing out of it as she became more pragmatic. Indeed, in Susan’s gloss, environmentalism was for naïve, immature children; sustainability, on the other hand, was for serious, rational, experienced professionals.

The few people who hesitantly accepted being identified as environmentalists were all relatively senior managers, and there were always caveats and conditions. When I asked the CEO of a small Scandinavian logistics company whether he considers himself an environmentalist, he responded with a chuckle, “Sure. I mean, why not? I definitely care about the environment, but I’m smart about it.” Another executive, the chief financial officer of a large NGO, neatly summed up the problem: “Yeah, I’m an environmentalist, but I’d never say that out loud. It just comes with too much baggage.” These people, who wield immense power in their organizations, obscure their environmentalism in various ways—by distinguishing “smart” environmentalism from stupid or silly environmentalism, by distancing themselves from ostensibly baggage-laden characterizations. Alyssa Zucker (2004), drawing on research among women who are “loath” to be labeled feminists, despite professing broadly (or at least stereotypically) feminist values, calls this the “disavowal of social identity.” She finds that women who are more marginalized are more reluctant to label themselves feminist. A similar dynamic is reflected among sustainability professionals and the “social identity” of environmentalism, as well, evidenced by the fact that, by and large, only senior executives would embrace an environmentalist identity and even then only tentatively.

What emerged to replace environmentalism is what I call the sustainability ethic, an ethi-

cal predisposition toward promoting environmental and social justice, but only insofar as problems could be defined and their solutions conceptualized within the fairly narrow band of acceptability staked out by market-based approaches to sustainability, solutions that line up with sustainability’s “business case.” There are two components of the sustainability ethic. The first is a genuine concern for social and environmental problems, things like women’s empowerment, climate change mitigation, sustainable development, and more. This is what my informants would refer to as their passion or their motivation. The second is the belief that only market-based solutions will work and that these market-based solutions, by virtue of being the only viable solutions, are also the only ethical solutions. They imagine their embrace of market-based solutions as further evidence of their pragmatism. People I interviewed who work in sustainable finance summed it up quite nicely, often claiming that they were “value-driven” rather than “values-driven,” drawing a sharp distinction between people who are overcome by their personal moral convictions and people who are able to see “the bigger picture.” This position is based on a belief that markets are more efficient than regulations or sanctions and are therefore better.

This becomes relatively clear in the sustainability ethic embodied by many of my informants, which brings together their concerns for various socio-ecological crises with a belief that solving them not only can be profitable but also should be profitable, reinforcing the hegemony of the people-planet-profit trifecta. Crucially, they see each side of the sustainability ethic—passion and pragmatism, moral values and market values—as tempering and thus strengthening the other. In other words, passion for social and environmental causes needs to be tempered by a commitment to market values, just like a staunchly pragmatic outlook must be tempered by a desire to achieve social and environmental goals alongside competitive financial performance. Sustainability professionals have to strike and maintain a balance between

these competing values. Consider the alternatives. A sustainability professional would consider someone who was overly passionate and driven predominantly by moral values as an activist, and would consider someone who was overly pragmatic and driven predominantly by market concerns as a “conventional” (a word my informants use to refer especially to investors, but also consulting firms, that do not consider sustainability issues) professional. In terms of their impactfulness, the former generates only social and/or environmental impacts, while the latter is concerned with nothing other than financial performance; unlike the sustainability professional, neither have considered all three necessary aspects of the triple bottom line.

Returning to the metaphor of pathways and maps, we can interpret Robert, Mildred, and other sustainability professionals’ discomfort with being labeled (or labeling themselves) “environmentalists” as less of a moral critique of environmentalists *per se*, and more of a commentary on the tools they believe environmentalists use to chart their impact pathways vis-à-vis the tools sustainability professionals use, not only on the accuracy of their maps but also on the way they choose to interpret them. While an environmentalist ethic might be precisely what is needed for Greenpeace activists to generate the kind impact they want to achieve (e.g., creating a corporate sustainability scandal with international media coverage), the sustainability ethic described above is what sustainability professionals need to use in order to navigate the terrains in which they are hoping to generate different kinds of impacts (e.g., convincing a multinational corporation to adopt a more progressive sustainability policy, leading to substantially reduced carbon emissions, workplace accidents, etc.).

The sustainability ethic helps explain how two actors might use similar maps to cross a similar terrain and still end up taking radically different paths between an origin and a destination. I met Norbert as he was preparing to graduate with a master’s degree in environmental management from a prestigious US univer-

sity and had accepted a job at one of the world’s biggest oil and gas companies. Some of his friends and classmates, especially those pursuing careers with organizations like Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund who see themselves working against the interests of oil and gas companies like Norbert’s future employer, were dismayed when he told them where he had accepted a job offer, and although he felt a bit guilty when he saw his company in the news for one of its many scandals, he was adamant that working to change the system “from the inside” was the most effective way of generating positive social and environmental impacts, which he was deeply committed to doing.

This suggests that Norbert has a particular conceptualization or mental map of how his work as a sustainability manager inside an oil company generates particular social and environmental impacts, such as convincing his employer to invest more in green energy research and development. But the terrain this map represents is full of pit stops, obstacles, points of interest, toll booths, and other features that have to be navigated in order for these anticipated impacts to materialize. It is largely the same terrain his skeptical friends will need to navigate in their own careers, and since many of them are trained in similar ways (most were pursuing the same master’s degree) and had similar socio-economic backgrounds (middle-class and upper-middle class white Americans) their maps are probably quite similar, as well. What is different are the ethical frameworks they use to interpret these maps in order to choose the most effective paths between an origin and destination, how they choose which particular impact pathway to try and follow, and how they identify a desired destination in the first place. Indeed, as Kockelman (2010: 155) observes, different ethical ideals can lead to radically different evaluations of the relative desirability of different paths within a terrain, to say nothing of the role these ideals play in determining the desirability of a particular destination. Where Norbert’s moral conventions and convictions might mean that working for an oil company to

achieve his personal social and environmental impact goals is perfectly fine, his classmates' own ethical ideals prevented them from doing so. Perhaps the latter found an impact pathway that ran through a zone of enhanced profitability for oil companies unacceptable based on their conceptions of social and environmental justice, while Norbert felt as if a refusal to work with companies risked the possibility of having any positive impact at all, and that the kinds of broad, incremental changes often associated with corporate sustainability were better than radical changes on limited scale more typically associated with activism. In thinking about impact pathways and sustainability landscapes through the metaphor of maps, travelers, and terrains, the notion of "moral compass" is particularly apposite.

Ethics, impact, and the anthropology of sustainability

Identifying the sustainability ethic and its relationship to sustainability professionals' understandings and interpretations of their impactfulness is important not least because it helps us locate similar dynamics in other contexts. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is an obvious place where this kind of ethic might be prevalent. As Catherine Dolan and Dinah Rajak (2016: 1) note in their introduction to the *Anthropology of Corporate Social Responsibility*, "while ethics were once the province of philosophy and religion, they are increasingly insinuated into corporate capitalism as the market supplants politico-judicial and religious domains as society's ethical arbiter." The growing anthropological literature on CSR (e.g., Benson and Kirsch 2010; Rajak 2011; Welker 2014) has made a compelling case for thinking about the corporation as an ethical actor alongside its obvious status as an economic and political actor, but this focus on the corporation as an entity has sometimes come at the expense of the people working within these entities, neglecting the fact that CSR (and corporate sustainabil-

ity) managers, too, are complex ethical actors. Thinking about the sustainability ethic and its place in the mental maps sustainability professionals use to make sense of their work's impact helps relate the ethical agency of corporations and the ethical agency of people working in and around those corporations.

Recent work in anthropology and geography on ethical dilemmas surrounding access to resources like minerals and energy shows just how informative this kind of analysis could be (e.g., Bell 2017; Calvão 2019; Cross 2019). In De Beers's efforts to render its diamond supply chain more socially responsible, for example, Jamie Cross (2011) shows how an ethic of detachment has to some extent helped reconstitute offshore diamond processing facilities as spaces where the dynamics of "corporate ethicizing" manifest in strikingly different ways. Even as ethical accounting regimes claim to pull these spaces under a shared ethic of transparency and accountability, the material technologies that underlie this ethic—meetings, reporting protocols, auditing forms, etc.—end up helping exculpate managers and other relatively powerful actors who might otherwise have been held responsible for a corporation's various wrongdoings. In more recent work, Cross (2019) shows how managers and executives in the off-grid solar industry are "deeply committed to the idea that making consumer markets for solar goods is ethical," drawing on Joel Robbins's (2013) "anthropology of the good" to explore how these commitments manifest in the context of their responsibilities as managers and executives of (mostly) for-profit companies. My approach to these practices of "corporate ethicizing" (see Dolan and Rajak 2011) builds on these accounts by focusing more intently on the group of people who are responsible for designing and promoting these programs, emphasizing the causal assumptions and ethical frameworks they use to try and navigate the sometimes conflicting values of contemporary sustainability.

This approach complements recent anthropological approaches to sustainability (see Brightman and Lewis 2017). Cross (2019), for

example, has shown how there are numerous ways of imagining ethical futures in the context of energy production and consumption. Even off-grid solar advocates, he observes, do not agree on how access to these resources should be managed and mediated. Thinking with the map metaphor developed in this article would allow for future anthropological research to compare the way a particular ethic helps (or hinders) sustainability professionals interested in making an impact achieve their goals in different contexts (the energy industry, the financial industry, the CSR industry [see Welker 2014], etc.). This would offer another way to bridge the gap between the two different approaches within anthropology to questions of corporate sustainability and CSR identified by Dolan and Rajak (2016: 2), one that focuses on the “apparatus and architecture” of these programs and one that focuses on their “local effects, contestations and responses,” allowing anthropologists to conceptualize the way different actors with different ethical frameworks (a sustainability ethic, an ethic of detachment, an ethical ideal that is more culturally and historically situated, etc.) perceive impacts, improvements, and other changes.

Conclusion

Sustainability professionals believe their work has a positive impact on the world, but they recognize that their impact is contingent on a number of other factors, chief among them the willingness of more powerful corporate, financial, and political elites to accept and proliferate their findings, and promote their recommendations. A particular but nonetheless profound sense of pragmatism pushes them to believe that markets can generate positive social and environmental outcomes, and they feel an ethical obligation to develop, promote, and implement sustainability initiatives that enact this belief. But the paths along which they imagine these impacts manifesting run through and between numerous obstacles, which they have

they have to figure out how to navigate in order to find meaning and purpose in their work. These obstacles could be a wrong word in a report or an unfriendly tone in a conference presentation, and they reveal the tenuousness and fragility not only of the so-called business case for sustainability, but of contemporary sustainability more generally. In order for sustainability professionals to generate the kinds of social and environmental impacts they hope for, they not only have to have a relatively accurate map of these obstacles and rest stops, but the right keys for interpreting it. Sustainability professionals’ ability to be impactful depends on their assumptions about the ability of other actors (usually more powerful executives, investors, or politicians) to translate their work into a positive impact in the real world. Precariously situated between the capitalist imperative for infinite growth and the socio-ecological limits this system continues to transgress, sustainability professionals have to be both subjective and objective, ethical and dispassionate, hopeful and pragmatic. They find themselves, in Jane Guyer’s (2011: S25) words, “on somewhat unexamined frontiers between personal and professional ethics, between the arc of one’s own capacities and the conventional time frames of projects and between commitment to blueprints (deontology) and the imperative to ongoing scenario building (judgment) as things change.” This is, of course, an extremely difficult terrain to navigate, and understanding the maps and compasses they use to determine the most appropriate path is crucial.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my informants, who were open, honest, and reflexive about the impacts of their work. I'm grateful to the Fulbright Commission; the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research, and Innovation; and the MacMillan Center at Yale for funding this research, and to the Graduate Institute for hosting me during my fieldwork in Geneva. Comments from two anonymous reviewers and the editors at Focaal improved this paper considerably, as did earlier discussions with Michael Dove, Karen Hébert, Paul Kockelman, Kate Dudley, and Filipe Calvão.

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