

AFTER SUSTAINABILITY:

The Future Histories of Climate Change

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The familiar rhetoric of “sustainability” urges us to “save the earth for future generations” and fulfill our obligations to “the world our grandchildren will inherit,” suggesting that this term is tied to particular ideas of time, experience, and history. But what exactly do we want to sustain? The stability of the planetary ecosystem as a self-perpetuating whole? Or the productivity of the planet so that technologies of resource extraction and energy generation can allow some people to maintain, and even extend, first-world standards of living? If we consider environmental problems at time scales of centuries and millennia rather than individual lifetimes, ideas of sustainability could be redefined from the prospect of future planetary histories, as in the 500-year plan of the Karori Wildlife Preserve in Wellington, New Zealand. Their goal is to restore the land to its native state before the arrival of humans and the nonindigenous plant and animal species that accompanied them. The Karori Wildlife Preserve, then, serves a case study for radical alternative visions of the planet’s ecological future.



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