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Locked into the politics of unsustainability

Dominant discourses of sustainability, argues Ingolfur Blühdorn, remain firmly within the growth paradigm, their hegemony being a reflection of the exhaustion of the critique of industrial society and consumer capitalism. For any genuine turn towards sustainability, the limits of rights and freedoms widely held to be sacrosanct must be re-politicized, and their content and limitations redefined.

Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), the Stern Review (Stern 2007) and the fourth assessment report of the IPCC (2007) catapulted the environment, most notably climate change, to the top of political agendas both nationally and internationally. They catalysed an unprecedented societal awareness that the established structures, values and practices of advanced consumer societies are unsustainable and require fundamental change. Stern and the IPCC, in particular, provided environmental politics with an entirely new foundation by focusing the totality of eco-political efforts on a single priority: climate protection. Never before had environmental policy been based on such unambiguous categorical imperatives, derived not from contested aesthetic or ethical norms, but based on the soundest and most authoritative science available. This science left no doubt that the economic costs of failure to achieve climate protection targets would by far exceed those of implementing the right policies in time.

Gore, Stern and the IPCC created a climate for policy change more favourable than at any earlier time — or so one might have thought. In 2008 the meltdown of the international financial system once again reinforced the message that the rich northern consumer societies have for a long time been living well beyond their means and that individual lifestyles will have to be reorganised in line with the limits of sustainability. Yet, like at other times when hopes for eco-political breakthroughs were high (the 1970s oil crisis, the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 or the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 spring to mind), the policy approaches devised by transnational actors and national governments keenly avoided touching upon the core values and principles underpinning capitalist consumer democracies.

Structural planning and development continue to be governed largely by the principle of "predict and provide" (e.g. mobility, consumer goods, energy). Investment continues to be concentrated into privatised and centralised large-scale structures (e.g. energy provision, transport infrastructure, shopping centres), and economic policy remains firmly oriented towards short term growth. Revealingly, this commitment to continuity rather than change is evident even with regard to the most central eco-political issue, energy politics. Policy makers are first and foremost concerned with energy *security* — with attempts to secure and sustain, rather than review and change, those

very lifestyles and patterns of development that have widely been recognized as unsustainable.

As time for negotiating a follow up agreement for the Kyoto Protocol runs out, ideals of social justice and environmental integrity recede into the ever further distance. Nobody is seriously expecting any dramatic decisions from the Copenhagen Summit (December 2009), least of all a binding and effective policy strategy for achieving what Stern and the IPCC have told us is indispensable if disaster is to be avoided. Instead, American bankers are set to receive larger bonus payments in 2009 than ever before, whilst the number of people going hungry worldwide is at its highest since 1970. How can we explain this simultaneity of an unprecedented agreement about the necessity of radical change and the eco-political paralysis on the other?

Sustainability, ecological modernisation and the Green New Deal

The simplest and most obvious explanation for the absence of effective eco-political measures is, of course, that for the economy as well as for individual consumers, environmental efforts simply do not pay. Whilst in the wake of unmitigated climate change *global* GDP may be considerably depressed, economic losses do not necessarily occur at the level of individual countries, firms, households or consumers. As long as environmental costs can be devolved to others, postponed in time or simply not paid at all, it is economically irrational to make extra investments for environmental protection, in particular when others are not doing the same. But why then does politics not impose the necessary legislation?

One reason is that in functionally differentiated and rapidly internationalising societies, the existing political institutions lack the structural ability to formulate and implement coordinated and effective policy approaches. Yet there is more to it than this. In order to see the arguably most powerful obstacle to major ecological progress, we need to focus on the values and paradigms governing national as well as international environmental policy-making.

Since the mid-1980s, environmental politics has incrementally come to be dominated by a policy paradigm that is inherently incapable of organising the category of change that the IPCC targets necessitate. This is the paradigm of sustainability, ecological modernisation and, in its most recent appearances, "ecological industrial politics" and the "Green New Deal".¹ For all the good they have done in terms of turning environmentalism into a "new ideological masterframe" and a "non-controversial collective concern",² the concept of sustainability as well as the strategy of ecological modernisation have proved unable to deliver the "break with traditional models of economic development"³ which are now widely recognised as indispensable for the effective mitigation of climate change. This is even more applicable to the latest addition to the lexicon of green-speak, the Green New Deal.

Sustainability is interpreted by national governments as well as transnational bodies such as the EU first and foremost as sustained economic growth and competitiveness securing the continuation of established lifestyles and patterns of societal development. Its fundamental weakness is that as a purely formal concept (do not use up more resources than can be reproduced) it does not contain any inherent specification of what is to be counted as a resource (do polar bears count or not?), at which level an equilibrium between use and reproduction is to be achieved (before or after the destruction of Indonesian rain forests?) and which political values or principles are to be implemented in

the envisaged society (authoritarian or democratic; decentralised or centralised; egalitarian or polarised).⁴

Ecological modernisation (EM), in turn, is a market and technology-oriented policy strategy fraught with inherent limitations. For key environmental problems (e.g. habitat destruction, soil erosion, bio-diversity loss), marketable technological fixes are simply not available; environmental efficiency gains are persistently over-compensated by rebound effects and ongoing processes of growth; and all ecological modernisation depends on targets that are circumscribed by the ability to generate political legitimation and public support. Perhaps most importantly, though, EM ultimately just renews and extends the logic of growth and consumption which political ecologists as well as the much more moderate UN Brundtland Report⁵ once identified as the underlying cause of industrial society's unsustainability.

More explicitly even than EM approaches, the new ecological industrial politics and the Green New Deal aim first and foremost to spur technological innovation, increase consumer demand, create new jobs, open up new export markets, enhance the international competitiveness of national economies and so forth. In other words, they reframe global warming and the environmental crisis as an opportunity, a tool, for a new round of innovation and growth. They are supposed to provide a double, or even triple, dividend (economic, environmental, social), yet they entirely reverse the relation between means and ends that had once been envisaged by those proposing the use of economic or market based instruments for the achievement of ecological goals. In practice they are primarily an attempt to prolong the life expectancy of what is known to be unsustainable. Even Europe's leading Green Party, the once fairly radical German Greens, have fully embraced this rhetoric.

The "realist" turn

Why then have these so evidently insufficient policy approaches become so dominant? Their rise is not a coincidence and certainly not just a consequence of the recent economic crisis. Instead, their hegemony reflects a transformation of the cultural norms and values on the basis of which environmental problem perceptions are formulated and remedial policies devised. Put differently, they reflect the incremental exhaustion of the earlier critique by political ecologists of industrial society and consumer capitalism.

Irrespective of the considerable diversity of their currents, the social movements that put the environment onto the political agenda were once mobilised by a fundamental unease with the "alienating" and "destructive" character of industrial society. They were inspired by the belief in a "different self" beyond the individualised and predominantly materialist consumer identity; a "different lifestyle" beyond the alienating treadmill of competitiveness and efficiency; "different social and natural relations" beyond social and ecological instrumentalisation and destruction; and a "different form of political and economic organisation" beyond the only formally democratic and only economically profitable order of consumer capitalism. In a word, the new social movements were demanding a "different modernity" beyond the scientific-technological-industrial "risk society",⁶ and their critique resonated into society at large.

In the contemporary era, however, this desire for a "new philosophy of life"⁷ and the belief in a "new politics"⁸ have largely evaporated. Instead, advanced consumer societies have more than ever embraced the constitutive principles of

liberal capitalist consumer democracy and are firmly committed to defending them. In a "realist" turn that is thoroughly comparable to Kant's Copernican revolution in epistemology, the ever expanding needs of contemporary modern societies — for mobility, flexibility, individualisation, cheap consumer goods, energy, animal protein, information and communication technology, and so on — have become non-negotiable. In this Copernican revolution, the fixed and the variable parameters have been interchanged: the emphasis has shifted from *life reform* aiming to bring social practices into line with categorical eco-imperatives, to adapting these imperatives to systemic needs and lifestyle preferences that have themselves acquired the status of non-negotiability.

Against this background, it seems fair to say that advanced liberal consumer democracies are, more than ever, both structurally unable and politically unwilling to implement radical change. Techno-managerial innovation will undoubtedly continue to provide cures for specific symptoms of unsustainability. But technology-driven resource efficiency revolutions alone are incapable of achieving ecological sustainability. As these techno-managerial approaches reinforce rather than challenge the underlying values and logic governing advanced modern societies (rationalisation, efficiency, competitiveness, acceleration, complexity etc.), they may actually themselves accelerate the depletion of the cultural resources on which sustainability vitally depends.

Narratives of self-delusion

Nevertheless, one of the distinctive features of advanced modern societies is the persistent awareness of their own unsustainability. In fact, the coincidence of an essentially uncontested consensus about the unsustainability of the status quo and the adamant resolve to defend and secure the structures and principles underlying this unsustainability may be seen as inaugurating a new phase of eco-politics: as the earlier project of political ecology has become symbolically exhausted, and as it has become evident that no categorical change is to be expected from the prevalent strategies of ecological modernisation, advanced modern societies can be said to be moving beyond the politics of sustainability into the "politics of unsustainability".⁹

One might ask whether this really qualifies as something new. After all, modern societies have for a long time been confronted with environmentalist diagnoses and demands, and they have always tried to defend and sustain their established values, structures and practices. Yet the politics of unsustainability can indeed be regarded as a clearly distinct phase in the evolution of eco-politics. Never before has the unsustainability of the current order and the inevitability of radical change been so widely acknowledged; nor, at the same time, has the structural inability and political unwillingness of advanced modern societies to become sustainable ever been more manifest.

In this new phase, the classical eco-political question, "How do we change the social order and societal practices in such a way that they become sustainable?" has been overtaken by the unspoken "post-ecologist" questions: "How can we sustain social structures and cherished lifestyles which are known to be unsustainable?" "How can we manage, nationally and internationally, the social and ecological consequences of sustaining the unsustainable?" "How can we protect what we have against climate change immigrants, environmental refugees and environmental justice movements, without appearing openly xenophobic, selfish and perpetuating gross global injustice?"

These questions are unlikely to be openly articulated, and social movement activists in particular would categorically reject them as anti-environmentalist and unethical. But as it has become generally acknowledged that the consumer lifestyles which advanced modern societies and the global middle class resolutely claim for themselves are incompatible with the ideal of environmental integrity, and that it is physically impossible to extend these lifestyles to all members of particular polities, let alone humanity at large, these questions have, explicitly or not, become the distinctive feature of contemporary eco-politics.

As a result, individual citizens, policy actors and advanced modern societies at large need to invest ever more effort into reassuring themselves and their respective constituencies that eco-politics is still about the agenda of change towards sustainability. Against the background of rising social inequality, exclusion and conflict this is an indispensable mechanism of pacification. Hence, societal discourses about climate change and the environment more generally are busily producing and maintaining self-descriptions according to which (a) the seriousness and urgency of the problem has been fully understood and accepted; (b) what needs to be done is known, and the means for doing it are available; (c) there is the structural ability and the political will to perform comprehensive change; (d) a major eco-political breakthrough is closer than ever before; and (e) with just a small amount of extra awareness-raising and public mobilisation, the eco-revolution will soon kick in.

The rhetoric of the Green New Deal, the "third industrial revolution" and the new ecological industrial politics are just the most recent examples of this discursive practice. Similarly, the vociferous demand that "market prices must tell the ecological truth"¹⁰ helps cope with the inconvenient fact that prices are already telling the ecological truth: namely that the availability of cheap consumer products allowing for the perpetuation and further expansion of established lifestyles and aspirations is essentially non-negotiable. Whilst it would be inappropriate to describe such discursive practices as a conscious strategy or insinuate any intentions of malicious deception, the continuous communicative reconfirmation of the commitment to the politics of sustainability may indeed be conceptualised as an exercise of societal self-delusion.

Through a glass, darkly

So is there any prospect at all that contemporary consumer democracies may move beyond the politics of unsustainability? The inconvenient truth is that the prospects are indeed rather bleak. In particular, it is a myth that the current economic crisis "presents us with a unique opportunity to invest in change" and to "sweep away the short-term thinking that has plagued society for decades".¹¹ This oft-repeated assertion can safely be counted among the narratives of self-delusion. In fact, despite promising technological innovations, the contemporary "political economy of uncertainty"¹² is particularly unfavourable for genuine change. It triggers security reflexes - witness the policy responses to the recent banking crisis - that reinforce exactly the kind of thinking and policy-making that from an ecological perspective urgently need to be abandoned.

Ecological modernisation and a Green New Deal can, of course, secure and create jobs, trigger new economic growth and also have positive side effects for the environment. In that sense they are urgently required! Yet for the

reasons outlined above, they cannot, on their own, deliver a solution to the environmental and climate crises. Ultimately, they cannot do so because the cultural resources required to render them really effective have been used up and are extremely difficult to regenerate. The experience of the established socio-economic order as inherently alienating and oppressive has largely evaporated;¹³ the concept of liberation has lost its mobilising appeal; and the understanding of self-identity and the ideals of self-realisation no longer militate against, but have become entirely consistent with the logic of capitalist consumer society. As a result, the forces of system-stabilisation are more overpowering than ever — or conversely, the impetus for system change is weaker than at any point in the recent past.

Given the symbolic exhaustion of the dream that authentic freedom, fulfilment and happiness may be realised only beyond industrial consumer capitalism; given the characteristic affinity (not only) in northern rich democracies between social value preferences (flexibility, mobility, innovation, consumerism) and the systemic imperatives of the capitalist economy, any hope that a major change in contemporary eco-politics is imminent are unfounded. In order to become effective, the technological revolution that is now, fortunately, gaining pace would need to be supplemented by a profound cultural revolution. This, however, is currently nowhere in sight.

This is a depressing message, but those who find it unduly pessimistic may be reminded that the task of understanding why contemporary consumer democracies are so firmly locked into the politics of unsustainability must not be confused with the task of spreading hope. The latter is the mission of religion and its secular counterpart, ideology — as the prevalent narratives of self-delusion richly illustrate. Critical sociology, on the other hand, has always sought to reveal the contradictions and irrationality of the prevalent social values, practices and structures, and to mobilise the norms of consistency and reason against this irrationality. If there is any hope at all for breaking the politics of unsustainability, it is to this project that we must revert.

This would entail, for example, shifting the emphasis from trying to resolve supposedly objective environmental problems towards exploring in much more detail exactly how the perception of these problems is being socially (culturally) constructed and reconstructed. Rather than understanding itself as an agent of any particular eco-political agenda, a critical theory of the politics of unsustainability would embrace the entirely new task of investigating the ways in which the paradoxes of the post-ecologist project to sustain the unsustainable are unfolding. It would analyse the strategies, mechanisms and narratives by means of which the social and ecological consequences of this politics of unsustainability are processed and managed at different societal levels. Beyond that, the renewal of the critical project would aim to repoliticise those key concepts that were once at the very centre of political ecology but have meanwhile been crowded out by the hegemonic discourses of technological innovation, resource efficiency and "green" economic growth: emancipation, integrity, identity, self-realisation, prosperity, democracy.

For any genuine turn towards sustainability it is imperative that these categories be repoliticised and their content and limitations redefined. This touches upon fundamental questions such as our freedom to pursue economic success, the right to realise our own preferred lifestyle and identity, to indulge in consumerism, or to travel and be mobile. For the moment, these rights and freedoms seem sacrosanct, and raising any questions about them amounts to political suicide. But the fact is, they have always been dynamic and contested

concepts, and they have always been conceived of as being subject to certain limits. Only the repoliticisation and redefinition of these limits can open a perspective for moving beyond the politics of unsustainability. In principle, there is no reason to assume that we are locked into the politics of unsustainability forever. For the time being, however, we can see the way out at best through a glass, darkly.

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- ¹ A report published in 2008 by the New Economics Foundation, a British think-tank, outlining a series of policy proposals "to solve the triple crunch of the credit crisis, climate change and high oil prices". See: <http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/greennewdeal.aspx>
- ² Klaus Eder, *The Social Construction of Nature*, London: Sage 1996.
- ³ Susan Baker, "Sustainable Development as Symbolic Commitment: Declaratory Politics and the Seductive Appeal of Ecological Modernisation in the European Union", *Environmental Politics*, 16(2): 297–317.
- ⁴ Daniel Hausknost, "Rasender Stillstand: Die simulierte Nachhaltigkeitsrevolution", in: *Osteuropa* 58/4–5 (2008): 9–19, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2009-10-30-hausknost-de.html>
- ⁵ WCED, World Commission on Environment and Development *Our Common Future*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1987.
- ⁶ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity 1992.
- ⁷ Dick Richardson, "The Green Challenge: Philosophical, Programmatic and Electoral Considerations", in: Richardson, Dick / Rootes, Chris (eds.), *The Green Challenge. The development of Green Parties in Europe*, London: Routledge 1995, 4–22.
- ⁸ Ferdinand Müller-Rommel / Thomas Poguntke (eds), *New Politics*, Aldershot: Dartmouth 1995.
- ⁹ Ingolfur Blühdorn / Ian Welsh (eds), *The Politics of Unsustainability. Eco-politics in the Post-Ecologist Era*, London / New York: Routledge 2008.
- ¹⁰ Alliance 90/The Greens, *Der Grüne Neue Gesellschaftsvertrag: Klima -- Arbeit -- Gerechtigkeit -- Freiheit*, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, Berlin 2009, 33, 35.
- ¹¹ Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth? The Transition to a Sustainable Economy*, London: Sustainable Development Commission 2009. See also: Ban Ki-moon, "Opening Statement to the High-Level Segment of the UN Climate Change Conference", Pozan, 11 December 2008, http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/print_full.asp?statID-385.
- ¹² Zygmunt Bauman, *In Search of Politics*, Cambridge: Polity 1999, 171–175.
- ¹³ Of course, the experience of alienation in the sense of exclusion is still rife. But the transformative potential of this experience is minimal. It translates, more than anything, into demands for inclusion into -- rather than comprehensive change to -- the existing socio-economic order.

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