Futures of sustainability: Trajectories and conflicts

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Abstract
The increased awareness of the exploitation of resources, as well as the negative ecological consequences of the modern way of life, has made sustainability a central guiding concept of social change in the 21st century. Sustainability has taken the form of a largely undisputed normative model of development, behind which, however, very different conceptions of the future are concealed: from the attempt to initiate a major socio-ecological transformation, through modernization processes, to control practices in a state of emergency. This special issue aims at these practices but is not primarily concerned with sustainability as a normative guiding idea that can just be pursued. However, a sociology of sustainability has to ask which conflictual spaces of possibility for socioeconomic change open up when very different ideas of a sustainable future are in conflict with each other. Three ideal-typical trajectories or futures of sustainability emerge, which can be theoretically grasped with the terms modernization, transformation and control. These three concepts of a sustainable future can also be found in the ambivalent imaginations, practices and structures of various constellations of actors.

Keywords
democracy, digitization, emotions, nature, property, social change, social theory, sustainability

Résumé
La prise de conscience croissante autour de l’exploitation des ressources, mais aussi des conséquences écologiques néfastes de nos modes de vie modernes, a fait de la durabilité une notion directrice centrale pour les changements sociétaux au XXIe siècle. Le développement durable a pris la forme d’un modèle normatif largement incontesté

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Introduction

The increased awareness of planetary boundaries and the enormous overuse of natural but also economic and social resources that are indispensable for human life on earth (Rockström et al., 2009) has made sustainability a central concept of social change in the 21st century. The booming concept of sustainability is manifested in a particularly powerful way in the demands of global institutions and civil society organizations – think of the Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations in 2015 (United Nations, 2015), the increasingly loud calls for a ‘green (new) deal’ in the United States and Europe (cf. Pettifor, 2019) or the youth protests of the Fridays for Future movement. Sustainability has thus taken on the form of a largely undisputed model of development, which however conceals very different processes, values and ideas about the future: from the attempt to initiate a major socio-ecological transformation, to modernization processes, and to sustainability as a façade of legitimacy behind which contrary practices are taking place.

Representatives of a ‘green economy’, for example, regard sustainability as an indispensable prerequisite for economic growth and rely on an efficient and at the same time sustainable modernization of economy and society. Critics of such a view, however, aim at a fundamental transformation of society, since they regard the need for economic growth as the greatest obstacle to sustainable development. Finally, a development path can be observed which seeks to address the problem of sustainability through a far-reaching policy of control. This involves socio-technical monitoring, the externalization of ecological burdens within and between societies, and measures to increase the resilience of certain population groups and to discipline or segregate them in the event of crises, disasters or shocks.

These trajectories are also the topic of the German Research Foundation (DFG) Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies ‘Futures of Sustainability’ at the University
of Hamburg,\(^1\) which began its work in 2019 and is chaired by the two authors of this introduction (cf. Adloff and Neckel, 2019; Neckel et al., 2018; Neckel, 2017). Members of the Centre had the possibility to outline their research perspectives in this issue and two comments critically reflect on our sociological program of analyzing futures of sustainability.

**Trajectories of sustainability and their structures, practices and imaginaries**

In contrast to political, economic and civil society actors, for whom sustainability usually serves as a normative guiding idea that should be realized, a sociology of sustainability is able to analyze by scientific means the conflicting fields of socio-economic change that open up when very different ideas of a sustainable future are realized. According to us, three ideal-typical trajectories or ‘futures’ of sustainability in particular emerge, which can be described and theoretically grasped using the terms modernization, transformation and control. In addition, the analytical frame of reference of our research program contains three basic theoretical concepts: imaginaries, practices and structures. Social imaginaries about future effects of current actions are never structured by cognitive and normative knowledge alone but always have an affective and evaluative relevance for actors as well (cf. Castoriadis, 1987; Adams et al., 2015). Imaginaries structure existent practices (Reckwitz, 2002) of sustainability which are carried out in a variety of social fields (politics, economy, civil society, science) and which in turn structure collective imaginations. In addition, practices of sustainability are structured by the outcomes of earlier practices (cf. Giddens, 1984: 73 ff.) and by their interdependencies with material infrastructures and the ecological world-system (cf. Shove, 2016; Elder-Vass, 2017). Thus, if different trajectories of sustainability are to be analyzed, one has to ask which enabling and constraining socio-material structures suggest which practices to economic, political, and civil-society actors, and which affective/moral imaginaries these practices are associated with. The concept of imaginaries occupies a key position within this conceptual triad since it is to collective imaginations that we owe the futures of sustainability.

In the following, we will briefly present the three potential development paths of sustainability, drawing on these basic analytical concepts, and in particular address the dilemmas inherent in them and potential new lines of conflict.

Three ideal-type visions of the future of a sustainable society can be identified in the imaginaries, discourses, practices, interests and structures of concrete constellations of actors. Programs of ecological modernization rely on existing institutions to make societies more sustainable. Firmly anchored in liberal democracy and the capitalist market economy, they do not question central elements of modern lifestyles – such as individualism, consumption, mobility – but seek to adapt them to the changed framework of ecological restrictions. Supporters of green capitalism are usually convinced of the beneficial effects of technological progress, which should finally make it possible to decouple economic growth from resource consumption (Mol et al., 2014). Markets and competition are by no means seen as obstacles to sustainable change, but rather as its most promising catalyst. Conversely, sustainability is also described as a prerequisite for
future growth. In the financial markets, this approach finds manifestation in products such as ‘green bonds’ and investment strategies such as ‘impact investing’ (cf. Chiapello, 2015).

In such attempts to combine economy and ecology, however, there is always the danger that this will be at the expense of ecology: if more and more banks, investors and rating agencies specify what sustainability means, it threatens to erode its principles (cf. Lenz and Neckel, 2019). The insight that this promotes social divisions – First World vs. Global South, eco-bourgeoisie vs. abandoned people etc. – has prompted (green) parties, civil society actors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to attempt to link environmental change with regulatory adjustments of the current economic system within the framework of a ‘green new deal’, for example by creating municipal ecological infrastructures. Finally, however, the green new deal remains committed to a capitalist logic of growth, which, fed by the imagination of a new progress optimism, is merely given a friendlier touch.

Strategies to economize sustainability are resolutely rejected by supporters of concepts such as social-ecological transformation, deep ecology, eco-feminism, conviviality, post-development, *buen vivir*, commons, solidarity economy, and post-capitalism (Mason, 2015). Instead of a renewal of capitalism, the aim here is its gradual overcoming; the goal is a new ‘great transformation’ (Polanyi, 1944) beyond capitalism and towards non-growth-based, egalitarian social orders and a radically changed social relationship to nature. The central imagination of all these movements is a solidarity and just world community in harmony with the earth system, and the conviction is that the capitalist urge for economic growth stands in the way of such a sustainable future (cf. Muraca, 2014).

Needless to say, each of the transformative approaches sets different accents – be it practices of collaborative production, sharing and exchange of digital information, principles of civil society self-organization and degrowth (cf. Kallis et al., 2015; Adloff, 2016), the enhancement of non-utilitarian aspects of living together (e.g. gift-giving, recognition, care-giving, sufficiency) in convivialism (cf. Adloff, 2020; Adloff and Heins, 2015) or the pluriversal goals of a ‘good life’ in the greatest possible harmony with nature in the case of the post-development movement (cf. Escobar, 2011; Acosta, 2017). Through the diffusion of local emancipatory practices, it is hoped that capitalism can be permanently eroded from within (cf. Wright, 2010).

The third future version of sustainability is determined by imaginaries, structures and practices of control. It is based on the dystopian scenario of an ecological emergency used by authoritarian forces to suspend democratic institutions (cf. Leggewie and Welzer, 2011). In view of increasing ecological crises – heat waves, floods, food, water or energy shortages – climate security has become a central concern of political action in the last decade. Biogeochemical processes of the earth system are now considered to be at least partially controllable, which gives rise to technocratic imaginations of the future in geoengineering, which are in tension with democratic procedures and liberal freedoms (cf. Stirling, 2014). One could think here of control practices such as socio-technical surveillance, disciplining, coercion and, last but not least, intra- and inter-societal segregation within the framework of a particularist ethic. While privileged classes are likely to prove ‘resilient’, for example by retreating into fortress-like enclaves with their own infrastructures, a large part of the world population would be
exposed to disasters without protection, especially in the global South (cf. Lessenich, 2019; Zebrowski, 2016; Brand and Wissen, 2018).

The futures of sustainability are focal points of ambivalent expectations: they raise hopes, but also fears of a societal and ecological collapse (Servigne and Stevens, 2020). It is to be expected that none of the outlined ideal typical futures of sustainability will occur ‘in pure form’, but rather that there will be overlaps. Theories of post-capitalism, for example, focus on the transformative social impact of economic modernization: with the progressive digitalization of the world of work, it is said, the capitalist order as a whole could ultimately be at stake (cf. Srnicek and Williams, 2015). Certain tendencies in today’s environmental movement point to an intertwining of the development paths of transformation and control: on the one hand, concentration on expertocratic discourse and technical innovation; on the other hand, demands for radical social upheaval, which are always accompanied by a claim to totality. Thus, an ecological regime of virtue would probably not shy away from radical measures of social control. Finally, there are also points of contact between modernization and control: as geoengineering projects already indicate, humankind could make far-reaching interventions in the earth system itself in the future. Moreover, the long-established process of economic shrinkage could result in a ‘re-feudalization’ of world society and lead to new social conflicts and distribution struggles, which in turn would be countered with authoritarian control techniques (cf. Muraca, 2014: 59 ff.; Neckel, 2020). Some futures of sustainability could thus also contribute to the much-discussed end of democracy.

On the contributions

Frank Adloff and Iris Hilbrich examine how different trajectories of sustainability are based on various concepts of nature. For each trajectory of sustainability (modernization, transformation and control) one characteristic practice with its specific conceptions of nature is reconstructed. The notion that nature provides human societies with relevant ecosystem services is typical of the path of modernization. Nature is reified and monetarized here, with regard to its utility for human societies. Practices of transformation, in contrast, emphasize the intrinsic ethical value of nature. This becomes particularly apparent in discourses on the rights of nature. Control practices such as geoengineering are based on earth-systemic conceptions of nature, in which no distinction is made between natural and social systems. The aim is to control the earth system as a whole in order for human societies to remain viable. Practices of sustainability thus show different ontological understandings of nature (dualistic or monistic) on the one hand, and (implicit) ethics and sacralizations (anthropocentric or biocentric) on the other.

Sarah Lenz focuses on the conflictual relationship between digitalization and sustainability and argues that both phenomena are necessary developments for modern societies. It seems that current socio-ecological problems are to be addressed, if not solved, by means of digital technologies like algorithms, information and communication technologies (ICTs) or big data. At the same time, however, contradictions are emerging which make the use of digital technologies incompatible with the goals of sustainability, when they lead to increasing energy consumption. It is this ambivalent and controversial impact that digital technologies could have on a sustainable future that is the focus of this
article, which asks about the nature of this conflict and how it comes about. To approach this question, Sarah Lenz examines the meanings of digitalization in different understandings of sustainability and shows that these meanings have different effects on the implementation of ecological sustainability.

Philipp Degens in his paper draws attention to the intersection of sustainability trajectories and property rights. His conceptual interest is to identify and explore different imaginaries of sustainable private property mainly within the modernization paradigm of sustainability. In particular, Degens contrasts ongoing propertization, as illustrated by various carbon emission trading schemes, with the idea of recognizing social and environmental obligations that are inherent to property. He thereby shows how sustainable property imaginaries are shaped by their underlying conceptions of the social as atomist or relational, respectively, and how they are linked to different strategies to use property regimes as an instrument for sustainability.

Benno Fladvad’s contribution focuses on the tensed relationship between the different future trajectories of sustainability and spatial dimensions of democracy. In doing so, he discusses the question on how societies respond to ‘super wicked problems’ such as climate change and questions of environmental injustice. These issues also challenge established procedures of liberal democracy – e.g. in terms of leading to calls for authoritarian governance and expertocratic solutions or of giving rise to manifold ‘emergent public spheres’ inside and outside existing democratic institutions. Building on this, he suggests to re-think democracy from a pragmatist point of view as coined by John Dewey. This perspective, he argues, allows conceiving of democracy as an ever-evolving phenomenon of problem-solving communities that convene around different issues of shared concern. Moreover, it provides a theoretical framework to think beyond theories of global democracy in favor of a democratic model that shows openness for social complexity and uncertainty and which is brought into being by the emerging publics themselves.

Sighard Neckel and Martina Hasenfratz put their focus on emotions that are crucial within the public debate of climate change and ecological destruction. Just as the imaginary worlds of the ecological pathologies of our time oscillate between catastrophe, crisis and normalization, so do the corresponding emotions, which constitute an important expressive element of future imaginations. Neckel and Hasenfratz first draw a conceptual map of those emotions triggered by ecological crises such as guilt, shame, grief, anxiety, love, hope and compassion, aiming to highlight the ambivalent effects of such an intense emotionality. Secondly, they outline those emotional dynamics that are responsible for concealing and denying ecological problems. They argue that these little-illuminated aspects turn out to be particularly consequential moments in politics and, therefore, should not go unnoticed in sociological research.

This special issue concludes with two invited comments on the approach taken here of examining sustainability from a social science perspective as a socially contested concept. Karl-Werner Brand points out that sustainability has to be understood more broadly analytically and not too vague in a normative sense at the same time. If sustainability is assumed as securing the regenerativity of natural, economic and social resources, this understanding takes up only one of the discourse threads of the guiding principle of
sustainable development anchored at the Rio Conference of 1992, but not its central innovation: the linking of the principles of ecological sustainability with those of social justice. Only with this integrative perspective, he argues, does sustainability as a guiding principle offer global connecting points for very different, contextually specific interpretations and institutionalizations. Thus, the proposed perspective taken in our approach seems to be one-sided. According to Brand, our research program restricts itself de facto to the analysis of the ‘futures of a halved sustainability’.

Gerard Delanty emphasizes that the question of the futures of sustainability goes to the core of a very important sociological and philosophical problem, namely the fundamental question of the sustainability of human societies in a wide sense. Until now, sociology has mostly relegated the natural world to the domain of environmental sociology. Delanty points out that our macro-sociological approach to the concept of sustainability puts the question of nature at the center of sociology. He is thus in basic agreement with the general approach taken here. However, he develops three topics that merit additional reflection. The first relates to the very idea of the future and Delanty depicts five visions of the future (instead of three). The second concerns the notion of social imaginaries, which needs further clarification. The third question focuses on the idea of social transformation that would need a stronger emphasis on the transformation of consciousness. For Delanty, social transformation signals something more than social change, for change always occurs, including regression. This also implies an unavoidable normative position.

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**Note**

1. See: www.zukuenfte-nachhaltigkeit.uni-hamburg.de/en.html

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