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Sustainability

Buying time for consumer capitalism – and European Modernity

Ingolfur Blühdorn

1. Introduction

Sustainability is a lead concept, a discursive master-frame, that has dominated eco-political debates and official policy making for some considerable time – but may now be about to lose its hegemonic power. For the moment, it still seems impossible to think, articulate and discuss issues relating to the biophysical environment and socio-ecological relations without using the terms *sustainability* and *sustainable development*. This is exactly what hegemonic concepts or master-frames do: They make us believe that there are no alternative ways to conceive of and speak about particular issues – in the present case, *the ecological issue* or *the ecological question* – to politically negotiate them and take related decisions. At first sight, such concepts just seem to be terms, interchangeable with other terms such as, in the present case, nature conservation, environmental protection or climate protection. But they actually come with considerable baggage. For, they selectively frame the particular issue that is at stake, what is perceived as problematic about it and for what reasons, what should best be done about it, who should take responsibility, and so forth. As regards environmental politics, it is worth calling to mind, therefore, firstly, that related debates have had a long history well before the notion of sustainability was first introduced, that is, *the ecological issue* or *the ecological question* has been perceived through other lenses and formulated from other perspectives. And, secondly, there is no reason to assume that the currently prevailing lens, frame or paradigm will always continue to be as prominent as it currently still is. Indeed, an increasing number of scholars are suggesting that sustainability and sustainable development are an exhausted eco-political paradigm (Blühdorn and Welsh 2007; Benson and Craig 2014; Foster 2015). In the affluent consumer societies of the global North, an order and politics of *unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2007, 2011, 2017; Blühdorn and Deflorian 2019) now actually seems more entrenched than ever before. Mainstream eco-political discourse has noticeably narrowed to focus on global warming and decarbonisation. And the COVID-19 pandemic, which has triggered unprecedented new investment in the re-stabilisation of the established, but severely destabilised, socio-economic order, may have delivered the final blow to the project of an international sustainability *transformation*, shifting the focus, instead, to the individual and societal ability to absorb and cope with – to become *resilient* towards – social and environmental catastrophes which are now, increasingly, perceived as normal and unavoidable (Benson and Craig 2017). Thus, the contours of new patterns of framing ecological issues, formulating *the ecological question* and shaping official policy responses are already becoming visible. For the moment, backward-looking concepts such as *post-sustainability* or *unsustainability* are used to signal that a paradigm shift is ongoing – until, eventually, critical environmental sociology manages to capture in more specific terms which new frames came to supersede the sustainability paradigm.

The rise, decline and ongoing substitution of stainability as an eco-political master-frame are the subject of this contribution. As a pre-amble, it is worth calling to mind that critical environmental sociology can be critical in two different senses: Firstly, it contests, politicises and seeks to change established societal conditions, institutions, power structures and socio-ecological relations. This is the activist, normative and transformative dimension of critical environmental sociology in which particular norms are practically applied for purposes of political mobilisation and change. Secondly, critical environmental sociology has a theoretical and reflective dimension that explores which assumptions, epistemologies and norms underpin particular framings of and solutions to eco-political questions. In this reflective dimension, critical environmental sociology calls to mind that the eco-political diagnoses and imperatives which eco-political activists articulate and from which they derive the legitimacy and authority of their demands are, in fact, never objectively valid and incontestable, but always the outcome of earlier processes of contestation and struggles for hegemony. As such, all supposedly categorical eco-imperatives embody the value preferences, world views and power relations prevailing in a particular community or society at a particular point in time, and they always have a *best-before-date* attached to them. They retain their validity and authority no longer than these underlying world-views, norms, interests and power-relations prevail.

For the purposes of this article, this second dimension of critical environmental sociology is particularly important. Put differently, the primary question here is not how environmental problems and crises might best be resolved, nor to critique the sustainability paradigm for the particular ways in which it frames and addresses eco-political issues. Instead, the agenda is, firstly, to sketch under what conditions the paradigm of sustainability emerged, historically, and how it understands *the ecological question*. And, on this basis, the second objective is to offer an explanation why this paradigm became so powerful. In exploring these questions, I am using an ideal-typical understanding of sustainability as the point of reference. Put differently, whilst there have always been more ambitious, *strong* notions of sustainability and rather modest *weak* notions (Jacobs 1999); and whilst in today's public discourse, in particular, the terms sustainable and sustainability are being used in a diversity of contexts – sustainable finance, sustainable tourism, sustainable profit, sustainable fashion, sustainable marketing, etc. – where they often signify little more than an unspecified deviation from the standard understanding of the noun to which sustainable is attached, I am assuming here an ideal-typical understanding of sustainability and sustainable development that I contrast with other eco-political paradigms such as traditional conservative *conservationism*, technology-oriented reformist *environmental protection* or emancipatory, radical *political ecology*.

Methodologically, my emphasis here is not on particular actors, institutions or power relations, but I am adopting an approach guided by eco-political and sociological theory. This allows for a critical perspective adding innovatively to the wealth of existing accounts of sustainability. From today's perspective, the overwhelming success of the sustainability paradigm over such alternative framings may be explained, I argue, not least by a dual impasse that had emerged in the latter half of the 1980s, firstly, in eco-political thinking and mobilisation and, secondly, for European and Western modernity, at large. Put differently, around the turn to the 1990s, the paradigm of sustainability seemed to offer a viable solution both to specifically eco-political dilemmas of the time and to a dilemma the European and Western project of modernity had to confront. It was this dual promise that rendered the paradigm of sustainability irresistibly attractive – until, eventually, it became clear that it had only bought time for eco-critical thinking, capitalist consumer society and Western modernity

at large, but was not able to resolve their underlying problems and transform their logic of self-destruction. The next section maps out the emergence of the sustainability paradigm and its rise to hegemony. Section three explores from which perspectives this paradigm may be perceived as having failed or as being successful. The concluding section then looks beyond the paradigm of sustainability, both in terms of the framing of eco-political issues and in terms of the European and Western project of modernity.

2. The rise to hegemony

The notions of sustainability and sustainable development were first introduced in the 1987 report *Our Common Future* – often referred to as the Brundtland Report – by the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED 1987). They were fully mainstreamed through the UN's 1992 Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio. These concepts are widely portrayed as constituting an *eco-political* paradigm but, as signalled above, they are, in fact, much more than that; and their emergence as a hegemonic master-frame can only be understood, if placed in the context of not only the eco-political debates at the time, but also of international politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The eco-political impasse

As regards the eco-political background, environmental debates and policy-making had at the time moved beyond traditional-style approaches of *conservationism* which had mainly focused on setting bits of nature and cultural heritage aside in order to protect them from being spoilt. Nature reserves and cultural heritage organisations continued to play a role, but since the early 1970s, the environmental side-effects of rapid industrial development had become increasingly visible, and citizens placed ever more emphasis on *quality of life* issues including, for example, matters of health and environmental pollution (Inglehart 1977, 1997). Initially, the primary way in which public authorities were addressing these concerns was reliance on *add-on* or *end-of-pipe* solutions. Indeed, technological fixes such as filters contributed a lot to cleaning the emissions from industry chimneys or waste water pipes. Yet, they left the underlying causes of environmental problems in place. They were unable to address, for example, that the capitalist economy is inherently based on the principle of continuous growth, that it exploits finite resources, that its logic of competitiveness and profitability necessarily implies the instrumentalization and exploitation of nature as well as human beings, that the rule of the market is inherently incompatible with the democratic principles of equality and self-determination, or that the capitalist economy is neither oriented towards, nor regulated by, social needs but driven by its own systemic imperatives of growth, competition and profitability.

Taking account of these more encompassing concerns, a different, much more ambitious strand of eco-political thinking had emerged – strongly informed by the post-Marxist tradition of Critical Theory – that, in the course of the 1970s, gradually evolved into what some observers later conceptualised as a political ideology in its own right – *ecologism* (Dobson 1990). *Ecologist* thinking was much more than just about the natural environment in the narrow sense, but entailed a radical critique of modern society and life at large. It drew attention to

the re-emergence of mass-unemployment in the industrialised North, the persistence of deep poverty in the global South, capitalist power relations and, closely related, the dominance of forms of rationality which regard nature and human beings in a purely instrumental way, systematically oppressing their autonomy, intrinsic value and inalienable right to authentic self-determination and self-realisation (Marcuse 1972; Gorz 1987). In other words, *ecologist* thinking raised a range of concerns to which neither traditional-style *conservationism* nor the new technology-oriented *environmental protection* programmes which some progressive national governments were implementing at the time addressed. It diagnosed a profound crisis not only in ecological terms, but in the social, economic and cultural dimensions of modern societies, too. Radically challenging the established socio-economic as well as political order of the industrialised countries, including their relationship to the developing world, ecologists demanded a comprehensive transformation of economic structures. Radical democratisation was their primary strategy for empowering and giving a voice to all those, including nature, who had so far remained oppressed. In fact, ecologism envisaged a radically different society in which the tensions between economic, social and ecological concerns would be fully overcome and socio-ecological relations fundamentally reorganised so as to allow for the full realisation of autonomy. In this sense, ecologism was – unlike the more traditional approaches of *conservationism* and technology-oriented *environmental protection* – profoundly political. Accordingly, it is often also referred to as *political ecology* (Gorz 1987; Lipietz 1995).

Yet, although its demands for comprehensive socio-cultural change – and in particular its emancipatory agenda of self-determination and democratic empowerment – echoed many concerns of the new educated and politically articulate middle classes, in particular, and entailed many promises, radical ecologism also triggered substantial resistance: By the less privileged parts of society, it was perceived as a threat to their aspirations for further development, social equality and inclusion. To others, the anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist critique of political ecology appeared as a threat to their achievements and the pleasures and conveniences of their established lifestyles. On the one hand, ecologist thinking pursued an agenda of liberation, but at the same time it also promoted an ethics of limitation – leaving uncertain how such limitation would be practically achieved and whether it would really secure authentic self-realisation superior to the supposedly *perverted* offerings of *alienating* consumer capitalism. To many, the ecologist critique, therefore, appeared excessively idealistic and anti-modernist. The belief that the protection of the natural environment, the realisation of human autonomy and the achievement of social and ecological peace necessarily demand that the capitalist consumer economy be abandoned seemed overly ideological and triggered deep political divisions. It gave rise to an eco-political deadlock in which ecological and economic interests seemed mutually incompatible.

In this conflictual constellation the new paradigm of *sustainability* and *sustainable development* appeared like the magic solution. It recognised the new ecological and socio-political concerns articulated, in particular, by the younger, materially secure cohorts in Western, post-industrial societies. But at the same time, it also accommodated the interests of those – in the industrialised countries as well as the global South – who were desperately hoping for further economic development and the improvement of their material situation. The Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) explicitly acknowledged the problems of international inequality and poverty in the global South, as well as the unsuitability of the industrial countries' model of development

as an example to be emulated in other parts of the world. It emphasised that the protection of the natural environment would, henceforth, have to be a priority concern in all policy-making and confirmed that there are bio-physical limits which must be respected. In line with ecologist thinking, the report also stipulated that the industrial countries would need to undergo a structural transformation so as to make sure that their development remains within 'the bounds of the ecologically possible' (WCED 1987: 55). At the same time, however, the Brundtland Commission also suggested that there is no need for any radical departure from the established trajectory of modernisation, for the abandonment of consumer capitalism or for 'the cessation of economic growth' (p. 40). Quite the contrary, the report explicitly underlined that the international economy 'must speed up world growth' (p. 89). The development of new, resource-efficient technologies, improved management and monitoring schemes, and the internalisation of social and ecological costs which had so far been discounted were presented as suitable means allowing to hold on to the capitalist economy and the principle of economic growth, but still 'avert economic, social and environmental catastrophes' (ibid.). Just as Ulrich Beck had suggested that a *second*, *reflexive* modernity (Beck 1993/1997) would resolve the problems of the *risk society* (Beck 1986/1992), a programme of *ecological modernisation* (Mol und Sonnenfeld 2000) was supposed to address the detrimental side effects of industrial modernity and ensure that all further development would be socially and ecologically benign. Thus, the paradigm of sustainability bridged the abyss between ecology and economy. With its promise of *qualitative*, *green* and *sustainable* growth, in particular, it allowed diverse societal groups to hold on their achievements and aspirations. It helped ecologists to appease the tension inherent to their commitment to both liberation and limitation (Blühdorn 2022) and to overcome their problem of being perceived as overly radical, ideological and anti-modernist.

The impasse of Western modernity

Yet, the overwhelming success of the sustainability paradigm was conditioned, at least as much, by parameters well beyond this specific constellation in eco-political debates. At the turn to the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union triggered a wave of huge optimism that the end of the East-West conflict would imply the extension of the Western system of liberal democratic consumer capitalism across the world, trigger a major new wave of economic growth and expansion, initiate a new era of global integration and pave the way towards a world society that would resolve all remaining problems – most notably those related to poverty, the biophysical environment and global warming – in a co-operative manner. The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio – often also referred to as the *Earth Summit* – was a powerful expression of this new forward-looking spirit and confidence in an integrated world politics under the leadership of the UN. Yet, this hope and prospect emerged at a point in time when fundamental doubts about the viability of the Western project of modernity and its suitability for globalisation had become so widespread that – as noted above – even the UN's Brundtland Commission had acknowledged that this project was deeply problematic and the Western system of liberal consumer capitalism not a model to be emulated by other parts of the world.

Indeed, whilst the problems of resource depletion and the *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972) had already been highlighted in the early 1970s, a crisis and the possible unsustainability of

liberal democracy had been debated since the mid-1970s, too (Crozier et al. 1975; King 1975). The inability of the economic system to sustain full employment and secure welfare and social inclusion for all parts of society had become evident since the turn to the 1980s, at the very latest. And in the latter half of that decade, the diagnosis of the *risk society* (Beck 1986/1992) powerfully renewed the much older critique of the *dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944/1972) further explicating how the very logic that had secured the enormous success of Western modernity – the logic of rationalisation, individualisation, scientific and technological development etc. – would lead into a condition of unmanageable risk and likely catastrophe – not just in an ecological sense, but in a social, economic, cultural and political sense, too. At the same time, systems theorists such as Niklas Luhmann powerfully demonstrated that Western societies, whose success he traced back to the principle of functional differentiation, are structurally incapable of resolving the systemic crises – which exactly this principle and logic invariably bring about (Luhmann 1986/1989, 1987/1995). Thus, the increasingly widespread awareness of inherent and potentially insurmountable problems which profoundly threaten the viability of the project of Western modernity and its constitutive ingredients coincided with the historical opportunity to expand exactly this system to the globe at large – an opportunity that appeared hugely desirable not only from the perspective of the Western economy, but also for all those who had been struggling for so long for human rights, liberal democracy, material improvement and social justice.

In this situation, the paradigm of sustainability promised to provide guidance on how the Western system and project might be retained, but the seemingly inescapable risks avoided. In addition to its new emphasis on *qualitative* growth that was to replace the traditional fixation on *quantitative* economic growth, two particularly important elements of its strategy were, firstly, the shift from traditional centralised, top-down *government* towards decentralised structures of *governance* and, secondly, a major effort to strengthen scientific research so as to put policy on a strong scientific footing enabling it to foresee, avoid and manage the manifold side-effects which in the past had gone unnoticed until they added up to turn modern societies into risk societies.

As regards the former, the UN envisaged a new network and action programme of local and regional initiatives, called *Local Agenda 21*, to become the counterpart to the new transnational and global structures (UN 1993). These initiatives were supposed to push for, help devise and practically implement policy measures and make democratic participation and the engagement of diverse local actors a core principle of sustainable development. Thus, traditional, state-centred environmental politics, which in the course of the 1980s had become increasingly institutionalised, was supplemented by a supra-national as well as a sub-national level of policy-making, and in the aftermath of the Rio Summit, *multi-level governance* became the big mantra (not only) in environmental and climate politics (Pierre 2000; Bäckstrand et al. 2010). This reflected, on the one hand, the new post-Cold War desire for international integration and a one-world politics to address the common problems of the envisaged cosmopolitan society and, on the other, the much-increased expectations of citizens regarding opportunities for democratic participation. These new forms of governance were said to take into account that in an increasingly complex world, environmental problems have multifaceted causes and implications which can only be addressed through constructive collaboration of diverse stakeholders (Lemos and Agrawal 2006). They were expected to increase the *efficiency* and *effectiveness* of environmental policy-making (Pierre 2000). For, cooperative, voluntary

approaches would engage even those actors which might otherwise oppose environmental policies or obstruct their effective implementation (Newig 2007; Dietz and Stern 2008).

As regards the role of science in environmental politics, the mainstreaming of the sustainability paradigm gave a major boost to academic disciplines dealing with environment-related issues and to the development of relevant scientific infrastructures. Historically, environmental movements had based their demands primarily on aesthetic and religious criteria. Political ecologists – in line with the tradition of critical theory (Marcuse 1964, 1972) – strongly based their diagnoses and demands on the Marxian argument that the system of capitalism alienates, dominates and enslaves both human beings and nature, violates their inalienable dignity and denies them the right to the autonomous realisation of their authentic Self. Thus, the older norms of aesthetics and religion were supplemented by a strong ethics of liberation and emancipatory commitment. Yet, these eco-political strategies of legitimation and securing authority still remained weak. Like the earlier aesthetic and religious norms, these eco-emancipatory and eco-ethical imperatives, too, proved incapable of unhinging the established logic of modernisation and the rule of consumer capitalism. Yet, with the rise of the sustainability paradigm, the objectivation and legitimisation of eco-political diagnoses and demands was referred, first and foremost, to the sciences. Empirically oriented environmental researchers now started to document and analyse environmental change much more systematically, calculate *ecological footprints* (Wackernagel und Rees 1996) and *rucksacks* (Schmidt-Bleek 1999), measure material flows and identify *planetary boundaries* (Rockström et al. 2009) which must not be crossed. Their objective was to specify solid, reliable, scientific criteria of sustainability, liberate environmental politics from its traditional dependence on soft, subjective and cultural criteria, and thus make sure that a socio-ecological transformation to sustainability would, finally, really succeed. For an internationally and globally integrated sustainability politics, in particular, such a cross-culturally valid foundation was indispensable.

Thus, sustainability and sustainable development were much more than just *eco-political* lead concepts; and the sustainability paradigm’s rise to hegemony was conditioned by parameters reaching well beyond environmental concerns in the narrow sense. Essentially, the sustainability paradigm embodied a firm commitment to all core ingredients of the Euro-American or Western project of modernity, such as universal human rights, individual self-determination, liberal democracy, private property, consumer capitalism and the belief in scientific rationality as the basis of truth, knowledge and decision making. It helped to sustain this project at a point in time when beyond its enormous strengths its glaring weaknesses and limitations had become visible, too – but a historical opportunity had emerged for this project to realise its global ambition.

3. Assessing success

A decade later, at the UN Rio+10 Summit in Johannesburg (2002), there were signs that the sustainability-optimism and the dynamic of the early 1990s was cooling down. Yet, the point when sustainability had visibly lost its radiance as an eco-political lead concept and its ability to galvanise the international community and energise the joint project of a socio-ecological transformation was the UN climate summit in Copenhagen (2009), where global leaders failed to reconcile the conflicting interests of their respective countries and agree an effective climate protection programme (Blühdorn 2011). At the time, the collapse of the American

investment bank Leeman Brothers and the subsequent crisis of the global banking and financial system triggered a global economic downturn. Many governments imposed draconian austerity programmes on their countries, and the project of a socio-ecological transformation suffered a major setback. *Sustainability* and *sustainable development* had degenerated into fuzzy concepts unable to guide any restructuring of liberal consumer capitalism or give orientation for a socially and ecologically benign development of the Global South. At the Rio+20 Summit of 2012, again held in Rio de Janeiro, national governments and international institutions then signalled 'little political appetite for anything but very modest change' (Linnér and Selin 2013: 983). Yet, global warming, resource extraction, biodiversity loss and social inequality continued to worsen in an essentially unabated manner, which put 'both sustainability governance and the sustainable development concept under growing pressure' (Bulkeley et al. 2013: 958). 'Mainstreamed as sustainability or sustainable development', John Foster noted, 'environmentalism has failed to reduce, even remotely adequately, the impact of humans on the biosphere' (Foster 2015: 2). Indeed, the paradigm that had once been invested with so much hope was increasingly regarded as 'an irretrievably misconceived framework and a delusive policy goal' (Foster 2015: Preface). A world characterised by unprecedented 'complexity, radical uncertainty and [a] lack of stationarity', Benson and Craig noted, 'must face the impossibility of defining – let alone pursuing – a goal of *sustainability*' (Benson and Craig 2014: 777). In the wake of the financial crisis, in particular, critical observers, increasingly, came to believe that the notions of sustainability and sustainable development are not 'actually part of the solution' to the socio-ecological crisis, but – given their firm commitment to the established logic of European-American modernity and modernisation – a 'deeply embedded part of the problem' (Foster 2015: 35).

In public discourse, the concept of sustainability, nevertheless, remained very prominent, not least because in major parts of the eco-political literature, the term continues to be used as if it were semantically and normatively *neutral*, i.e. giving no recognition to the fact that the concept actually carries considerable baggage in terms of a specific framing of *the ecological issue* which essentially reconfirms rather than challenges the established logic of western modernity and consumer capitalism. Also, in 2015, the United Nations undertook a new attempt to update and revitalise its sustainability agenda. The document *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015) restated the commitment to achieving a genuine transformation rather than just marginal reforms, and to achieving it at a global scale. The document specifies seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ranging from the elimination of poverty (1) and hunger (2), the provision of quality education (4) and the enforcement of gender equality (5) to the creation of decent work and economic growth (8), the promotion of responsible consumption and production (12) and the guarantee of peace, justice and strong institutions (16). Contrary to suspicions that the concept may be impossible to define, the document holds on to the belief that a globally integrating understanding and agenda of sustainability can actually be achieved – and implemented. And in the wake of debates about a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene (Crutzen 2002), the idea of science-based and technology-supported *earth systems governance* (Biermann 2012) actually mustered additional support. Yet, the UN's SDGs are defined in very general terms; many of them seem mutually incompatible, and the time frame set for achieving them – by 2030 – seems entirely unrealistic. Also, when the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* was agreed, the international tide of right-wing populism – which is explicitly anti-egalitarian, neo-nationalist, anti-environmental and illiberal – had been well underway, and supranational organisations such as the EU

or the UN itself had run into a profound crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic then further darkened the perspective for a structural transformation of the established socio-economic order: It exacerbated social inequalities, further entrenched the power of international corporations, massively reinforced what Bauman had called the *secession of the successful* (Bauman 2001: 50-57) – the emancipation of the privileged from social commitments and liabilities (Blühdorn 2022: 40-45) – and triggered unprecedented investment in the re-stabilisation rather than transformation of consumer capitalism. It further cemented the established fixation of governments worldwide on economic growth and competitiveness. And it has left national governments – and future generations – with a level of debt that further reduces the leeway for any genuine structural change.

In fact, from today's perspective, the profound doubts about consumer capitalism and the European-American project of modernity, which had become visible already in the latter half of the 1980s, but had then been suspended by the sustainability paradigm, have powerfully re-emerged – and become much more forceful than ever before. Most notably, perhaps, the central pillar of the sustainability paradigm – the idea that by means of technological innovation economic growth may be decoupled from increasing resource exploitation and eco-system destruction – has proven untenable. Whilst there are substantial achievements and, undoubtedly, further potentials for increasing resource efficiency, there is mounting scientific evidence that ongoing economic development and growth consistently overcompensate these gains and thus perpetuate the trajectory of unsustainability (Wiedenhofer et al. 2020; Haberl et al. 2020). And there is nothing to suggest that the Green Deal and ecological modernisation programmes issued by many national governments and the EU as a means of post-COVID economic recovery may avoid these pitfalls.

A second core element of the sustainability agenda, the vision of an integrated and cooperative world society that collectively addresses and resolves issues such as climate change, global justice and the protection of the bio-physical environment, has come under substantial pressure from powerful trends of renationalisation and the new competition of systems that is unfolding between the US and Europe, on the one hand, and China, on the other. Right-wing populist movements and governments are most explicit about their agenda of *our country first*, but the EU and its member states, too, have clearly demonstrated their inability and unwillingness to engage in a serious politics of redistribution, human rights, social inclusion and ecological integrity, nationally and internationally. Quite the contrary, the profound crisis which both the UN and the EU have been facing in recent years signals that the belief in a socially and ecologically pacified world society has given way to the (ever less) tacit recognition that the freedom, rights, values and lifestyles which citizens of the affluent countries of the global North – and global consumer elites, more generally – regard as non-negotiable, cannot be generalised and that, accordingly, their sustainability for some is predicated on policies of social inequality and the exclusion of others (Brand and Wissen 2018; Lessenich 2019; Blühdorn 2011; 2022).

Also, and by implication, the belief in liberal democracy and democratic governance, another central pillar of the sustainability paradigm, has been profoundly shattered. Already in the early 2000s, discourses of *post-democracy* (Crouch 2004) and *post-politics* (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014) became increasingly prominent. More recently, there is mounting evidence of a global *recession of democracy* (Diamond 2015, 2021) and an *autocratic-authoritarian turn* (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Blühdorn 2022), which may have to be explained, not least, in terms of a *dialectic* and *multiple dysfunctionality* of democracy

(Blühdorn 2020a, 2020b). Such explanations would imply that the prospects for stopping or even reversing these trends may not be favourable. Meanwhile, the much-vaunted new forms of collaborative and multi-level governance proved to have little transformative power. They are now widely criticised for systematically eclipsing all matters of fundamental disagreement, tightly restricting how issues may be framed, and only co-opting rather than genuinely empowering citizens (Davies 2011; Boezeman et al. 2014; Blühdorn and Deflorian 2019). Unsurprisingly, therefore, public trust in the democratic qualities and problem-solving capacities of these governance arrangements is diminishing. And the perception that China has dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic more efficiently than democratic systems in the West gives new credence to the belief that authoritarian systems may also be more effective in dealing with issues of climate change, eco-politics more generally, and the risks and catastrophes which in the Anthropocene are increasingly part of the *normality* governments will have to confront (Shearman and Smith 2007; Beeson 2010).

Finally, the belief in science and evidence-based policy making, too, has come under significant pressure. Already in the 1980s, in the context of debates about Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* (1986/1992), there had been extensive debates about modern science generating at least as many risks and as much uncertainty as it helps to remove. At the time, social scientists had also highlighted that environmental politics is not primarily about empirically measurable conditions but, first and foremost, about social perceptions, values and concerns (Luhmann 1986/1989). But, as outlined above, the paradigm of sustainability framed environmental issues primarily as a matter of the natural sciences, technology, the market and professional management. And in doing so, it not only ignored the wide range of emancipatory and identity issues which have always figured prominently in environmental movements, but it also failed to take into account that, as a matter of principle, environmental problems, are never objectively identifiable conditions *out there* in the natural environment, but always *perceived violations of socio-cultural norms* (Latour 2004). Put differently, the sustainability paradigm systematically eclipsed the irreducibly normative core of all eco-politics. For, *what* is to be sustained*, for whom, for how long*, *in what condition*, *by which means* and *for what reasons* are irreducibly political questions which can neither be objectivated nor delegated to the sciences. Today, the politics of Trumpism and societal responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have powerfully called to mind to what extent political discourse and decision-making are actually governed by *subjectively perceived* facts rather than *scientifically established* truths (Fischer 2021). And contrary to common accusations by the liberal left, denialism, post-truth and post-factuality are by no means a phenomenon particular to the populist far right. They are equally wide-spread in other parts of society which adamantly defend their privileges, values and lifestyles, irrespective of their well-known socio-ecological implications (Blühdorn 2007, 2017; Blühdorn and Deflorian 2021).

So, in many respects, the very foundations of the sustainability paradigm – and, in fact, of the whole project of a *second*, *reflexive* modernity (Beck) – have become very instable, indeed. Yet, although the beliefs underpinning this paradigm, each individually as well as collectively, are themselves becoming unsustainable, it would be wrong to regard this paradigm has having comprehensively failed. Admittedly, the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development have proven incapable of guiding a social-ecological transformation taking capitalist consumer societies beyond their underlying logic of instrumentalization, domination and exploitation. They have not resolved the issue of ever-increasing social inequality, nor have they rearranged established socio-ecological relations or power relations between the Global North and the

South. But when assessing the paradigm of sustainability, critical environmental sociology has to be careful regarding the criteria it applies. In its activist dimension, it may judge the paradigm, for example, by the criteria of political ecology, but in its social-theoretical dimension, it ought to judge sustainability by its own criteria and ambitions. For this purpose, it is important to call to mind that eco-political thinking in terms of sustainability had never intended to reverse the established Western understanding of progress and development, nor to overcome consumer capitalism and its core principles of continuous growth and profitability. Quite the contrary, its openly declared agenda had always been to defend, sustain and globalise a set of distinctly Western ideas and principles. As such, sustainability had never really been a transformative project, but, more than anything, a defensive project. It was – and still is – a strategy for defending the Western claim to progressiveness, superiority and global leadership at a point when this claim was coming under pressure both from the internal contradictions of this project and from the rise of developing countries such as Brazil, India and China. And in this respect the sustainability paradigm was very successful, indeed. It managed to appease the conflict – at least temporarily – between the radical critics of Western consumer capitalism and those who were determined to hold on to its core principles and Western modernity, at large. In many respects, sustainability policies helped to ameliorate environmental problems. And, at least temporarily, the sustainability paradigm also appeased the fundamental dilemma of all eco-emancipatory movements, i.e. the tension between their commitment to an agenda of *liberation* and the commitment to an agenda of *limitation*, which they never managed to resolve (Blühdorn 2022).

Thus, whilst the paradigm of sustainability has indeed not inaugurated any socio-ecological transformation of the world as envisaged, for example, by political ecologists, it has been very successful in sustaining – in negotiating and *buying time* (Streeck 2014) for – the European-American project of modernity. Today, however, this extra time seems to be running out, not only for the eco-political frame of sustainability, but for the project of European-American, more generally – and for the European-American claim to progressiveness, superiority and global leadership. The issues which have been conceptualised over recent decades, in mainstream discourse, at least, primarily in line with the paradigm of sustainability will not disappear, of course. But the present constellation gives rise to new concerns; it changes the way in which ecological questions are being framed, and it reconfigures the political struggles unfolding around them.

4. Beyond sustainability

Critical observers have suggested that the *end of sustainability* (Benson and Craig 2014) will force an 'end of pretending' (Foster 2015: Chapter 1) and move capitalist consumer societies beyond their 'current state of denial' (Benson and Craig 2014: 778). Indeed, the quick succession of crises which have recently hit these societies, and the world at large – financial, economic, austerity, refugee and migration, climate, COVID-19 – have much increased public awareness of the social, economic, political and ecological vulnerability of consumer capitalist societies. Energised by these crises – and by the threat of a right-wing populist *great regression* (Geiselberger 2017) – social movements have promoted *postgrowth* (Latouche 2009; Jackson 2017), *degrowth* (Kallis 2018), *post-capitalism* (Mason 2015), *environmental justice* (Schlosberg 2009) and other notions for a more ambitious, in many respects *neo-ecologist*, reframing of *the ecological issue* and as new lead concepts for a genuine transformation of

modern societies beyond their logic of exploitation, inequality, oppression and destruction. Yet, given the power of transnational corporations and globalised financial markets, on the one hand, and the adamant defence by societal majorities of their particular value preferences, interpretations of freedom and visions of a good life, on the other (Blühdorn 2017, 2020a, 2022), the societal and political resonance of these notions has so far remained limited. Although the scientific and public understanding of the social and ecological implications of the established order of consumer capitalism is now more comprehensive than ever before, there is not much evidence of this knowledge – or the manifold crises – triggering any socio-ecological transformation as environmental movements and many scientists have been demanding it for a long time. On the contrary, the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has exposed more clearly than ever the inability and unwillingness of modern societies to move beyond their established *politics of unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2011, 2013). Compared to what a socio-ecological transformation in the ecologist sense would demand, the measures imposed by some governments in order to contain the pandemic were modest, and they were only temporary. Still, these restrictions triggered major protests by a wide range of societal groups, giving governments a glimpse of the kind of resistance any serious socio-ecological transformation would have to confront. Thus, the pandemic exposed to what extent, in the affluent global North, social peace and public psychological health are predicated on the *normality* of growth and consumerism, and to what extent, reversely, even a partial and temporary suspension of this normality – or put differently: of *sustained unsustainability* – triggers major economic, psychological and political instability. Unsurprisingly, rather than taking the pandemic as a final stimulus for the *great transformation* that had been debated for so long, the primary imperative governing the management of the pandemic was the determination to *return to* and *restore normality* as swiftly and fully as possible.

So, public awareness of the multiple unsustainability of the established order, and scientific knowledge about its causes and implications, may have become more comprehensive than ever before. But the resolve to defend the established freedoms, rights, lifestyles and economic order, nevertheless, seems more unwavering than ever, too. This said, a great transformation is undoubtedly underway. But rather than being guided by the emancipatory and progressive values which have inspired many eco-movements and critical environmental sociologists so far, this transformation may be taking modern societies beyond exactly this normative horizon. Eco-politically, the determined defence of the understandings of freedom, inalienable rights and a good life prevailing in Western consumer societies implies that what environmental movements and sustainability researchers had managed to achieve in terms of a consensus that a profound socio-ecological transformation is both necessary and urgent is increasingly being challenged and re-politicised – so as to sustain the unsustainable. The deepening division and polarisation within national societies, transnational communities such as the EU and the global community are indicative of a new eco-politics that is about the organisation and legitimation of social exclusion.

Looking beyond eco-politics, narrowly understood, the exhaustion of the sustainability paradigm also signals the exhaustion of western modernity at large, whose life expectancy this paradigm had successfully extended. Beyond Ulrich Beck's notion of a *second* or *reflexive* modernity that was supposed to resolve the problems of *first* industrial modernity and fulfil the promises which the agenda of *modernisation* had left unfulfilled so far, a *third* modernity is visibly emerging. In many respects, it seems set to continue the trajectory of its predecessors.

But it seems set to move beyond the specifically European notions of freedom, subjectivity and human rights; and it will leave behind the notions of democracy, equality, justice and rule of law which were derived from them. In this emerging third modernity the global power-centre seems set to move to Asia and the specifically European norms of liberalism, emancipation and progress will lose in relative significance. Their ongoing suspension is powered by the interplay of the economic dynamic of market-liberalism, the cultural dynamic of *second-order emancipation*, i.e. the ongoing revision of Enlightenment understandings of autonomy, subjectivity and identity (Blühdorn 2020b, 2022) and the technological dynamic of the digital revolution. For critical environmental sociology – given its own normative commitments – this factual transformation towards a third modernity represents a major challenge: In its social-theoretical dimension, it is now confronted with the task of having to diagnose and conceptualise changes which undermine the viability of the transformative project to which it is committed in its activist dimension (Blühdorn 2020b, 2022). Yet, refusing to diagnose and theorise this shift would amount to a ‘refusal to see’ (Foster 2015: 7) and thus reproduce the ‘pervasive culture of denial’ (Foster 2015: 35) that social movements and critical sociologists have always campaigned against.

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