

A large iceberg floats in the ocean. The top part of the iceberg is visible above the water, while the much larger bottom part is submerged. The sky is blue with some clouds.

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The Oxford Handbook *of*
**ENVIRONMENTAL
POLITICAL THEORY**

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

**ENVIRONMENTAL
POLITICAL
THEORY**

Edited by
TEENA GABRIELSON,
CHERYL HALL, JOHN M. MEYER,
and
DAVID SCHLOSBERG

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CHAPTER 17

SUSTAINABILITY — POST-SUSTAINABILITY — UNSUSTAINABILITY

INGOLFUR BLÜHDORN

A PARADIGM EXHAUSTED?

To many observers, *sustainability*, for more than two decades the beacon of global environmental politics, today seems an exhausted paradigm. In the second half of the 1980s, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) had raised the concepts *sustainability* and *sustainable development* to prominence, famously defining the latter as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987: 43). Its report *Our Common Future* framed the environmental issue in a way that enabled a diverse range of societal actors to embrace it; and the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio then fully mainstreamed the sustainability paradigm. Indeed, in the wake of the Rio Earth Summit sustainable development became an essentially hegemonic eco-political frame that pushed all other perspectives on nature, society, and their mutual relationship far into the margins of public and policy discourse. Two decades later, however, there is considerable concern that “the sustainable development agenda no longer exerts the pulling power it once had” and that the concept is “under growing pressure amid a perceived failure to deliver change” (Bulkeley et al. 2013: 958f). Despite the threats of climate change and a tightening ecological, economic, and social crisis, global leaders at the Rio+20 Summit (again held in Rio, 2012) displayed “little political appetite” for any fast and sweeping transformative action (Bulkeley et al. 2013; Linnér and Selin 2013).

Still, the concept of sustainability and the policy strategy of *ecological modernization* that is widely associated with sustainable development retain the status of hegemonic eco-political frames (Brand 2010), though sustainability is, more than ever, a fuzzy term

that does not imply any commitment to the kind of structural change that radical ecologists and many scientists regard as essential if “serious harm and societal collapse” are to be prevented (Meadowcroft 2013: 991). In fact, in practical policy-making the ever present terms sustainability and sustainable development seem to have adopted a meaning exactly opposite to what, for many, the concepts originally meant: Rather than using the global financial and economic crisis since 2009 as a unique opportunity to initiate a radical transformation of the modern growth economy and consumer culture, national governments and international bodies are bending over backwards to restabilize and sustain the established socio-economic order—however self-destructive it is now widely acknowledged to be, ecologically, economically, socially, and also for democracy (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014).

From the perspective of eco-activists and ecologically committed policymakers, this sustained *politics of unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2011, 2013) in ecological, economic, social, and democratic terms may, indeed, be perceived as a comprehensive failure of the sustainability paradigm. At least from a sociological point of view, however, there is also an impressive story of success to tell: After all, there is, undoubtedly, more knowledge and public awareness of the multiple sustainability crises than at any earlier stage. As a concept, sustainability is more present in public discourse than ever before. Virtually all societal actors and institutions portray themselves as fully committed to the goal of sustainability. This goal has been adopted as a key objective in constitutional documents, pieces of legislation, policy programs, and international agreements. All this signals considerable success! It not only raises the question why so much knowledge, awareness, and commitment yield so little structural change, but also why an unwieldy—and in many respects counter-intuitive—notion such as sustainability could become so powerful in the first place. Why is a paradigm that has provided so extensive evidence of its failure to deliver radical structural change nevertheless not abandoned in favor a more effective approach? How has the agenda of sustainability metamorphosed into the prevailing politics of sustained unsustainability?

In what follows, the objective is not to criticize those who profess commitment to sustainability without supplementing their rhetoric with commensurate action, nor to expose the power of self-interested elites (such as Republican deniers of climate change in the United States) who systematically blockade any move toward a transformation of the existing order of unsustainability. These are very important tasks! Yet, at least equally important as investigating its *failure*, is the task to explore the curious *success* of the sustainability paradigm. In fact, this contribution proceeds from the assumptions that (a) the sustainability paradigm, despite its inability to deliver to eco-activist expectations, is by no means exhausted but, actually, very responsive to the particular requirements of modern liberal consumer societies; and that (b) if a transformation of these societies in line with the demands of many ecologists, climate scientists, and sustainability researchers is possible at all, a much more profound understanding of the prevailing politics of unsustainability is required than is provided by the wide literature on power relations (for example, Luke 1995; Klein 2008; Swyngedouw 2010) and different forms of denial (Dunlap and McCright 2011; Norgaard 2011; Foster 2014). The next section

first of all explores why the paradigm of sustainability is widely perceived to have failed focusing, in particular, on the misguided attempt to decouple eco-politics from the category of the *subject* and the *emancipatory project*. The third section is about the shift towards *post-sustainability*. It investigates prevalent norms of subjectivity and identity which underpin the ways in which advanced modern societies perceive environmental issues, frame environmental problems and negotiate related policy responses. The fourth section then elaborates on the conceptualization of contemporary eco-politics as the *politics of unsustainability*. It investigates how the paradigm of sustainability—in its contemporary appearance—rather than having failed and being exhausted, very effectively addresses the complex needs of liberal consumer societies.

GENEALOGY OF THE PERCEIVED FAILURE

When trying to assess why and in what respects the paradigm of sustainability may be seen to have failed, calling to mind against what kind of background this thinking gained prominence and what kind of promise it had actually entailed is a useful starting point. Since the 1960s, in particular, rapid economic development in the industrialized countries and the spread of the consumer culture had triggered fast and profound environmental change, whilst the expansion of education systems and the increasing availability of information had increased public environmental awareness, raised expectations in terms of quality of life beyond material accumulation, and nurtured emancipatory claims for political self-determination (Commoner 1971; Inglehardt 1977). At the same time, the re-emergence of mass unemployment in the industrialized North, the persistence of deep poverty in the global South, and the threat of new mega-technologies such as nuclear technology (civil and military) raised profound doubts about the underlying logic of industrial capitalism (Marcuse 1972; Kelly 1984). All this added up to a diagnosis that Ulrich Beck later captured with his concept of the *risk society* (Beck 1992) and gave rise to a novel blend of concerns to which neither traditional-style conservationism nor the new environmental protection programs which some progressive national governments were launching at the time could offer an adequate response. Thus, radical *ecologism* (Dobson 2007) emerged as a new brand of eco-political thinking that took a much more holistic approach than any of its predecessors. It diagnosed a profound crisis not only in the natural environment but in the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of modern society, too (Habermas 1984, 1987). Radically challenging the established socio-economic and political order of the industrialized countries as well as the latter's relationship to the developing world, radical ecologists demanded a comprehensive transformation of economic structures, the political system, and personal lifestyles, as well as cultural values and notions of identity. Yet, whilst it offered a much more profound problem analysis, and although its demands for comprehensive socio-cultural change seemed thoroughly plausible in theory, radical ecologism was also widely perceived as unrealistic in political practice, as overly ideological and as anti-modernist.

In particular, it appeared as a distinct threat to established notions of *progress* and the convenience and pleasures of modern lifestyles. Its critique of consumer capitalism triggered deep ideological divisions leading into a confrontational, often deadlocked, style of eco-political discourse.

It was against this particular background that the WCED's notions of sustainability and sustainable development developed their coercive attractiveness. They promised to take the environmental crisis seriously, acknowledged the existence of non-negotiable bio-physical limits, and demanded respect for "the bounds of the ecologically possible" (WCED 1987: 55). They recognized the problem of Third World poverty and the unsuitability of the industrial countries' model of development as a blueprint for the global South. They conceded the necessity of comprehensive structural change, yet they held out an alternative to the demands of radical ecogism that seemed much more palatable and feasible than a wholesale departure from capitalist industrial capitalism and the consumer culture. Their promise that the environmental crisis, in industrialized as well as developing countries, could be addressed from within the existing socio-economic system and would not require radical system change was compelling not only for environmentally aware economic actors, reformist policymakers, and the politically moderate public, but it also appealed to many radical ecologists who believed that a suitably *strong* interpretation of the sustainable development concept might indeed be conducive to the achievement of radical ecologists' objectives (Dobson 1996; Jacobs 1999).

But although the sustainability paradigm seemed to acknowledge many concerns which were central to the thinking of radical ecologists, it distinguished itself sharply through its belief and promise that a combination of improved scientific understanding, technological innovation, managerial perfection, and the internalization into the market of hitherto unaccounted or externalized costs could rectify the destructive tendencies of consumer capitalism. Essentially, it conceptualized environmental problems as a matter of inefficient resource use and, accordingly, the sustainability paradigm remained firmly committed to established notions of progress and development. Indeed, it regarded the logic of modernity and modernization, which many radical ecologists had portrayed as the core problem, as the very solution. It suggested that even the principle of growth was thoroughly compatible with the conditions of finiteness. The WCED report of 1987 stated unambiguously that sustainable development is "far from requiring the cessation of economic growth" (1987: 40). Quite the contrary, it presented economic growth as an "essential" tool to "avert economic, social and environmental catastrophes," particularly in the developing world (1987: 89). Hence the WCED demanded that the international "economy must speed up world growth" (1987: 89). In contrast to radical ecologists, it thus reconfirmed the most basic principle of the established economic order, placing its primary emphasis not only on *development* rather than the restrictive qualifier *sustainable*, but more specifically on *economic* development in the traditional sense of *economic growth*.

Insofar as it had never intended to suspend the principles of capitalism, the consumer market, or the modernist logic of progress and efficiency, the critique that the sustainability paradigm has failed to deliver radical structural change may, thus, be based on

inappropriate norms of assessment. Yet, the proponents of sustainable development also raised unjustified expectations. Particularly significant was the promise that the sustainability paradigm would emancipate eco-political thinking from its earlier dependence on soft and subjective criteria (aesthetics, religion, ethics) and thus render environmental policy much more effective than it had ever been before. Indeed, earlier forms of environmental thought had tried to support their demands and motivate environmental action by invoking aesthetic norms (preserve beauty of nature), religious imperatives (protect divine creation), or the ethical principle to respect the integrity and dignity (intrinsic value) of nature—all of which had proved too weak a foundation for a kind of environmental policy that would change established socio-environmental relations and attitudes toward nature. The sustainability paradigm, in contrast, promised to base environmental policy on a foundation of hard science and objective truths. It sought to specify the Brundtland Report's two norms of reference—the "bounds of the ecologically possible" and to the "needs" of present and future generations—in bio-physical rather than aesthetic, moral, or cultural terms. The scientific diagnosis of bio-physical limits was expected to facilitate much more focused and effective policy responses. Technological innovations and increased reliance on market-based policy instruments would, furthermore, improve the political acceptability of environmental policy.

Accordingly, sustainability researchers set out to quantify the availability of particular *resources*, calculate the stock of *natural capital*, determine the *carrying capacity* of regional ecosystems and the Earth at large, measure the *ecological footprint* of specific lifestyles or forms of social behavior, explore which *ecosystem services* are indispensable for modern society, understand the *material-flows* that make up the *nature/society metabolism*, and so forth. Similar effort was invested into defining key functions of human existence and yardsticks of individual and social well-being so as to identify the "needs" of present and future generations. These efforts were supplemented by the push for new efficiency technologies which radically reduce both the consumption of natural resources and modern society's waste and emissions output. Yet, in their endeavor to measure, map, quantify, and innovate, sustainability research and technology developers tended to neglect that the accumulation of scientific knowledge and technological know-how, however detailed and sophisticated, can never be a substitute for normative judgment. Science and technology on their own can neither define environmental limits—because "normative judgments are essential to give social and political meaning" to the notion of limits—nor specify "the positive social goods that are to be secured through the recognition of such limits" (Meadowcroft 2013: 988). Science can gather empirical information, measure and explain processes of environmental change, and try to calculate how particular patterns of human behavior and societal development may impact on natural ecosystems or the global climate. But the empirical data it delivers do, as such, never qualify as problems and nor do they necessitate or by themselves trigger any form of social action—unless they are put into relation to, and are perceived to conflict with, established social values, expectations, and aspirations. Ultimately, so-called *environmental* problems are perceived violations of *social* norms—and as such they are beyond the realm of the natural sciences and technological solutions (Redcliff

1993). Thus, with its focus on bio-physical conditions, its fixation on objective truth, and its belief in technological fixes, the sustainability paradigm did not simply neglect the irreducibly normative character of environmental policy and politics, but it systematically failed to grasp the actual core of eco-political discourse.

In fact, the sustainability paradigm left the whole range of subject-related concerns, which had figured so prominently in radical ecologism, essentially unaddressed. On the one hand, the Brundtland report and the sustainability paradigm had, from the outset, adopted an anthropocentric perspective. Human welfare and well-being were, just like social justice and the eradication of poverty, key concerns and the primary reason for considering ecological limits and protecting the environment. On the other hand, however, the emancipatory and subject-related concerns which had so central a position in the thinking of radical ecologists, were never part of the WCED's sustainability agenda. The liberation of human beings from the widely perceived reification, instrumentalization, exploitation, and domination of human beings through the logic of rationalizing modernity and the spirit of capitalism were not relevant concerns. Yet, exactly these so-called *post-material needs*, that is, the new demands of increasingly educated, articulate, and self-confident citizens in post-industrial societies, for cultural and political self-determination, self-realization, and self-expression were a core element of the *new social movements* and a feature that distinguished eco-political discourses of the 1980s from both, older social movements such as the labor movement and earlier environment-related discourses such as conservationism (Inglehart 1977, 1997; Touraine 1981). The WCED's notion of sustainability, however, explicitly aiming to render environmental policy independent from categories like culture, subjectivity, and identity, remained insensitive to the emancipatory struggle. Similarly, the ecological modernization promise that new efficiency technologies and market-based resource management policies can resolve the environmental crisis not only disregarded the fact that normative judgments are required to establish what qualifies as a *resource* and what forms of resource-use may be considered as *efficient*, but it, too, failed to recognize that environmental crises, problems, and concerns are inextricably linked to matters of subjectivity and identity.

TOWARD POST-SUSTAINABILITY

Such norms of subjectivity and identity are crucial when it comes to defining *what* ought to be sustained, *for whom*, *for how long*, and *for what reason* (Redclift 1993; Luke 1995). They underpin the perception of environmental problems, determine what kind of policy responses are regarded as suitable and efficient, and power the implementation of such policies. And just as much as their neglect is a key parameter explaining why the sustainability paradigm is widely perceived to have failed, it is also crucial when it comes to explaining why contemporary liberal consumer democracies, nevertheless, do not abandon the sustainability paradigm in favor of a different

approach. Indeed, the ongoing transformation of prevalent norms of subjectivity and identity is a much-neglected factor in explaining the success of this paradigm and understanding how the politics of sustainability—if it ever really had a genuinely transformative agenda—has silently metamorphosed into the prevailing politics of sustained unsustainability.

The central category here is, arguably, the modernist notion of the *autonomous subject* which has its origins in the Protestant–Kantian tradition of thought and has been installed as a quasi-transcendental—yet always unfulfilled—norm through a long sequence of emancipatory struggles. For the new social movements, exactly this unfulfilled promise was the foundation not only for the social demands they articulated, but also for the way in which their more radical currents, in particular, framed environmental issues. Indeed, radical political ecologists demanded that nature has to be accredited the same intrinsic value and status of subjectivity, that is, the same autonomy, dignity, and integrity that modern citizens claim for themselves and consider as their inalienable right. Explicitly, or often just implicitly, this idea of the autonomous subject is the normative point of reference for environmental concerns, and the normative yardstick by which ecological limits would have to be defined and legitimate human needs identified. Underneath all narratives of threats to the survival of the human species and other life on earth, it became the normative foundation for ecological imperatives and eco-political policy prescriptions—even where ecological thought aimed to adopt an eco- rather than anthropocentric point of view. But in the course of its long journey to hegemony and beyond, this specifically modernist, quasi-transcendental norm did not remain static. For norms of subjectivity and their interpretation are in fact always in flux, changing in line with the ongoing evolution of modernity.

Two interrelated changes which, in eco-political terms, are particularly relevant are, first, the transformation of the ways in which individuals in contemporary post-industrial societies realize, articulate, and experience their subjectivity and identity and, secondly, the incremental differentiation, fragmentation, and flexibilization of prevalent notions of identity. The former had for a long time been debated by the critical left as the permeation of the supposedly autonomous subject by the market, its colonization by the culture and consumer industries, and its manipulation by the advertising machine. More recently, however, it has been acknowledged in less normative terms that for purposes of their identity construction and self-expression individuals in advanced post-industrial societies very strongly rely on acts of consumption and the choices provided by the market (Featherstone 2007). Social theory has acknowledged this in that it has begun to conceptualize modern individuals primarily as consumers rather than—as the Marxist tradition had done—as producers (Bauman 2005: 23–4, 2007: 54); market actors have shifted from selling products to selling brands as carriers of lifestyles and identities; and governments and policymakers are increasingly addressing citizens as customers making well-informed consumer choices in the free market. Thus emancipation, empowerment, and autonomy are ever less a matter located *beyond* the market but an agenda pursued *within* its boundaries. The emancipatory struggle for self-realization

and consumer capitalism have become mutually compatible rendering the abolition of the latter not only unnecessary but, indeed, undesirable.

The latter, that is, the pluralization and flexibilization of identity, had for a long time been discussed under the headings of popular culture and postmodernization (for example, Kellner 1995). More recently, Zygmunt Bauman has sought to capture this socio-cultural shift with his paradigm of *liquid modernity* (Bauman 2000). He suggests that individual identity, which had once been conceived of as unitary, consistent, and solid, is becoming increasingly fragmented, volatile, and liquid. Indeed, the bourgeois-modernist tradition had understood identity formation as a steady and life-long process of maturation culminating in a rounded and stable personality defined by firm moral principles, consistent tastes and interests, and reliable features of character. Yet, as contemporary societies are becoming ever more differentiated and subject to accelerated change; as the life-worlds of modern individuals are becoming ever more extended, complex, information-rich, and virtualized, this traditional notion of identity is giving way to multiple, fragmented, and flexible forms of identity. The qualities in demand today are versatility, mobility, and openness to change. Life-long learning and strategic image management are imperatives of the modern labor market and professional success. Also, more flexible notions of identity, which are more open to inherent contradictions, appear to facilitate a much richer experience of life and more personal fulfillment, whereas the earlier ideals of subjectivity and identity—with their implicit demands for consistency, commitment, loyalty, and rational-cum-moral self-discipline—are becoming impracticable and burdensome. Accordingly, the more progressive parts of contemporary societies, in particular, are adapting their understanding of their Self and their norms of identity. Such value change may be seen as an "evolutionary process in which those values that are best suited to cope with life under given existential conditions have a selective advantage" (Inglehardt and Welzel 2005: 23).

Critics of hegemonic neo-liberalism continue to describe these developments, quite legitimately, in terms of *alienation*, the incremental *decline* of the individual and the expansion of the apparatus of *domination* and control. Yet, taking into account its emancipatory drivers and potentials, this cultural shift can also be framed in terms of liberation from norms which no longer reflect the aspirations and life-world realities of contemporary citizens. As regards its eco-political implications, this modernization-induced value- and culture-shift may be conceptualized as a *post-ecologist turn* (for example, Blühdorn 2004). Whilst radical ecologists and the emancipatory new social movements had been driven by the longing for, and the belief in, the *authentic Self* and identity beyond the individualized and predominantly materialist consumer lifestyle, *real fulfillment* beyond the alienating treadmill of competitiveness and efficiency, *pacified social and natural relations* beyond social and ecological instrumentalization, exploitation, and destruction, and *genuinely empowering forms of political and economic organization* beyond the only formally democratic order of liberal consumer capitalism (for example, Goldsmith 1972; Die Grünen 1980), contemporary consumer-citizens are much less likely to experience this profound unease with the *alienating* order of scientific-technological-industrial modernity. The belief in a better

alternative has largely evaporated, and scientific-technological-industrial modernity with its consumerist lifestyles has been firmly embraced.

Ever expanding needs in terms of, for example, mobility, technology, communication, or shopping opportunities have become essentially non-negotiable. Prevalent notions of well-being and quality of life imply that ways *must* be found to meet them. Accordingly, the supposedly categorical imperatives (ecological and social) which ecologists believed in *must* be reviewed; environmental policy and eco-political action *must* be amended to conform to, rather than challenge, the consumer market. Of course, contemporary eco-political communication is also shaped by an unprecedented awareness of the multi-dimensional unsustainability of post-industrial consumer societies. Yet, prevalent norms of subjectivity and identity imply that sustaining the established socio-economic order has itself become a categorical imperative. Indeed, in a number of respects, *unsustainability* is itself a constitutive feature of contemporary self-realization: notions of identity are inherently flexible, fluid, and non-identical, that is, they are not intended to be sustained but to be remolded as and when required. And as the ever more strongly consumption-based lifestyles and patterns of self-realization cannot be generalized, they inherently rely on ever increasing social inequality and exclusion.

So, in the wake of the post-ecologist turn, eco-political approaches which are based on the (reinterpreted) norm of the autonomous subject as their ultimate point of reference invariably lose their transformative capacity. They can no longer generate, legitimate, and implement criteria for remolding the established order of unsustainability. Quite the contrary, prevalent norms of subjectivity, identity, and self-realization demand that the established order of unsustainability and the logic that supports it are sustained. They turn *sustaining the unsustainable* into an imperative, destroy the normative foundation of the criticism that the paradigm of sustainability has failed, and necessitate a much more positive reassessment of policy approaches—voluntary agreements, corporate social responsibility, ethical consumerism, green growth—which neither aim for, nor deliver, profound structural change. In fact, from a post-ecologist perspective, the paradigm of sustainability now actually appears as a major success! Rather than having failed, it has paved the way toward environmental policy approaches which accommodate and deliver to the changing aspirations and identity needs of modern individuals. Supplementing approaches which focus on power structures, this focus on the change of social values and norms makes a significant contribution to explaining why the paradigm of sustainability could ever become so hegemonic and why it is being defended with so much resolve. Rather than being exhausted, the paradigm seems set to retain its significance and have a promising future as the politics of unsustainability.

THE POLITICS OF UNSUSTAINABILITY

This politics of unsustainability distinguishes itself from earlier phases of eco-politics in that an unprecedented level of scientific understanding and public awareness of the

social and bio-physical implications of modern lifestyles, patterns of self-realization, and socio-economic structures coincides with an equally unprecedented determination to maintain these emancipatory achievements regardless of their ecological and social impact. Whilst it fully acknowledges the social, ecological, and economic unsustainability of the established socio-economic order, this politics of unsustainability is ever less about trying to change social values, prevalent lifestyles, and socio-economic structures to comply with any categorical eco- or social imperatives. Instead, its focus is on managing the inevitable consequences, social and ecological, of the resolve to sustain the established value preferences and the related socio-economic order. Rather than attempting to suspend or even reverse the prevailing logic of unsustainability, its main objective is to promote societal *adaptation* and *resilience* to sustained unsustainability. Inter alia, this implies trying to push minor changes in consumer behavior and the development of new technologies, which may help to reduce, on the production side, the empirical impact (social and ecological) of liberal consumer capitalism. But having taken on board that eco-political discourse is not primarily about empirically measurable conditions but about the social concerns which the latter may or may not trigger, an at least equally (and probably even more) important dimension of the *governance of unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2013, 2014) is to manage the *social perception* and *communicative processing* of changing societal and bio-physical realities, and thereby to reduce their capacity to raise socio-political conflict.

A key strategy for this is, first, the continued *depoliticization* of eco-political issues. This entails, inter alia, that eco-political issues are framed as matters of scientific knowledge, technological innovation, and managerial perfection—an effort that has always been central to the paradigm of sustainability and the policy approaches of ecological modernization. But beyond that, depoliticization also entails the relocation of definitional power, issue competence, and decision-making capacity away from the realm of the political—and the societal grassroots, in particular—to specialist bodies or authorities which are equipped with relevant expertise and shielded from political contestation. These depoliticized institutions—also including the market—are ascribed the ability to deal with matters of (un)sustainability more competently, effectively, and efficiently than political bodies ever could. In fact, political institutions themselves, in an effort to manage public expectations and the conflicting pressures to address and at the same time sustain the condition of unsustainability, now explicitly emphasize the limitations of their own abilities and the extent to which their actions are circumscribed by imperatives which are beyond their control. This is reflected in the dual shift of emphasis in policy-making, first, from producers to consumers and, secondly, from traditional-style regulation to voluntary agreements. On the one hand, this depoliticization of environmental issues may appear as disempowering and disowning the grassroots movements which once put the environment on the political agenda. On the other hand, however, the outsourcing of commitments and responsibilities to assumedly more effective service providers is fully in tune with the emancipation of modern individuals—as discussed earlier—from the previous social and ecological commitments which are seen to conflict with (non-negotiable) modern lifestyle preferences and personal aspirations.

In fact, the non-negotiability of these values, lifestyles, and aspirations is itself one of the imperatives which circumscribes government action and, therefore, such practices of depoliticization may actually claim much more democratic legitimacy than contemporary critics of *post-democracy* and *post-politics* (for example, Crouch 2004; Dean 2009; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014) may want to concede. In addition, they are embedded in, and mediated by, a policy discourse of co-optation and re-empowerment.

Indeed, practices of *engagement* and *activation* are a second core ingredient of the governance of unsustainability. Recognizing their own limitations and acknowledging that modern demands for self-determination necessitate a shift from traditional-style, centralized government to decentralized, participatory forms of governance, governments and public administrators are not only soliciting the services of depoliticized expert bodies, but are also trying to engage a variety of non-state actors including private businesses, charities, civic interest groups, and individual citizens. Participatory, often informal and apparently non-hierarchical *stakeholder networks* are proliferating as a policy tool employed to reduce the potential for political conflict, facilitate consensus-based policy-making, share responsibility, and improve policy implementation. This new discourse of engagement and activation also entails that individual citizens and their households are addressed as the level where real societal change can and should be effected. Citizens are portrayed as commanding a wealth of readily available information and a broad variety of market choices which enables them, as socially and ecologically *responsible consumers*, to shape and propel society's transformation towards sustainability. This discourse presents consumer-citizens—rather than economic or political elites—as the real center of power, demands that every individual *contribute their bit*, and suggests that the sum of individualized consumer choices and small-scale behavior changes (for example, recycling household waste, not printing every email, using public transport more regularly, changing light bulbs) will deliver what neither the globalized economy nor the decapacitated state are able to achieve. Thus the task to define sustainability criteria, that is, to decide what exactly it may mean to *shop ethically*, *travel lightly*, and *live responsibly* is shifted to the individual, and the inconvenience and disadvantages which may accompany socially and ecologically informed consumer behavior are privatized.

Such strategies of decentralizing responsibilities which have traditionally been ascribed to (and claimed by) the state and such practices of individualization and responsabilization are firmly in line with neo-liberal thinking and may, accordingly, be portrayed as the project of self-interested elites. Yet, they also resonate with the social movements' and radical ecologists' great confidence in the ability of emancipated individuals and their civil society associations to effect change. Therefore, just like the practices of depoliticization, these strategies, too, have much more solid societal foundations than their critics may want to acknowledge: the accentuation of the emancipated and empowered individual speaks to contemporary citizens' desire to experience themselves as autonomous subjects, and the principles of voluntarism, state restriction, and personal responsibility maximize the space modern individuals retain to accommodate their own manifold commitments. Citizens may take action or make particular lifestyle

choices where this supports their self-perception and identity-construction. But they can delegate responsibilities to service providers where this seems more convenient; and they may also pursue ecologically or socially detrimental avenues where external pressures or non-negotiable priorities seem to leave no acceptable alternative. Thus these practices of co-optation and activation maximize social inclusion into the politics of exclusion.

Thirdly, the governance of unsustainability strongly relies on the *neo-democratic, neo-social, and neo-ecological discourse* that orchestrates the ongoing depoliticization of modern liberal democracies, the steady rise of social inequality, and the continued exploitation of the natural environment. As the conditions of the post-growth economy, that is, the factual absence and apparent unachievability of any significant economic growth, powerfully reinforce the long-established awareness of natural finiteness, the non-negotiable continuation of prevalent value priorities, lifestyles, and patterns of self-realization is, more evidently than ever, possible only for certain parts of society; and it invariably implies that equivalent reductions must be achieved elsewhere. Accordingly, securing societal support and generating political legitimacy is an ever more difficult task—which is further complicated by the fact that, seemingly in contradiction to the above-mentioned preferences for delegation and outsourcing, expectations concerning democratic participation, representation, and legitimation continue to rise. In this particular constellation, new forms of social discourse have evolved in which a wide range of societal actors not only emphasize their firm commitment to environmental sustainability, but also to democracy and social justice. Indeed, in contemporary consumer democracies, the new social movements' values of *new politics* seem to have been more firmly embraced and mainstreamed than the emancipatory movements themselves would ever have thought possible (Dean 2009). The terms engagement, responsibility, self-determination, inclusion, fairness, or empowerment resound through public political debate; yet in the wake of the post-ecologist turn they have all been reinterpreted in line with the logic of the market and the changing identity needs of contemporary individuals. On the one hand, invoking these emancipatory values is a tool for securing societal support and generating legitimacy, on the other hand, their reinterpretation makes sure that they do not obstruct the post-ecologist priorities of contemporary individuals. As a matter of fact, these refashioned norms are an important tool for identifying social groups which may legitimately be excluded: they provide criteria to distinguish between those who *engage, do their bit, behave responsibly, etc.*—as defined in the depoliticized manner and reflecting the post-ecologist needs of advanced modern society—and those who don't and may, therefore, be regarded as socially irresponsible and not deserving societal support, for example in terms of public welfare provision.

Together, these practices of depoliticization, co-optation, individualization, and responsabilization, and the neo-emancipatory discourse into which they are embedded, ensure that there is rich societal engagement and a high level of sustainability-related activity, without the established, and non-negotiable, socio-economic structures being challenged in any serious manner. In fact, remaining

firmly within its boundaries, these activities reliably reproduce and further consolidate the established order; but at the same time they provide societal actors with ample opportunity to articulate their firm commitment to the goal of sustainability. This is exactly what renders them so effective as tools for the governance of unsustainability. They allow the wide range of political, economic, and civil society actors to demonstrate that they fully understand the seriousness of the multiple sustainability crises and make genuine efforts to take appropriate action. They enable individual citizens to present and experience themselves as socially and ecologically committed, but at the same time hold on to their values, lifestyles, and identities of unsustainability. Elsewhere I have conceptualized such social practices as the *politics of simulation* which is specifically geared to the inherently contradictory value preferences emerging in the wake of the post-ecologist turn (Blühdorn 2011, 2014). But from a social-theoretical point of view, in particular, it is essential not to misread this politics of simulation as a tool devised by a small power elite to oppress and rule the masses! Instead, it is the project of a new, and in its aspirations inclusive, alliance of societal actors, which entirely redraws established socio-political division lines. Undoubtedly, the politics of unsustainability is about managing—and facilitating—ever increasing levels of social inequality and exclusion. But it is essential to recognize that the governance of sustainability is a decentralized, participatory, and collective effort engaging a wide range of societal actors. And at least as much as it is about minimizing the social conflict that sustained unsustainability invariably breeds, the governance of unsustainability must be regarded as an individual as well as societal coping strategy for the paradoxes and the irresolvable dilemmas of an eco-politics that has no extra-social normative point of reference (Blühdorn 2015).

CONCLUSION

So, the analysis has revealed in what respects, or from which perspective, the paradigm of sustainability may be regarded as having failed to deliver and as being exhausted. Yet, it has also revealed why the sustainability concept has become so powerful and indeed hegemonic, and in what respects it may be regarded as very successful and expected to retain considerable future importance. This is neither simply because its reliance on modern science rather than cultural, religious, or ideological norms rendered the paradigm acceptable to a wide range of societal actors who had previously been divided by deep ideological rifts. Nor is it just because it did not demand a wholesale departure from the capitalist growth economy and consumer culture. Going well beyond these undoubtedly important points, its most significant strength is, arguably, its openness to diverse interpretations of exactly what sustainability may imply politically and, accordingly, its ability to accommodate the change of social values and identity needs in the post-ecologist constellation. It is for this reason, in particular, that the sustainability paradigm is set to retain its hegemonic status.

Talking of the sustainability paradigm—as well as radical ecogism—in generalizing terms as if they were monolithic bodies of thought, this analysis has paid little attention to the differences between the diverse interpretations of the sustainability concept. Also, it has not dealt with issues of power and with political actors who have consistently endeavored to block sustainability policies. Instead it has highlighted that science will invariably remain unable to generate objectively valid eco-political imperatives and uncontested policy agendas, and that sustainability research will have to fully acknowledge that ecological communication is, at its root, always about the perceived violation of socially negotiated norms. Accordingly, any sustainability research that wants to reach beyond the sheer reproduction of neo-empiricist discourses, and beyond contributing to the governance of unsustainability, needs to break out of the mainstream of technocratic thinking, economic analysis and its assigned role as policy advisor to the governors of unsustainability. It needs to take account of the radical re-subjectivation of eco-politics, the particular conditions under which it occurs, and the new eco-political constellations and social practices which it entails. As the politics of unsustainability continues to unfold, any eco-political theory that wants to retain a critical ambition will need to focus on unpacking the prevailing societal self-descriptions and investigating the communicative strategies that facilitate the governance of unsustainability.

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