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The Sustainability Society: A Sociological Perspective

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Sustainability has become a central theme in the public sphere and a key concept in social change. Numerous institutions, businesses, organisations and public entities invoke sustainability as a core value and as a guiding principle for their actions. The notion of sustainability has diversified in many directions and has been cited to support quite contradictory social agendas. Therefore, sociology should not regard sustainability as the long-sought solution to every environmental and societal problem. On the contrary, sustainability needs to be approached as itself a problem, one that societies of the present day must tackle and for which they will require solutions. Hence, the sociological approach presented in this paper addresses sustainability not as a normative guiding principle that designates something desirable per se. Instead, it takes up a problem-oriented and reflexive stance towards sustainability that does justice to sustainability's contradictions, dilemmas and paradoxes. It is part and parcel of this reflexive perspective not to approach sustainability as something detached from the social conditions under which sustainable development can be implemented. Those conditions are essentially the structures of global capitalism that not only define the economic prerequisites of sustainability, but also constitute a cultural form of life that profoundly shapes everyday practices and self-relations.

Sustainability has an indisputably relevant place in society, and its significance and genesis have long been a distinct research object for the social sciences. Since the concept gained public currency with the *Report for the Club of Rome* in the 1970s, it has been used to respond to experiences of crisis and global risks that entered general awareness during the final quarter of the twentieth century (Meadows et al. 1972; Beck 1992). These risks arise pre-eminently from contemporary societies' confrontation with the destructive exploitation of resources that are essential to their survival – whether the natural resources of the ecosystem, the economic resources of societal prosperity, the social resources of welfare and solidarity, or the subjective resources of work performance and the conduct of private life, which today seem no less exhausted than the planet's fossil fuels.

1. Sustainability as a key concept in social change

Against the background of these dramatic processes, sustainability has become a central theme in the public sphere and a ubiquitous ideal for societal change, as well in the early industrialized countries of the global North as in some of the emerging economies of the South. This is exemplified by the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals set out by the United Nations in 2016. Alongside environmental issues, economic and social problems are increasingly being discussed under the heading of sustainability as well. The public discourse revolves around the possibilities of transforming social practices such as diet, consumption (Stengel 2011), or mobility (Knaut 2015), the debate on an economic order that is structurally dependent on growth (Binswanger 2009; Latouche 2009; Miegel

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2011), and notions of justice specifically associated with sustainability. All these come together in the normative idea that the needs of the present must not be realised at the expense of those who will wish to realise their own needs in the future (see Birnbacher 1988). This guiding principle was set out as early as 1987, in the definition of sustainability proposed by the Brundtland Commission's report: "Sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future" (WCED 1987, ch. 1, point 49). What becomes obvious in this formulation is that sustainability has a particular temporality: it is a future-oriented model that is to take effect in the present. Sustainability stands for a societal *developmental goal* that aspires to provide for the future by reaching an equilibrium between the consumption of resources and their conservation. In the time horizon of the present, sustainability is understood as a *mode of action* by means of which the overexploitation of resources can be curbed and the developmental goal of resources security achieved.

From a sociological point of view, it is hardly surprising that the concept of sustainability has been appropriated by a wide diversity of actor groups during the process of its proliferation and increasing public visibility. Today, sustainability makes itself felt everywhere in societal discourses. Numerous institutions, businesses, organisations and public entities invoke sustainability as a core value and as a guiding principle for their actions. What is understood by "sustainability" in any one case has not remained stable in the course of this development; the notion has diversified in many directions and been enriched by different motivations, perspectives and interests. Sometimes, one and the same idea of sustainability has been cited to support quite contradictory social agendas. Advocates of a "green economy" and "smart" growth programmes (Fücks 2013), for example, regard sustainability as a vital precondition for future economic growth (Jänicke 2012), whereas proponents of the degrowth movement or convivialism (Adloff and Heins 2015; Les Convivialistes n.d.) see that very focus on economic growth as a serious obstacle to sustainable development (see Muraca 2014; Paech 2014; Fatheuer, Fuhr, and Unmüßig 2015; Brand and Wissen 2017).

1. Sustainability as a problem, not a solution

If only because of this multiplicity of meanings, for sociologists there can be no question of regarding sustainability as the long-sought solution to every environmental and societal problem. On the contrary, sustainability needs to be approached as itself a problem, one that societies of the present day must tackle and for which they will require solutions. A sociological approach, therefore, will address sustainability not as a normative guiding principle that designates something desirable per se, or something that can be investigated simply in terms of the societal conditions and functional requirements for its implementation – the procedure most often followed by current sustainability research (see the overview at www. futureearth.org). Instead, it will take up a problem-oriented and reflexive stance towards sustainability, a perspective that does justice to sustainability's contradictions, dilemmas and paradoxes.

Sustainability should not, in other words, be sociologically investigated from the position of participants in society, but should serve as an observational category capable of offering us insights into the socioeconomic transformations that are under way, the novel lines of conflict that are emerging, the inequalities and hierarchies that are taking shape, the practices and new forms of justification for the social order (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) that can be identified as contemporary societies increasingly integrate sustainability-related criteria into their institutions and cultural value patterns. Attentive enquiry in sociological research on sustainability should, above all, be able to discover how sustainability interlocks with social relations of power. How sustainability is defined, and who

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makes the decisions on sustainability, is a question of social hierarchies – just as the societal consequences of sustainability give rise to problems of social inequality. Before it can become binding, what is to be considered "sustainable" must be named as such, authorised, and ultimately implemented. Within these definition processes, different actor groups have differing degrees of the "power to *name*" (Bourdieu 1985, 729), the power to designate circumstances in the world according to their own categories. Who stands to gain from sustainability and who will bear its costs, who can expect sustainability to bring benefits and who will experience restrictions, is unequally distributed between different social milieus and life patterns. Sustainability thus becomes a socially embattled category, the conflictual negotiations of which present an object of special interest for sociology.

Although a reflexive and critical perspective insists that sociology keep its distance from its object, this does not necessarily stand in contradiction to the normative claims that are currently associated with sustainability. In general, we may say that in modern contemporary societies, only those value patterns will be justifiable in the long run that do not posit themselves absolutely, but remain open to public discourse and dissent, allowing themselves to be criticised and rethought. This is just as true of the value pattern of sustainability, which requires critical reflexivity if it is to avoid becoming ossified in terms of worldviews or special interests and thus losing legitimacy.

2. Sustainability as an element of capitalist modernisation

It is part and parcel of this reflexive perspective not to approach sustainability as something detached from the social conditions under which sustainable development can be implemented. Those conditions are essentially the structures of global capitalism, structures that not only define the economic prerequisites of sustainability and have multifarious social and political repercussions, but also constitute a cultural form of life that profoundly shapes everyday practices and self-relations in the present day (see Neckel 2008; Sachweh and Münnich 2016). The relationship of tension between sustainability and capitalism, the question of whether sustainability can be turned to profit or necessitates exit from the growth economy, and the ways in which global economies are changing due to sustainability – all these are crucial fields of enquiry for a sustainability research programme informed by a theory of capitalism.

The points of reference for such research today will inevitably be global ones, given that in the Anthropocene ecological crises such as climate change, marine pollution, non-renewable resource use and soil contamination have worldwide dimensions. These crises do not of course affect the different regions of the world in equal measure. Certainly, the postcolonial advances of countries such as China or India are now contributing substantially to trends such as the continuing increase in fossil fuel use – but as a whole, the poorer regions of the world, especially in the global South, are considerably more severely exposed to the impact of these ecological processes. Their greater vulnerability derives from the fact that the poorer countries of the South are far more dependent on their local conditions of existence and resource flows than are the richer societies of the North, which have access to global value chains as well as the power to externalise the negative consequences of their own economy and lifestyle by displacing them into the global South (see Lessenich 2016). One consequence of capitalism's global triumph is the proliferation of an "imperial lifestyle" (Brand and Wissen 2017) that has, in a comparatively short period, universalised the economy of rapid resource consumption and long-term environmental damage.

It is not least due to these global crisis configurations that sustainability is becoming the next step in an inescapable, but internally contested, modernisation of contemporary capitalism. As with modernisation, sustainability serves to rejuvenate the capitalist econ-

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omy and adapt it to changed framework conditions, especially with respect to ecology. The key problems of social reproduction that a sustainable modernisation of capitalism seeks to overcome are, firstly, the need to safeguard the renewability of the ecological, economic, social and subjective resources that social institutions require for their survival and must utilise for their own further development. It is becoming increasingly urgent to find ways of deploying and distributing resources that will not consume those resources completely in the application but are renewable – which is why the antithesis of the regenerative principle of sustainability is destructive exploitation. This ties in with sustainability's second problem of social reproduction: the need to ensure the potentiality of future development opportunities, which must not be destroyed or substantially circumscribed by the resource problems of the present. In this case, sustainability serves to safeguard a future inventory of opportunities for action, a store that must not continue to be run down by present-day societies. Its antithesis is determination, in the sense of open futures being transformed into closed ones. In both of these dimensions, sustainability constitutes an attempt to correct a capitalist logic of value generation that, because of its compulsion to increase profit, is unsustainable in and of itself.

At the same time, ecological modernisation regards itself as a socio-political strategy that undertakes to enlist the institutions of modern society, and especially its economy, for the purposes of an ecologically defined reorganisation. Existing structures of modern society in politics and the economy, such as liberal democracy and the capitalist market economy – as well as key elements of modern life conduct such as individualism, consumption, aspirations to affluence, and mobility – are to be not fundamentally transformed, but adapted to meet ecological constraints. In this view, markets and competition are not impediments blocking the turn to sustainability, but economic institutions that enhance efficiency and can be put to use for sustainable practices. This is epitomised by emissions trading, a well-known market-based "solution" to problems of sustainability (Engels 2006). Financial markets are considered efficient instruments to boost demand for investment in sustainably run enterprises, and the "financialisation of sustainability" (Feist and Fuchs 2014) has found expression in financial market products such as green bonds or impact investing. Models such as "green growth" or a "Green New Deal", too, assume that technological progress will enable economic growth to be decoupled from resource consumption and the corresponding emissions. In recent years, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD 2011), the United Nations (UNEP 2011), the World Bank (Hallegatte et al. 2011) and the European Union (European Commission 2010) have all proclaimed green growth strategies to be the path of their future development.

3. Sustainability: The new spirit of green capitalism

Closely connected with the sustainable modernisation of capitalism is the gradual emergence of sustainability as a new justification pattern in the order and organisation of society. In Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's study of the "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), capitalism renews and reproduces itself by "recuperating" and internalising whichever critique of capitalism is socially relevant at any one time (ibid., 441–7). A central pattern in the critique of capitalism today is the concept of sustainability, which is used to charge the capitalist growth economy with damaging the ecosphere and depleting essential natural resources. Contemporary processes of transformation clustering around "green capitalism" may be attributed not least to the critique pattern of sustainability being internalised, making it a new form of justification for modern capitalism. One circumstance supporting this interpretation is the generalisation of sustainability to become a normative criterion of social organisation. This process of generalisa-

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tion can be identified everywhere to the degree that sustainability fans out from ecology to other domains of society. Regarded as a pattern of justification, sustainability could equip the "green capitalism" of the future with a new faith in progress, based on the alleged capacity of the modern economic and social order to learn and change.

Every regime of justification contains particular essential principles that define the intrinsic value of practices, objects and actors. Thus, according to Boltanski and Chiapello, connectivity is a superordinate value in the project-based justification regime of network capitalism (ibid., 130–2). In the justification regime of sustainability, it will probably be the two principles of renewability and potentiality that form such values – raising the question of how the social orders of the present will change when they establish the justification pattern of sustainability.

Initial hints of an answer to this may be found in the tendency to subjectivise sustainability, something currently to be observed in all quarters. With its rigorous prioritisation of market success and competition, neoliberalism has given rise to the subjective ideal of the "entrepreneurial self", characterised by an ethos of efficiency and optimisation. Among other things, the high public profile of crisis phenomena such as stress, burnout and depression marks a change in the cultural programmes of self-management, which are increasingly typified by maxims such as mindfulness, empathy, resilience and work–life balance. In the public sphere, these and similar topoi are regarded as indicators of a "subjective sustainability" assumed to enhance the renewability and potentiality of the individual's resources.

4. Sustainability as transformation: Postcapitalism

The investigation of sustainability as a next stage in capitalist modernisation will attend primarily to the processes by which sustainability is integrated by and made utilisable for present-day capitalism. However, the debates around sustainability also offer numerous entry points for exploring the possibilities of societal transformations that transcend capitalism and its order of growth and competition. Sustainability is now seen not solely as a mode of renewing capitalism but, in many social discourses and practices, as an instrument to vanquish capitalism (see Sommer and Welzer 2014; Kaven 2015; Wright 2010). As a pivotal concept in thinking on "postcapitalism" (Mason 2015), sustainability articulates a desire to test out new forms of communal, cooperative or eco-sufficient economies and ways of life. The transformative potential of such practices – and the question of whether the new anticapitalist tendencies will generate spaces of freedom for a "democratic experimentalism" (Brunkhorst 2015) that may result in a rupture with the economic habitus of capitalism – forms a particularly interesting research domain in the sociological study of sustainability. Faced with capitalism's internalisation of the sustainability pattern of critique, for example, transformative social movements are responding with a critique of sustainability itself, objecting to its conceptual narrowness and political instrumentality (see Blühdorn 2016). In the wake of such criticisms, conceptual alternatives to sustainability have become established in the political currents and debates of postcapitalism: the economy for the common good (Felber 2015), the commons (Bollier and Helfrich 2012), or, borrowing Karl Polanyi's term, the "great transformation" (WBGU 2011).

Because such transformative discourses and practices ask not only how contemporary capitalism is changing, but also what is capable of transforming capitalism itself, they may become the constitutive object of a transcapitalist sociology that takes a new kind of interest in social forms beyond market competition and profit orientation. What do postcapitalist organisational forms mean for economic practices, modern lifestyles and contemporary self-relations? Empirically, these are far-reaching questions for a transcapitalist sociology. Conceptually, they offer the opportunity to rethink sociology itself from a

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new vantage point. If there has hitherto been general agreement that sociology is a child of capitalism and took epistemic shape on the basis of capitalism's problems – that, in other words, capitalist modernity and modern sociology were constituted reciprocally – the tendencies of a postcapitalist society open up the prospect of conducting sociology beyond the capitalist era.

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