
Environmental Humanities: Transformation, Governance, Ethics, Law

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Sustainability, meaning the demand for long-term and globally practicable lifestyles and economies, is increasingly being understood as the key challenge of our time. But just as today science is often simply equated with natural science, many people think only of the natural sciences when it comes to sustainability science. Undoubtedly, natural scientific and technical knowledge of problem relationships in dealing with nature, resources and climate is important. However, technical change does not happen on its own. In addition, the ecological challenges are simply too great not to aim for a behavioural change as well as technology. This is the starting point of this series of publications.

Some questions are about, for example, the conditions for individual and social change, the means or governance instruments, and normative (ethical and legal) issues about the ultimate goals to be pursued. Transdisciplinary approaches should play a special role, i.e. approaches that do not operate based on disciplinary boundaries but based on questions of content without excessive subordination to established disciplinary dogmas. It is important to the editors that the present series stands for pluralism and expressly gives room to uncomfortable, unexpected and heterodox views and methods. In times in which sustainability research in particular is increasingly influenced by the interests of clients, this openness seems necessary in the interest of truly acquiring knowledge.

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Sustainability

Transformation, Governance,
Ethics, Law

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Preface

When billions of people in the Global South copy the Western model of prosperity, perhaps the greatest challenge of the twenty-first century will arise in our world, which is already overwhelmed by the consumer demands of the industrialised countries and the upper middle classes in the emerging countries. This challenge is usually summarised under the term sustainability or sustainable development. This refers to the goal of lifestyles and economies that can be maintained in the long term and across borders.

So far, the sustainability debate has mostly focused on climate change, energy transition and, in particular, electricity. This book would like to show the following: efforts to date, especially in industrialised and emerging countries, have fallen far short of the requirements for sustainable societies. In addition to technical measures (such as the expansion of renewable energies), the sustainability turnaround will also have to include behavioural change; it will ultimately have to turn into a debate on post-growth, with unclear but by no means insoluble consequences. Furthermore, the sustainability turnaround can only succeed in an interplay of different actors, whereby a key component is a new political-legal governance approach that consistently reduces the amount of resources and sinks used on a broad substantial and geographical scale in absolute terms. To this end, the conditions of individual and social change and the development of effective policy instruments in comparison with previous discourses will have to be rethought. The key to solving various environmental problems is to move away from fossil fuels and to reduce livestock farming.

The social change in technology and behaviour must be aimed less at knowledge than at our conceptions of normality, emotions and self-interest calculations. This has little to do with the frequent demand for more environmental education. Such a transformation to sustainability is not patronising but enables freedom in the long term and worldwide through clear frameworks and distinct rules. This is if we reinterpret freedom ethically and legally in a new and correct way. This does not endanger democracy and social distributive justice but preserves and promotes it. Also, for our happiness and good life, the chances are greater than the risks. With all this, the turn towards sustainability could as well lead to a new conception of freedom, to a new concept of balancing decisions and to a new answer to the question of to what extent normative questions can be decided rationally. Furthermore, newly designed – and more effective – governance instruments can be developed.

With all this, my work in general and this book in particular present (a) a new (social science-based) theory of sustainability but also (b) fresh answers to some core questions of social sciences (or humanities) regarding human motivation, governance and the grounds of normativity. This includes a theory of the conditions of social change and of the effective policy instruments, ethics and the legal foundations of sustainability (on the basis of a newly founded normative universalism with a new understanding of freedom and a new theory of balancing). One could also say that it thus provides a kind of all-round service to environmental humanities. Questions of the disciplines of philosophy, sociology, jurisprudence and religious studies (these subjects form the author's educational background in the language of academic degrees) but also political science, economics, theology, ethnology, psychology, history or cultural studies are touched upon. For this reason, a transdisciplinary foundation of sustainability and in particular of the climate problem is being pursued. Therefore, the book follows the problems rather than the (often arbitrary) disciplinary boundaries. Thus, a certain confrontation with the mainstream in academia, politics and public discourse is inevitable. Furthermore, since sustainability suggests a rethinking of beloved certainties, the book also takes up fundamental questions of various fields of human sciences and attempts to develop them critically.

This book compiles the most important results of my research during the last 22 years for a broad interdisciplinary and international readership. So far, there have been around 50 journal articles and book contributions in English (compared to over 450 in German), but no monograph. In German, this task is fulfilled by my postdoctoral thesis "Theorie der Nachhaltigkeit: Ethische, rechtliche, politische und transformative Zugänge – am Beispiel von Klimawandel, Ressourcenknappheit und Welthandel" (3rd ed. 2016). However, it is much more detailed and gives more space to details – as well as the documentation of the extremely broad German literature in sustainability research. On the other hand, this book quotes more sparingly (and much more "international") in the interest of better legibility and brevity. Cum grano salis, "Sustainability" and "Theorie der Nachhaltigkeit" are roughly as close to each other as John Rawls' *Justice as Fairness* and *A Theory of Justice*. However, "Sustainability" is much more detailed than various popular paperbacks I have written in German.

This book also attempts to correct some very common misunderstandings that exist in politics, society and science. This makes some common "literature" wholly or partly obsolete because it is based on problematic assumptions. Partly, this concerns especially the (often overly) Anglo-Saxon-dominated typical international journals and their articles. Partly, it concerns certain schools of thought, especially in the human sciences, no matter in which language. To name just a few examples, it is *inter alia* about the following questions: Is epistemological empiricism really tenable, which only believes in quantifiable and reproducible "data" – and regards normative questions as *per se* subjective? Is philosophical (not trivial sociological) constructivism perhaps just as unconvincing as empiricism? Are perhaps all behavioural disciplines biased and a kind of dogmatic – do we maybe need an integrating new approach, which must then present differentiated solutions, e.g. for

ongoing wars about the role of biology for human behaviour? Does the whole debate on sustainability strategies – technological change versus behavioural change – completely ignore the scope of the challenge (for instance in the light of human rights and Article 2 of the Paris Agreement)? Does the same apply to the debate on political instruments, and does this *inter alia* mean that traditional focal points of debates, such as the central focus on price elasticity in the case of economic instruments, have to be overcome?

This monograph seeks to offer new perspectives. At the same time, it will contribute to new fields of study such as sustainability studies or environmental humanities with a work that also offers orientation also for students. To make this monograph usable as a textbook, it includes a glossary, an index, take-home messages at the end of each chapter, a box of questions for repetition at the end of the four main chapters and a summary at the very end of the book summarising all important findings.

My work since 1997 on sustainability issues – and on basic questions of human sciences in general – would not have been possible without many people, whom I would like to thank very much once again. Colleagues, friends, acquaintances, relatives, the audience of about 600 speeches in very different disciplines, countries and auditoriums as well as the constant contact to many journalists through our media work have enriched my thinking very much. Most of all, I thank the members of my Research Unit Sustainability and Climate Policy in Leipzig and Berlin. I would also like to thank my colleagues at the Rostock University (Faculty of Law and Interdisciplinary Faculty), in particular our Leibniz Science Campus Phosphorus Research, which we are intensively involved in with our research on land-use issues from Leipzig and Berlin. Of course, the responsibility for any errors or inaccuracies remains solely with me.

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Felix Ekardt

Contents

1	Foundations in Natural Science, Economics and Epistemology: Problems, Categories, Strategies, and the Issue of Growth	1
1.1	Problem Statement.	3
1.2	Sustainability, Climate, and Other Ecological Issues Caused by Fossil Fuels and Livestock Farming: An Alleged Success Story Measured Against Global Environmental Goals	5
1.3	Sustainability Strategies: Purely Technical Through Consistency, Efficiency and Wonder Technologies – Or also Through Frugality?	12
1.4	Sustainability, Profitability, Population Growth, Involuntary Transition to a Post-growth Society – And the Difficult Consequences	19
1.5	Sustainability: A Definition Without Pillars	27
1.6	Basic Terms, Epistemology, Levels of Rationality and Misunderstandings	32
1.7	Transdisciplinarity and a New Methodology for Behavioural, Governance, Legal and Ethical Analysis: Beyond Empiricism and Quantitative Versus Qualitative Methods.	41
1.8	Repetition Questions	53
	Bibliography	53
2	Transformation to Sustainability: An Innovative Perspective on Societal Change – With and Against Sociological, Psychological, Biological, Economic and Ethnologic Findings	61
2.1	Complex Interconnectedness of Stakeholders: Overcoming the Distinction of Micro Versus Macro – The Danger of a Chicken-and-Egg Game.	63
2.2	Knowledge, Values, Environmental Awareness as Key Factors? On Misperceptions About Self-Interest.	68
2.3	Evolutionary Biology, Neurophysiology and Personal Biography Behind Factors of Motivation?.	75
2.4	A Broader Picture of Individual and Structural Factors: Knowledge, Self-Interest, Values, Paths Versus Conceptions of Normality and Emotions.	80

2.5	Culture as Factor of Motivation, Besides Biology: Environmental History, Protestantism, Capitalism	87
2.6	Do Empirical Happiness Research, Cooperation Research, and Criticism of Capitalism Change Everything?	92
2.7	Politics, Corporations, Citizens, Interest Groups and Other Stakeholders: How Change Is Possible in a Ping-Pong – Not in a Chicken-and-Egg Game	98
2.8	Repetition Questions	105
	Bibliography	105
3	Ethics and Law of Sustainability – Especially of Freedom, Human Rights, Democracy, and Balancing in a Reinterpreted Perspective	111
3.1	Why Normative Questions Can Be Rationally Decided – Toward a New Universalism Beyond Philosophical Classics, Postmodernism and Cost-Benefit Analysis.	114
3.2	A Sustainable Conception of Freedom: Dignity, Preconditions of Freedom (Not Capabilities), and Overcoming Individual and Business Ethics	135
3.3	Intertemporal and Global Justice – The Core of Sustainability Ethics and Law.	152
3.4	Multipolarity of Freedom and Overestimated Factors, Also with Regard to Sustainability: Good Life, Distributive Justice, Ecocentric Ethics.	163
3.5	Sustainable Institutions, Democratic Systems, and the Inevitability of Balancing – Beyond an Eco-dictatorship	179
3.6	Concrete Decision-Making and Balancing: Economic Freedom Versus Sustainable Freedom – Concretising Normative Sustainability	189
3.7	Uncertainty and Risk: Facts and Sustainability Ethics and Law	195
3.8	Example: Strong Climate Protection Obligation – Despite Non-egalitarianism and Discretion of Political Majorities.	199
3.9	Normative Sustainability Beyond Cost-Benefit Analysis and Risk Theory – The Example of Climate Economics.	206
3.10	Repetition Questions	215
	Bibliography	215
4	Politics and Governance of Sustainability – On Climate, Energy, Agriculture and Conservation Policy Instruments with a New Focus.	225
4.1	Sustainability Governance – Sustainability Through Education, Propaganda, and Advertising?	228
4.2	How Much Containment Does Capitalism Need – Sustainability Through CSR and Sustainable Consumption?	230

4.3	Political Objectives, Programmes, Sustainable Development Goals – And the International Framework of Climate Policy Up to the Paris Agreement	234
4.4	The Classic Approach to Policy Instruments: Regulatory Law, Planning Law, Subsidies, Information – And Basic Regulation Problems (Rebound, Shifting, etc.)	238
4.5	Basic Structures of Economic Policy Instruments and Their Defective Implementation So Far.	246
4.6	New Resource and Climate Governance Through Newly Focussed Economic Instruments	254
4.7	Sustainability and Questions of Distribution	260
4.8	Competitiveness, Shifting of Emissions, Global Economy: Could the EU Become a Real Pioneer?	263
4.9	Integrated Solutions for Environmental Problems Such as Land Use, Energy, Climate, Biodiversity, Phosphorus and Nitrogen.	266
4.10	The Complementary Role of Command-and-Control Law, the Example of Biodiversity, Overrated Instruments Like Nudging – Centralised Versus Decentralised Structures	274
4.11	Free Trade, Global Constitutionalisation, Democracy, and the WTO	281
4.12	Repetition Questions	287
	Bibliography	287
	Summary	297
	Glossary	309
	Index	313