

Sustainability as Culture

Larissa Krainer

Abstract

What could be described as the “cultural dimension” of Sustainability? And why should ethics be discussed in order to answer this question? The ideas of sustainability and sustainable development cannot be seen as purely neutral demands. They are based on ethical values, focusing either on different “goods” (ecological, economical, social or cultural), or on various dimensions of justice (between cultures, generations and classes) or global fairness (trade, access to the media). Many concepts have been proposed, mostly connected with suggestions for action – on many levels from political through economical to private. However, very few of them, in fact, were put into practice. This can be explained as a matter of culture. The dominant model of modern society follows technical and economical values that promote production and consumption, profit and competition, speed and innovation. Our culture therefore seems unsustainable. More than that, it seems that our culture even works *against* sustainable development. If so, we have to recognize conflicts of values that cannot be solved by well-meaning advice. Contradictions have to be handled in a different way. Process ethics is a model that helps to organize ethical debates and finally to balance conflicts and contradictions of values.

Preface

When I speak about sustainable development, I am talking about a (political) need and an aim of our society. But at the same time I am talking about a cultural phenomenon and an ethical problem. The ideas of sustainability and sustainable development cannot be seen as purely neutral demands. They are based on ethical values, focusing either on different “goods” (ecological, economical, social or cultural), or on various dimensions of justice (between cultures, generations and classes) or global fairness (trade, access to the media). And I really do think that our current culture does not promote sustainable development. Why? I would first like to offer two theses, then to formulate some consequences and to outline some answers from an ethical perspective.

Theses

1. *To promote sustainable development many concepts have been proposed, mostly connected with proposals for action – on many levels from political through economical to private.*

However, very few of them, in fact, were ever put into practice. This can be explained as a matter of culture. Many authors do so, and some of them even claim a cultural change

that should promote sustainable development in a better way. (Vgl. Banse et al. 2009)
But: What is wrong with our current culture?

2. *The dominant model of modern society follows technical and economical values that promote production and consumption, profit and competition, speed and innovation. It seems that our culture works against sustainable development. More than that, it seems that our culture even works against sustainable development.*

So let's look for the central values within technical and economical concepts.

One slogan or motto says: *The new is the good*. It stands for technical development but equally for progress and the improvement of society. All in all it recalls the success story of western democracy. But at the same time it says: the old is the bad – throw it away! Do not repair or reuse the older things! If there is something new (for example a new generation of communication technology) go and buy it! This is one reason why millions of people living in poor circumstances (for example in states within the so called Third World countries) are motivated to want the same as we already have. What else should they do, if we are always running for technical development and if they want to make friends with us? I don't know why or how we should tell them that their push for technical development should be forbidden, in order to promote sustainable development instead. I would say we are not in a moral position to do so.

Another aspect of this motto is: If we call the new the best, we always have to devalue something else. Older things as mentioned before, but more and more it was been applied to older people as well. The elder generations are not seen as an important resource of knowledge and competences any longer but as a burden in different economic contexts: They earn too much (their human labour is too expensive), they live too long (their health insurance cost too much) and recently they spend most of their money before they die (their inheritance is not big enough anymore). Since we stopped looking after the knowledge and competences of elderly people, we are cutting through lines in our tradition and in fact we have to pay a lot to reconstruct what we had previously thrown out of the door.

Another motto of our modern society is: *growth is good*. Even if we all know the prominent title of the Club of Rome's publication "The Limits to Growth", which back in 1972 already showed the consequences of a rapidly growing world population and finite resource supplies already in 1972, it seems that the economic mindset does not believe it. Our real economy but especially our public finance asks for profit and never for its

limits. And since profit is the name of the game we do not even hesitate to make money from the collapse of countries which ought to be our partners in developing sustainability (like Greece for example).

A third motto – and I think one of the most problematic – is: *time is money*. And we can even turn it around and say: money is time. One important consequence of our modern society is speeding up and compression. First we agreed to measure human performance in work per time units. Then we found out that standstill is a step backwards. Finally we learned to become fast. Whatever we do, we try to do it fast, mostly faster than we ever did before. Our production became faster (on the market place the winner is always the one who presents a product first), and so did our travel system and our information system.

On the one hand, this again can be seen as an improvement. On the other hand we all know that speed kills. We do not have enough time to examine the effects, to assess the technology and to reflect on the consequences. Our media system is forced to provide a running commentary which led to lots of mistakes in their reporting; Technology assessment should be done very quickly although it has become increasingly complex; to stop reflections means to prevent one of the most important questions of modern society: Do we like our world, our life and our circumstances like we have appointed them? (Heintel 1998)

A final motto says: *politics should not interfere in the free play of forces of the market economy*. Again this idea is not so bad and especially Americans are well trained in this tradition through always fearing communism. But also again, it led to two problems.

On the one hand our governments are unable to regulate the globalized public finance in order to prevent economic crises. One reason is that politics did not globalize in the same way as our money did. There is no powerful international cooperation to stop dangerous parts of public finance. Another well-known reason is that many powerful interests do their best to prevent politics from legislating against economic interests, as Robert B. Reich has shown impressively in his book: *Supercapitalism: The Transformation of Business, Democracy, and Everyday Life*. (Reich 2008)

On the other hand politics overall has become devalued (at least in many parts of Europe; in the USA there might be more “hope”). I don´t know anybody who wants to become a politician, the younger generations even less so.

Consequences

The mottos I have described here can be seen as important, modern values. Each has its good sides but also very negative ones. Taking these to extremes means endangering ourselves. And that is what we have been doing for a very long time and it seems to be an ongoing danger. The idea that undefined intensification leads to a linear increase in success is wrong. The exact opposite is true.

If so, we should spend a little time on opposites in general. Ethical values are never unambiguous or completely clear. They are always contradictory. Even if some moral institutions taught us that just one thing, aim, believe or behaviour might be right, dialectic philosophy discovered that more positions than just one can be true or right and that there is always a thesis *and* an antithesis. Western democracy is based on the principle of government *and* opposition, and both might be right; we saw that the dominant values of modern economy (profit, growth, or speeding up) might be good *and* bad at the same time; they can lead to social progress *or* to economic disaster. The same goes for sustainability and sustainable development: it might be good *and* bad in the same time. To set limits (on growth, on profit, on uninhibited speculation, on traffic and so on) might be good for sustainable development but it might also be a danger for freedom (of markets, globalization, travel and so on). And it offers inner contradictions. What might be good for social sustainability must not necessarily be good for economic sustainability as well. If employees earn (too) much a major corporation might go bankrupt. What might be good for ecological sustainability must not necessarily be good for social sustainability. If we have to pay lots of money for a clean environment we might become poor. And so on.

We live in a dialectic system standing in the tradition of enlightenment. If we agree to this result, we have to accept another conclusion: Dialectic systems need to process their opposites or contradictions in a dialectic way and not with the methods of logic. For example: If we agree that child labour is bad, we might come to a logical conclusion that says: don't buy things that are produced by child labour. But if we did so, we would get the children concerned and their families into big trouble, because many of them have to live off the income of these children, as the parents often don't get any work. So we first have to search for possibilities that offer an economic basis for families in all the parts of the world without child labour before we stop buying their products.

To use dialectic methods means to engage in conflicts, to handle and to process them, to weigh up the different possibilities against each other and finally to balance them. Most of the solutions are compromises. If just one side wins, both might lose. If we only push profit, we won't make much of a profit there. If we stop pushing profit, we also won't

make much of a profit. So we have to be clever enough to handle our profit in a balanced way.

To organize a dialectic conflict management is a matter of time and finally a matter of money. We know: If the things are complex, so are the conflicts. All our systems have become enormously complex. Technology, Economy, Natural Science, science altogether, Politics cannot be seen as a simple area for taking decisions. And so, we need more time to analyze complexity within all these areas that are interconnected anyway (which makes it more complex). We have to analyze carefully and do it in interdisciplinary groups (which makes it more complex again). We have to understand the arguments of our opponents (those who seem to work against sustainable development) the best we can in order to find solutions that have every chance of being converted into action or results. Most of the time we prefer to keep to ourselves, in an in-group of likeminded people standing for sustainable development. We won't find our opponents, if we don't move towards them. They won't search for us, because they prefer to achieve their goals with other methods than dialectic ones. They do not search for opposition. That is the reason why most of them dislike democracy. So: If we don't move – who will?

Banse, G., O. Parodi, A. Schaffer. (Hrsg.) 2009. *Interdependenzen zwischen kulturellem Wandel und nachhaltiger Entwicklung*. Karlsruhe: Forschungszentrum Karlsruhe.
Heintel, P. 1998. *Abendländische Rationalität - Welche Ethik für die Wissenschaften?* Unveröffentlichtes Manuskript. Klagenfurt.
Reich, R. B. 2008. *Superkapitalismus. Wie die Wirtschaft unsere Demokratie untergräbt* Frankfurt am Main Campus.