

Unsustainability as a Frame of Mind-and How We Disguise It: The Silent Counter-revolution and the Politics of Simulation

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Advanced modern societies, confronted with the social and ecological side effects of their hitherto dominant mode of progress and development, have adopted sustainable development as their mantra. The concept of sustainable development has united previously intransigent enemies and forged unexpected strategic alliances. It is seen as the magic formula that will guide the ecological modernization of economic and all other social processes and, at the same time, bring social justice to those who have been marginalized or excluded. However, concrete definitions of what sustainable development might imply have so far remained elusive — which is exactly why the global coalition for sustainability has been relatively easy to maintain. Given the fundamental problems of defining what should be sustained, for whom, for what reasons, and for how long, and the problems of actually implementing such ideals, it has been suggested that sustainability should be regarded as signifying, first and foremost, a certain frame of mind and only in a secondary way a concrete set of conditions and relations in the empirical world. The resulting questions: What kind of frame of mind could bring about sustainability? and; How might we develop it? add further dimensions of complexity to an already impenetrably complicated issue and undoubtedly help to keep the sustainability debate going. Yet, while from one perspective (which shall be further explored below) this continuation of the debate might in itself be regarded as the chief purpose and major achievement, the retreat into the inner world is not likely to contribute much towards improving social and ecological conditions in the empirical world.

Therefore, rather than adding to speculations about which hypothetical frames of mind may or may not bring about sustainability, and whether environmental education may or may not be able to develop these frames of mind, it might be advisable to begin by re-analyzing the currently dominant frame of mind and investigate the foundations on which environmental educators might build. This approach follows the pedagogical principle that educators always have to begin by exploring and understanding the learner's underlying mindset and situation. It also helps us to gauge the likely success of any educational process of bringing about the "different metaphysics"¹ that ecologically minded reformers believe to be a precondition to the achievement of empirical sustainability.

The thesis to be developed in this contribution is that the contemporary frame of mind is not negligent of the ecological concerns that it actually theoretically appreciates and shares. Rather, it is actually *post-ecologist* in the sense that the ecologist patterns of thought (diagnoses, values, strategies) have become outdated and have been abandoned. This suggests that the unsustainability of the contemporary frame of mind is not just one of its curable faults, but an essential feature. The hypothesis is that the contemporary frame of mind has no genuine appreciation for the ecologist goals of social justice and ecological integrity, and that the discourse of sustainability may have to be interpreted as a strategy to *disguise* an unsustainability late modern societies neither can, nor really want to, remove. In order to facilitate the further explication of this argument, it may be helpful to clarify that the terms ecologism and ecologist are used to refer to a comprehensive eco-political belief system or ideology that is distinct from conservationism, preservationism or reformist environmentalism. The terms post-ecologism and post-ecologist refer to the belief system that emerges from the decline in ecologism.

From pre-ecologism to post-ecologism

In examining the ecologist or post-ecologist frames of mind, we are implicitly acknowledging the important fact that climatic change, decline in bio-diversity, contamination-induced epidemics, or any other phenomena or conditions in the social and natural environment are not in themselves problematic but are charged with normative content by being confronted with a pre-established value system. These might either be systems of human-centred values whose violation causes anxieties and concerns, or function-system-centred necessities whose violation causes disruption and dysfunctionality. In both cases, the crucial point is that the violation of established rules give rise to disorder and uncertainty that might, in the worst-case scenario, amount to an imminent threat to survival. Environmental sociologists, therefore, insist that it is not enough to simply describe the state of the physical environment empirically. We also need to explore the value systems that turn intrinsically value-free conditions and events in the physical world into problems.

In the social-movement literature, one of the best-known and most influential analyses of such underlying value systems is surely Ronald Inglehart's theory of post-materialism² that he developed to explain the emergence of the new social movements, including the environmental movement, of the 1970s and 1980s. Inglehart's theory provides a good starting point for the conceptualization of the different frames of mind under investigation here. It is based on the assumption that, for the modernist individual, the most fundamental values are *security* and *autonomy*. Inglehart suggests that post-war societies understood security and autonomy first and foremost in material terms. The post-war value system, which for our purposes might be described as the pre-ecologist frame of mind, was thus characterized by a narrow focus on issues of material production and distribution. However, Inglehart argued that, in the 1970s, the marginal utility of further economic growth for the pursuit of security and autonomy triggered a shift towards post-material politics, which takes material security for granted and places the main emphasis on identity needs such as self-determination, self-realization, and self-expression. Inglehart suggested that this silent revolution in the value system sensitized significant parts of the public to phenomena in the social and natural environment that had previously not attracted much attention but which then became the focus of the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s.

With its focus on post-materialism, Inglehart's theory is too one-dimensional to provide a really satisfactory explication of the ecologist frame of mind. Since the beginning of the 1990s, it has also become increasingly evident that the frame of mind Inglehart described has once again substantially changed. Late-modern societies are experiencing a silent counter-revolution³ that is once again rearranging the parameters that determine the way in which the social and natural environment are being perceived. What is emerging is the *post-ecologist* frame of mind whose arrival is signalled, for example, by the glaring neo-materialism that commands late-modern societies. Other indicators of the *post-ecologist constellation*⁴ include: a) the realization that nature, rather than being an unambiguous physical reality out there, is a social construction and heavily contested concept; b) the de-ideologization of eco-politics; c) the integration of environmental issues into other fields of politics and the implicit loss of the specific identity of eco-politics; d) the reformulation of ecological issues as economic issues and issues of efficiency; e) the decline of the political actors of ecologism; and f) the emergence of an overwhelming optimism (ecological modernization, civil society) replacing the traditional eco-pessimism. I have discussed these issues in more detail elsewhere;⁵ what is important here is to conceptualize more clearly how the post-ecologist frame of mind differs from its ecologist predecessor. For this purpose it is useful to turn back to Inglehart's core values of *security* and *autonomy*.

Blends of security and autonomy

Inglehart's theory does not explain the *relationship* between these two core values very well. In his model, there seems to be a hierarchy and temporal sequence between the two with security (material needs) being sought first and autonomy (identity needs) being sought at a more advanced stage. For the ecologist frame of mind, however, there is no such hierarchy sequence. Rather, it is characterized by a very specific combination of the concern for security and the concern for autonomy. Furthermore, the way in which these values are interpreted is key to understanding the ecologist frame of mind.

In the decades prior to Inglehart's silent revolution, security and autonomy were not only understood in a primarily materialistic way, but they were thought to be most achievable if pursued collectively and for society as a whole rather than competitively and for particular individuals. This inclusive understanding of security and autonomy had its origins in idealistic Enlightenment thinking. It had been both materialized and popularized through the various branches of Marxist thought. Hence, the pre-ecological frame of mind was not only characterized by its materialism, but also by a clear commitment to collectivism and the community. In Inglehart's silent revolution then, security and autonomy were not only reinterpreted in cultural, rather than material, terms but also in individual, rather than collective, terms. To the extent that the self and the autonomy, which shifted into the centre of the new frame of mind, were the individual self and individual autonomy, post-material politics might be described as ego-politics. The free development and realization of the individual self — of individual identity — presupposed normative liberalization and flexibilization. In cultural terms, a process of deregulation and privatization was initiated that was thoroughly comparable to the processes that, from the 1980s onwards, were to restructure the economic sphere. But it was characteristic of the ecologist frame of mind that cultural individualization, value pluralism, and individual autonomy were pursued on the basis of (rather than instead of) egalitarian and collectivist foundations in both cultural and material terms.

The combination of the Cold War experience and radical technological progress, both of which implied potentially uncontrollable risks, forged the sociological paradigm of the risk society and kept issues of security at the forefront of the debate. Given the inclusive character of both the nuclear and the ecological threat (apocalypse), the eco-movement pursued its two goals of security and autonomy in a strongly inclusive way; that is, *collective* security and *social* autonomy. However, this particular constellation, which provided the foundations for ecologist thought, was superseded when the bipolar world order collapsed and the paradigm of the risk society was replaced by that of the opportunity society.

In the same sense that material security was taken for granted in Inglehart's silent revolution, the emerging, silent counter-revolution took the achievement

of individual autonomy for granted but reinterpreted autonomy in an individualistic and exclusive way. Thus, the shift from the ecologist to the post-ecologist frame of mind not only implies the emergence of a new phase of *hyper-materialism*, but, of equal importance, this new materialism is egoistic and exclusive. The opportunity society insists on individual autonomy in the sense of the right to unrestricted personal development and benefit. It understands opportunity and self-realization primarily in terms of material accumulation and consumption. Further, in the interest of this new understanding of autonomy, the opportunity society applies the principles of liberalization, deregulation, and privatization, which had previously restructured the cultural sphere, to the material base of late-modern society. Collectivity and community now appear, first and foremost, as interference to the private sphere and as illegitimate obstacles in the way of personal fulfilment. Late-modern society therefore “lives in a state of permanent pressure towards dismantling of all collective interference.”⁶ The silent counter-revolution, which is in fact a much more comprehensive process than the terminological reference to Inglehart seems to suggest, thus dismantles the ecologist frame of mind right down to its very foundations.

Uncertainty

In order to understand exactly what triggered the emergence of the post-ecologist frame of mind, and in order to avoid the impression that any particular parts of society could be blamed or held responsible for this development, one might refer to what Bauman⁷ and others have called “the political economy of uncertainty.” Uncertainty is undoubtedly the most characteristic feature of late-modern societies. Concepts like that of the *risk society* or the *age of side effects*,⁸ the *Juggernaut Society*,⁹ or *Liquid Modernity*¹⁰ all seek to capture this *new obscurity*¹¹ and incalculability that descended upon society when the Iron Curtain fell. Thus, the major challenge for late-modern society is to restore certainty, or at least to find effective strategies for the management of uncertainty, which is an unavoidable consequence of ongoing processes of globalization.

This new uncertainty has a material as well as a normative dimension. In response to new economic uncertainties, society develops neo-materialist value priorities, a trend that is reinforced by the fact that only material values seem to provide a reasonably solid foundation for social consensus. In response to the dissolution of the normative certainties of traditional modernity, contemporary society turns towards new *constructed certitudes*¹² that are enforced in an almost authoritarian way. Constructed certitudes are consciously adopted fundamentalisms that provide guidance and reassurance, while deregulation and flexibilization generate a sense of disorientation and exposure to fate. Such fundamentalisms may be of a traditional ideological nature (ethnic, national, religious, ecological, et cetera) or appear in an allegedly *post-ideological* guise such as the metaphysics of the market or the religion of competitiveness — or

the moral superiority of western liberal democracy.

So a *neo-materialist reflex* and an “authoritarian reflex”¹³ add up to the new “authoritarian security-materialism.”¹⁴ The silent counter-revolution that has brought it about has reshaped the politics of late-modern society. It has shifted issues like the reduction of tax burdens and public expenditure; the defence of ethnic, national, and cultural identities; internal and external security and protection against crime and terrorism; border control and defence against migration; denunciation and prosecution of so-called free riders and social parasites; new conflicts of distribution arising against the background of increasing social inequality; and the installation of internal enemies like radical ecologists, the work shy — or pedophiles — to the top of the political agenda. The common denominator of all these issues is that they are neo-materialistic, that they are security oriented, and that they are strongly individualistic and exclusive. “The transition from modernity to late modernity can be seen as a movement from an inclusive to an exclusive society,” that is “from a society whose accent was on assimilation and incorporation to one that separates and excludes.”¹⁵ We might call this framework of neo-materialist, neo-authoritarian, and socially exclusive security politics the post-ecologist frame of mind.

Managing unsustainability

The emergence of the post-ecologist frame of mind has important implications for the way in which contemporary society formulates and conducts its ecopolitics. It is self-evident that its neo-materialism, exclusive individualism, and neo-authoritarianism are diametrically opposed to ecological thought and are incompatible with any demands for social justice and ecological integrity. Nevertheless, these post-ecologist features are firmly built into the contemporary frame of mind; they are indispensable ingredients of late-modern consciousness and identity. Hence, its social and ecological unsustainability cannot be regarded as a curable fault of contemporary society or a flawed frame of mind that could be rectified through appropriate education. In a somewhat paradoxical way, it might be said that unsustainability is here to stay. In the post-ecologist constellation, the idea and ideal of sustainability has factually been abandoned. The integrity of nature and the ecologist principle of comprehensive inclusion (social and environmental) have lost their significance. In the interest of its needs for, and understanding of, security, autonomy, and certainty, late-modern society will make any effort to defend its unsustainability. For this reason, it is not particularly useful to identify the frame of mind that facilitates sustainability and expect environmental education to develop it. Insofar as the comparatively recent concept of sustainable development is quite different from earlier ecologist ideals, this concept might itself actually be regarded as a post-ecologist invention that already reflects the silent counter-revolution and the arrival of the post-ecologist frame of mind.

For late-modern societies, the question is not how (nor on the basis of what kind of frame of mind) the capitalist growth economy can be made socially just and ecologically sustainable. Instead, the question is; How we can generate the illusion that social justice and ecological integrity are on the agenda while at the same time perpetuate a system and a frame of mind that is inherently socially exclusive and ecologically unsustainable? Put differently, the fundamental challenge for late-modern society is the management of unsustainability and its implications, rather than its removal. In this situation, late-modern society has developed strategies of simulation that stabilize the normative basis of society and pacify potentials for social conflict that emerge from inherently exclusive and unsustainable practices of growth, accumulation, and consumption. By means of these strategies, late-modern society manages to convince and reassure itself that the modernist and ecologist ideals are still in place and on the agenda. These strategies of simulation entail, firstly, the reflexive redefinition of the constitutive parameters of modernist (and ecologist) thinking and, secondly, an ostentatious emphasis in public discourse and policy making on political renewal, social inclusion, and economic greening.

As examples for this reflexive redefinition of key concepts and values of modernist thinking, we may point to the contemporary reinterpretation of the concepts of *freedom* as freedom of choice, of *equality* as equality of opportunity, of *rationality* as efficiency and profitability, of *participation* as realization of self-interest, of *democracy* as transparency and accountability, of *individual identity* as the unique consumer profile, of *autonomous self-development* as the realization of one's full productive and consumptive potentials, of *social inclusion* as inclusion into the labour and consumer market, or of *environmental integrity* as resource efficiency and sustainable development. The old conceptual shells are being retained but they are filled with a different meaning. The established concepts simulate continuity and committedness to the modernist values and tradition, yet their meanings have changed in such ways that they are compatible with the perpetuation of the capitalist growth economy. All of these concepts have once been used as tools for the critique of an economic system whose logic relentlessly colonizes all other social systems and extinguishes all non-economic codes or ways of thinking. In their redefined, contemporary understanding, however, these concepts all serve to stabilize and reproduce the consumerist, growth economy. They provide the moral and political legitimation for the further expansion of this system and for the crusade against its internal and external enemies. In fact, the liaison between the western capitalist system and the redefined key parameters of Enlightenment thinking has become so close that it has become almost impossible to defend one without defending the other.

Against this background, we may conclude that the discourse and policies of ecological modernization and sustainable development function to simulate the possibility and desirability of environmental justice and integrity without genuinely aiming to address, let alone reverse, the fundamental unsustainability of

late-modern society.¹⁶ Any talk of education for sustainability invariably contributes to this simulation of modernity and distracts attention from the new, post-ecologist ways in which contemporary society formulates and processes its ecological issues. Yet it would be fatally wrong to misunderstand *simulation* in this context as the conspiratorial deception of the underprivileged by a certain social elite. This may well be one dimension to be considered, yet the important point here is that the politics of simulation simulates the ongoing validity of the modernist project for society *as a whole*. Given that the politics of simulation is a *societal* strategy of *societal* self-deception, the particular difficulty of any analysis of *simulative politics* is that there is no perspective from which this practice could actually be revealed as a conscious strategy. It is difficult to identify any subject to which it could appear as a deception and which could criticize this practice. Nevertheless, social theorists will have to continue their efforts to explore and conceptualize late-modern society's politics of simulation.

It has become clear how environmental education, particularly in the shape of education for sustainability, runs the risk of serving purposes to which it might be expected to be fundamentally opposed. Nevertheless, the aim of these deliberations cannot be to present the post-ecologist constellation and frame of mind as unchangeable. Obviously, the late-modern condition is not the end of history. Neither is environmental education pointless, nor can policies of social and environmental sustainability simply be given up. After all, there is evidence that environmental education can have an impact and that ecological modernization does change societal practices. The point of this article, then, is to reflect on the fundamental problems and obstacles environmental educators must confront. Such reflections represent, of course, a tight-rope walk in as much as they threaten to undermine confidence in environmental education and committedness to the project of ecological restructuring. Education for sustainability and the project of ecological modernization may be societal strategies designed to disguise the unsustainability of late-modern society, but a viable alternative to such strategies is not available. Any undisguised expression of the post-ecologist frame of mind would amount to straight barbarism compared to contemporary practices of simulation, which are appreciably more civilized.

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Endnotes

1. Bonnett
2. Inglehart 1977, 1990, 1997
3. Ignazi 1992, Raschke 1999, Blühdorn 2000b
4. Blühdorn 2002b
5. Blühdorn 2000b, 2002a, 2002b
6. Bauman 1997, 16
7. Bauman 1999
8. Beck 1997
9. Giddens
10. Bauman
11. Habermas
12. Beck 1997
13. Inglehart 1997, 38
14. Raschke 1999, 87
15. Young 1999, 7
16. Blühdorn 2000a, 2001