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Eco-politics beyond the Paradigm of Sustainability: A Conceptual Framework and Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT   *This contribution sketches a conceptual framework for the analysis of the post-ecologist era and outlines a research agenda for investigating its politics of unsustainability. The article suggests that this new era and its particular mode of eco-politics necessitate a new environmental sociology. Following a review of some achievements and limitations of the paradigm of sustainability, the concept of post-ecologism is related to existing discourses of the 'end of nature', the 'green backlash' and the 'death of environmentalism'. The shifting terrain of eco-politics in the late-modern condition is mapped and an eco-sociological research programme outlined centring on the post-ecologist question: How do advanced modern capitalist consumer democracies try and manage to sustain what is known to be unsustainable?*

A Watershed in Eco-politics?

This volume is devoted to exploring the stakes associated with entry into an era in which the historically radical and transformative elements of environmental movements and eco-political thought are blunted through mainstreaming and have been reconfigured by comprehensive cultural change. We are proposing to call this the *era of post-ecologism* and its eco-politics the *politics of unsustainability*. Furthermore, we are suggesting that this new era and its particular mode of eco-politics necessitate a new environmental sociology. We are aware that these propositions will trigger responses of intuitive caution not only within the academic community. Given the prominence of key eco-political issues in current public debate and the overpowering declaratory

commitment of leading societal actors to the goals of sustainable development and global justice, terms like *hyper-ecologism* might intuitively seem more appropriate. Also, the notion of post-ecologism is reminiscent of diagnoses of the 'end of nature' (e.g. Carson, 1962; Merchant, 1980; McKibben, 1990) and earlier announcements of 'post-environmentalism', the 'fading of the Greens' and the 'death of the environmental movement' (Young, 1990; Bramwell, 1994; Shellenberger & Nordhaus, 2005). Such announcements have always been around – and they have always proved premature. Are things really going to be different with the *post-ecologist era* and its *politics of unsustainability*? Is it really appropriate to speak of a *watershed in eco-politics*? Is there really a need for a new environmental sociology?

We believe so! As the reassuring belief in the compatibility and inter-dependence of democratic consumer capitalism and ecological sustainability has become hegemonic, different and perhaps counter-intuitive lines of enquiry are not particularly popular. They appear disturbing, even counter-productive. As faith in technological innovation, market instruments and managerial perfection is asserted as *the* most appropriate means for achieving sustain-ability, empirical experience reveals the limitations of such approaches. This insistence on the capabilities of these strategies; the denial that the capitalist principles of infinite economic growth and wealth accumulation are ecologically, socially, politically and culturally unsustainable and destructive; the pathological refusal to acknowledge that western 'needs' in terms of animal protein, air travel or electric energy, to name but three examples, simply cannot, i.e. *can not*, be satisfied in ecologically and otherwise sustainable ways, is itself a syndrome that deserves close sociological attention. But more generally, an environmental sociology that opportunistically refrains from pursuing potentially inconvenient lines of enquiry and instead confines itself to serving and enabling the prevailing techno-economic hegemony fails in terms of both academic and eco-political integrity. For these reasons, a new sociological effort to grasp and address what we are calling the post-ecologist era and its politics of unsustainability is in fact imperative.

It is 27 years since André Gorz likened ecology to the movement for universal suffrage and the campaign for a 40 hour working week, movements initially dismissed as 'anarchy and irrationality' until accumulating 'factual evidence and popular pressure' made 'the establishment suddenly give way' (Gorz, 1980/1987: 3). 'What was unthinkable yesterday becomes taken for granted today', Gorz noted, but ironically, 'fundamentally nothing changes': democratic consumer capitalism assimilates 'ecological necessities as technical constraints, and adapt[s] the conditions of exploitation to them' (Gorz, 1980/1987: 3). Today, the ascendancy of neo-liberal free market principles and the 'metaphysics of efficiency' (Blühdorn, 2007a) renders Gorz's insights tangible amidst discussion of the 'inexorable growth of environmentalism' (Jordan & Maloney, 1997). Indeed, the environment has acquired a position of un-precedented prominence within economics and international politics (witness the UK Treasury's *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change*

(Her Majesty's Treasury, 2006)). An abundance of eco-political measures are being considered and implemented. Yet the key principles governing western practices of production, circulation, exchange and consumption remain immutable. The key principles of consumer capitalism, i.e. infinite economic growth and wealth accumulation, which ecologists have always branded as fundamentally unsustainable, remain fully in place.[1] Over the past few decades there has been a steady build-up of work that is fascinated by this resilience of democratic consumer capitalism and is setting itself against both the hegemony of eco-economic 'win–win thinking' and the ongoing flow of eco-apocalyptic doomsday literature. This literature pays particular attention to symbolic stakes, rhetorical forms and the enactment of forms of societal self-deception in eco-political matters. It explores the ways in which the formalisation, declaration, communication and absorption of ecological politics take place within the context of wider social, political and economic transformation beyond the confines of traditional modern politics. It is exactly this agenda which we are seeking to formalise around the notions of the *post-ecologist era* and the *politics of unsustainability*.

The transformation of communication and other technologies since the 1980s (Thompson, 1995) has significantly changed what it is possible to know about the environment, how quickly this knowledge can be accessed and how it is disseminated and socially distributed (Adam *et al.*, 1999). The knowledge economy and the information society are widely depicted as increasingly reflexive, adaptive and innovative compared to a previous corporatist era which had been constrained by the dead hand of the state. Social movements are portrayed as critical social forces scrutinising 'every individual speck of cement in the structure of civilization for the potential of self-endangerment' (Beck, 1992: 176). They are said to be capable of constraining the 'juggernaut' of modernity (Giddens, 1990: 151). Public–private partnerships are advanced as dynamic means of innovation to meet the challenges of globalisation including ecological ones. Yet amidst this technological and managerial optimism western consumer democracies are experiencing a metamorphosis that does indeed qualify as something like a paradigm shift in eco-politics. Indicators include *inter alia*:

- the normalisation of the environmental crisis, with reports about the worst ever floods, droughts, forest fires, famines, species extinction rates, desertification, deforestation, shrinking of ice caps, etc. becoming a standard feature of daily news coverage;
- the globalisation-induced reinforcement of the fixation on economic growth, international competitiveness, consumer spending, material accumulation, etc., which are radically incompatible with the *ecological virtues* (Blühdorn, 2007a) constitutive of a sustainable society;
- the acceptance by environmental figureheads such as Jonathon Porritt of capitalism as an integral ingredient of the solution to deepening problems of unsustainability (Porritt, 2005);

- the alignment of traditionally radical non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace with regulatory initiatives and commercial partnerships consistent with ecological modernisation;
- the transformation of Green parties across Europe and their struggle to redefine and reposition themselves in a radically changing political landscape;
- the rebranding of nuclear energy as green energy, inverting its symbolic status and historic founding role for eco-politics as the iconic symbol of an unsustainable form of civilisation.

This list of indicators could easily be extended;[2] they signal entry into what we are calling the era of post-ecologism. But of course none of this means that environmental issues have disappeared from either political agenda(s) or the public sphere. What we are describing as the politics of unsustainability is not simply the denial of environmental problems; nor must it be understood as an anti-environmentalist backlash. If anything media coverage and mainstream party political commentary on environmental issues have increased as debates over climate change intensify amidst incessant commentary on 'the war on terror'. Indeed climate change and terrorism compete in terms of which represents the greater threat to established patterns of western life, with *energy security* having emerged as the key concern connecting the two. So ecology and the environment have moved centre stage within formal politics, but at the same time, a combination of structural and contingent phenomena leaves established eco-politics in something of a hiatus. Commenting on the US, Cohen notes that the eco-political trajectory that had its origins in the 1970s has 'come to an end' marking the start of a protracted period of 'foraging' to 'find a new path forward' (Cohen, 2006: 77). This assessment is *mutatis mutandis* also applicable to the European context. The causes and wide-ranging implications of this reconfiguration of eco-political stakes and remedial strategies need to be investigated.

   The objective of this contribution is to sketch a conceptual framework for the analysis of the post-ecologist era and outline a research agenda for investigating its politics of unsustainability. As a preliminary exercise, the next section will review some achievements and limitations of the paradigm of sustainability. This paradigm was instrumental in obtaining the status of a 'non-controversial public concern' for the environment (Eder, 1996:183), and without it, it would not make sense to speak of an eco-politics *beyond* the paradigm of sustainability. The third section will then be devoted to some of those observers who have talked about the 'end of nature', the 'green backlash' and the 'death of environmentalism'. A review of their work will help to establish a conceptual framework for the exploration of the post-ecologist era. Building on this framework, the fourth section will sketch the research agenda into the politics of unsustainability. We will conclude with an overview of the contributions which are assembled here and with some pointers as to how these

analyses fit into the much larger research project that this volume is hoping to launch.

The Limitations of the Sustainability Paradigm

Whilst the notion of sustainable development (SD) has been central for establishing environmentalism as an 'ideological masterframe' (Eder, 1996:183), sustainability remains a contested concept in academic and political circles, giving rise to practical policy approaches to which broader publics find it difficult to relate. It is now a commonplace to distinguish between different forms of sustainable development and sustainability (e.g. Dobson, 1998: 33–61; Jacobs, 1999). The prime distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' forms involves differences in emphasis placed on inter-generational equity, North–South equity and the importance attached to precaution within regulatory and legislative institutions (Baker, 2006). Furthermore, the question of what is to be sustained and how is a critical issue. If this is first and foremost the established economic system, or cherished western practices of individualised, consumption-oriented identity formation, then this is a far cry from the demand to sustain planetary ecological integrity and the intrinsic value of nature. Carruthers (2001) argues that the continued primacy of economic growth within SD, reinforced by World Bank and International Monetary Fund approaches, represents the effective subversion of any radical counter-hegemonic programme. Meadowcroft (2000), in contrast, sees SD as a cumulative process with long term positive consequences, even though it may in the short term contain unsustainable practices and technologies. Key commentators over the lifetime of the SD debate now argue that even actors which are widely perceived as adopting a pro-active stance – such as the European Union (EU) – have prioritised economic and commercial dimensions of sustainability at the expense of ecological and social dimensions (Baker, 2006 and in this volume).

At the societal level conditions are no more favourable. The culture of mass consumption remains fundamentally incompatible with the principles of sustainability. Furthermore, as the axiom of individual self-responsibility cascades down through societies via the institutions of market-oriented governance, citizens find their capacities stretched by rising levels of complexity and precariousness (Chesters & Welsh, 2006; Ilcan, 2006). For individuals struggling to confront the multiple challenges of late-modern 'life in fragments' (Bauman, 1995), adopting lifestyles consistent with strong sustainable development adds further to the escalating burden of 'self-responsibility', compromising their capacity for personal competitiveness (Bauman, 2004). Against this backdrop, environmental issues are delegated to political actors and regulatory regimes. In line with the principles of both representative democracy and the service society, such actors and regimes are keenly providing reassurance that appropriate action is being taken. Yet, strong sustainable development in terms of individual lifestyles, inter-generational

equity, North–South redistribution of wealth and the long-term preservation of eco-system integrity remain distant prospects, whilst traditional economic growth remains prominent. The *ecological footprint* of western consumer societies (and their emulation around the world) continues to grow dramatically, and so does the size of what researchers of societal metabolisms and global material flows are describing as the *ecological debts* and *ecological rucksacks* of western societies (e.g. SERI/Friends of the Earth Europe, 2005; Giljum, 2006). Such metaphorical terms aim to illustrate the increasingly visible and deepening unsustainability of 'Northern' lifestyles, the geographical imbalance in resource extraction and consumption and the unequal distribution of environmental degradation around the globe.

The centrality afforded to the 'categorical imperatives' of globalisation implies that the social, cultural and political dimensions of sustainability which figure prominently within Agenda 21 and Local Agenda 21 are almost invariably subordinated to economic growth, competitiveness and innovation. As labour market participation rates and hours worked rise amidst increasingly 'flexible', precarious and often poorly paid forms of employment, social, cultural and political activities dependent upon free time and resources are eroded. The performative demands of the 'only game in town', globalisation, necessitate the reconfiguration – more often than not into more *unsustainable* directions – of the traditional family, residence and mobility patterns, education practices, work, leisure and the construction and articulation of identity. Local Agenda 21 had envisaged public engagement with the long term, inter-generational dimensions of sustainable development to devise action programmes with extensive (if not consensual) societal support. Little of this has materialised, not least because of escalating demands upon time in dual income, sometimes multi-occupation households. Roundtables, public consultation exercises and other participatory initiatives open up new circuits of communication, but structurally cannot stimulate the envisaged degree of public (re)engagement. Whilst material living standards continue to rise, western societies exhibit multiple faultlines. Britain, a widely celebrated example of successful economic modernisation (e.g. Jun, 2007), aptly illustrates how the enforcement of market liberal reform agendas directly augments social unsustainability as manifested in excessive individualisation, social inequality, political disengagement, family breakdown, anti-social behaviour, alcohol and drug abuse, high crime rates and prison populations, and so forth.

As social responses to policy initiatives in pursuit of sustainable development (e.g. household waste recycling or road pricing) exhibit confounding complexity – because situated publics respond to progressive measures in unanticipated and contradictory ways – two responses can be discerned. First, initiatives requiring social participation begin to be accompanied by surveillance and compulsion. Second, the balance between social and political initiatives, on the one hand, and technological fixes, on the other, has begun to tip decisively towards the latter *irrespective* of public alignment. The preference of politicians and policy makers for the apparent certainty of techno-managerial solutions

reflects a *reciprocal* withdrawal of trust. Whilst public trust in political parties declines amidst historically low electoral participation rates and collapsing party membership figures, politicians and policy makers increasingly distrust 'innovation-resistant' publics. Innovation and reform need to be imposed on refractory publics, legitimised by the superior wisdom of *responsible* rather than *representative* governments. Public resistance against genetically modified (GM) crops or the expansion of nuclear energy, to name but two prominent examples, is perceived as the 'irrational' rejection of 'inevitable' modernisation by an 'innovation-resistant' public (Welsh, 2000a, 2006; Blühdorn, 2007a; ⑥ Hughes, this volume). As reciprocal trust between publics, political representatives and officials of state is diminishing, the tacit bedrock of liberal democratic theory has entered a particularly corrosive conjuncture (Blühdorn, 2007b), and the tensions between 'the game' and viable eco- and social systems begin to play out across multiple sites. This is the shifting terrain upon which post-ecologist politics is situated.

Whilst ecological modernisation had been widely praised as a win–win path to aligning economic and environmental goals in realising sustainable development, 21st century politics tacitly accepts environmental crises such as climate change, including their consequential outcomes, as an inescapable given. This does not mean to say that any attempts to control such developments have been abandoned, but the novelty in the politics of unsustainability is the shift of emphasis from trying to *avert* such crises to *managing* their implications and consequences. States are familiar with crises as operational modes which legitimate extraordinary security measures, the suspension of democratic safeguards and the uncoupling of checks and balances. The extension of terror tropes to contemporary movement radicals utilising direct action tactics and the creation of offences relating to 'economic terrorism' underlines the importance that state authorities attach to containing post-1990s activism (Chesters & Welsh, 2006; Welsh, this volume). By framing the implications of the bio-economy or new nuclear build in terms of the sustainable development and modernisation agendas, any challenge to the hegemony of techno-managerialism and economic efficiency can be portrayed as a threat to both environmental reform and societal progress (Welsh, 2007). Addressing the 2006 Labour Party Conference former US President Bill Clinton acknowledged that the contemporary epoch could be characterised as 'unequal, unstable and unsustainable' (BBC Radio 4, *World at One*, 27 September 2006). The responsible way forward, he suggested, was the creation of more wealth, North–South redistribution, a resolute stance against terror and the pursuit of ecological modernisation consistent with economic growth. The electoral appeal of such leadership statements is considerable, yet they seamlessly endorse substantial public subsidies to the 'creative, dynamic and innovative' corporate sector, the erosion of civil liberties and the renunciation ⑦ of the emancipatory project. Thus the pervasive sense of environmental crisis becomes another means of reinforcing state authority and citizens' compliance with future-fitness programmes orientated towards 'sustaining the

unsustainable' (Blühdorn, this volume). Post-democratic and neo-authoritarian tendencies are an important dimension of the politics of unsustainability.

So sustainable development has been appropriated by established political parties and re-spun in such a way that the state/corporate sector nexus, operating through deepening public–private partnerships, emerges as the central means of delivering sustainability. George W. Bush's investment initiative to spur technological innovation and Tony Blair's underwriting of the accumulated costs of nuclear waste and reactor decommissioning are examples of the re-engineering of sectors which were formerly closely associated with environmental destruction as agents of a sustainable future. The return to nuclear power, backed by the International Energy Agency, as a key ingredient of energy security and climate change policy consistent with perceived economic interests illustrates the firm resolve to *defend* and *continue* rather than *review* and *change* the established path. Critics of the discourse of sustainable development have always argued that this paradigm does not envisage a genuine departure from the trajectory of material growth, social inequality and ecological deterioration. But if it ever did (e.g. Baker, this volume), the ongoing process of modernisation has taken western consumer democracies *beyond* the politics of sustainability and into a realm where *the management of the inability and unwillingness to become sustainable* has taken the centre ground. Thus, environmental sociology is confronted with a categorically new constellation to which it must respond. Yet the conceptual and strategic tools which it has accumulated so far are not sufficient for this purpose.

Green Backlash, End of Environmentalism and Post-ecologism

What then are the constitutive ingredients of post-ecologism, and when and how did the era of post-ecologism emerge? A detailed answer to these questions exceeds present confines and will be provided later in this volume (e.g. Blühdorn). At this stage we want to point to some important milestones in the accompanying academic debate. This will, at the same time, help to clarify the relationship between our notion of post-ecologism and earlier diagnoses of *anti-environmentalism*, the *end of nature* or the *end of environmentalism*. In 1990, at the time when globalisation began to emerge as a major paradigm within the social sciences, two books articulated central dimensions of what we are formalising here as the era of post-ecologism and its politics of unsustainability: John Young's *Post Environmentalism* and Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*. Young argued that the advent of post-industrial society would lead to a political consensus on the environment, with ideological environmentalism giving way to a pragmatic diversity of practices, and 'all parties' offering 'sensible long-term environmental policies' (Young, 1990: 165–7). McKibben pointed to the disappearance of nature as an external pristine domain uninfluenced by human culture and civilisation. As the markers of human activity are increasingly apparent even in the heart of wilderness areas,

he noted, we are entering a 'post-natural world' (McKibben, 1990: 55).[3] McKibben also realised that with the 'end of nature' ecological movements – and modern societies at large – are losing an important normative standard and source of meaning. The loss of *naturalness* as an extra-societal and therefore reliable normative category triggers the rampant growth of negotiability, decideability and responsibility, and hence McKibben's end of nature leads straight into Bauman's (1999) *political economy of uncertainty*. Yet, McKibben himself did not follow this through by questioning the concept of nature, which was in fact drawn into a maelstrom of political contestation. Towards the end of the 1990s, Eder's (1996) *The Social Construction of Nature* and MacNaghten & Urry's (1998) *Contested Natures* formalised and consolidated this area, establishing that in the discursive realm of eco-politics there is no single and stable phenomenon called nature but an unlimited number of competing and ever changing conceptions of 'nature' each of which has its own perspective on what ought to be valued, protected or recognised as an environmental problem or good. By implication, this work at the same time reconfirmed that eco-politics is in fact most closely connected to the politics of individual and social identity (Inglehart, 1977; Blühdorn, 2000).

The recognition of the inescapably social character of nature and the social constructedness of environmental consciousness, problems and concerns had major repercussions on eco-political thought. For a long time ecologists had implicitly assumed that nature could be a functional equivalent or substantive grounding of transcendental reason, but it now transpired that whatever environmentalists may regard as ecologically necessary or desirable are projections of their ethical and political values into the supposedly external Other of society, i.e. into nature. Whilst anthropogenic change of the natural environment including the wide range of empirically measurable consequences is undeniable, ubiquitous, accelerating and probably irreversible, categorical ecological imperatives do not exist.[4] There are no political values or prescriptions which can be read off nature. The political ideology of *ecologism* as it had emerged in the 1980s had been the most comprehensive and consistent articulation of eco-political thought (Dobson, 1990; Goodin, 1992; Hayward, 1995). Yet the diversity of ways in which the environment, environmental crises and environmental consciousness are conceived frustrated the attempt to create a unified ecologist ideology and severely moderated the political impact of the ecological critique.

Sociological work, inspired by systems theory, then led to the announcement of the 'abdication of the ecologist paradigm' (Blühdorn, 1997, 2000). Central in ⑧ this was, in particular, the belief that for the analysis of the late-modern condition the traditionally modern concept of the *autonomous subject* needs to be replaced by the late-modern concept of the *autopoietic system*. More specifically, the suggestion that the idealist notion of the subject has run its course not only as the central category of sociological analysis, but also as the dominant ideal of late-modern identity construction,[5] implied that the *subjectivisation* of eco-politics and the *differentiation* of its value base were

supplemented by an important third development which is the *identification of the Self with the system*, i.e. the collapse of traditional modernity's central dualism of the *Self* and its *Other*. Together these three dimensions paved the way for the 'post-ecologist constellation' or the 'post-ecologist condition' (Blühdorn, 2000, 2004). In a number of respects, eco-politics now turned into a politics 'without identity' (Blühdorn, 2000: 151–72).

Whilst sociological and eco-political theory were trying to get a conceptual grip on the changing ways in which advanced modern societies frame and address their eco-political problems, the policy-oriented paradigm of ecological modernisation further accelerated this *post*-ecologist transformation. The proponents of ecological modernisation reframed environmental problems primarily in technological, economic and managerial terms. While there are different varieties of the ecological modernisation approach (e.g. Christoff, 1996; Barry, 2005), the overarching effect of this paradigm was the softening of the tension between (a) technology and ecology, (b) economic growth and ecology and (c) the competitive market and ecology (e.g. Mol & Sonnenfeld, 2000; Young, 2000). The undeniable successes of ecological modernisation strategies and the promise that the full potential of 'new environmental policy instruments' (e.g. Jordan *et al.*, 2003) is only just being discovered spread considerable eco-political optimism. The paradigm of ecological modernisation thus challenged a range of established ecologist beliefs. In particular, it rehabilitated the 'ecologist enemies' and made technological innovation, economic growth, capital accumulation and consumerism in principle acceptable[6] – if only they were of the correct, i.e. the 'green', variety. The paradigm of ecological modernisation thus offered reassurance, disempowered radical ecologist movements and helped to pacify eco-political conflicts whilst bolstering the argument that radical system change is not actually required as environmental goals can be realised through the modification of existing structures.

Around the turn of the century, this message was powerfully reinforced by Bjørn Lomborg's best-selling *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, which set out to fully debunk the ecologist 'litany' (Lomborg, 2001: 3–42). Whilst putting much emphasis on how genuinely he 'care[d] for our Earth and . . . for the future health and wellbeing of its succeeding generations' (Lomborg, 2001: 3), Lomborg suggested that 'if we want to leave a planet with the most possibilities for our descendants', it is 'imperative that we focus primarily on the economy' (Lomborg, 2001: 324). He wanted to see the 'spotlight on securing economic growth', and this should be pursued 'within the framework of the World Trade Organization' (Lomborg, 2001: 324). Just like the proponents of ecological modernisation, Lomborg was responding to an implicit societal demand.[7] The overwhelming popularity of their message reflected a *Zeitgeist* which insists on the official acknowledgement and incorporation of environmental concerns and at the same time desires a *green light* signalling the continuation – if in a modified form – of established practices and principles. This green light was exactly what Lomborg and the paradigm of ecological modernisation – each in

their particular ways – delivered, and in doing so, they paved the way for the pacification of eco-political conflicts surrounding the assumed incompatibility of consumer capitalism and ecological sustainability. The transformation this implied for eco-movements and eco-politics in western consumer democracies has been described and discussed as the 'end of environmentalism' (Wissenburg & Levy, 2004).

This 'end of environmentalism' through the selective mainstreaming and post-ecologist reframing of environmental concerns displays specifically European features. Its American counterpart, the hotly debated 'death of environmentalism' (Shellenberger & Nordhaus, 2005), bears markedly different characteristics. Shellenberger & Nordhaus's (2005) influential article focused on the institutionalised environmental movement, i.e. the major environmental NGOs of the US, and argued that this movement is no longer able to connect to the concerns and aspirations of mainstream society. The American eco-movement's 'slide into death' (Cohen, 2006: 76) is widely explained by the fact that the 'movement is overwhelmingly preoccupied with ... wildlife protection and landscape preservation' and has consistently neglected an equally important dimension of environmental activism: 'the well-being of people' (Cohen, 2006: 75).[8] Furthermore, the 'death of environmentalism' in the US has been portrayed as effected by a powerful 'anti-environmental movement' which in terms of 'grassroots organizing' and grassroots mobilisation has 'beaten the environmentalists at their own game' (Rowell, 1996: 373). The corporate counter-attack on US environmentalism detailed in Rowell's *Green Backlash* (1996) also included extensive use of law suits, heralding the wider use of legal intimidation (Donson, 2000). The rise of neo-conservatism and the 'far right' then brought to completion what Buell (2004) terms the transition *From Apocalypse to Way of Life*. Indeed Buell regards neo-conservatism as 'the most important explanation' (2004: 3) for the demise of American environmentalism. Along with Shellenberger and Nordhaus, he points to the 'strong and enormously successful anti-environmental disinformation industry' (Buell, 2004: 3) in the US, which was 'not simply spontaneous' but 'carefully crafted' by the neo-conservative movement (Buell, 2004: 7; also see Brulle & Jenkins, 2006; Devall, 2006).

Comparison to the US illuminates what exactly the transition to an era of post-ecologism is supposed to imply. The phenomena described by Rowell, Buell, Shellenberger and Nordhaus and many others are undoubtedly highly relevant, but they neither capture nor explain the metamorphosis of environmental politics that is the topic of the present volume. European societies and their eco-movements have not been affected by factors similar to those that have reshaped environmentalism in the US.[9] And for the US, too, the observation that 'a sense of unresolved, perhaps unresolvable, environmental crisis has become part of people's normality today' and 'part of the uncertainty in which people nowadays dwell' (Buell, 2004: xvii and following) points well beyond explanations in terms of *anti-environmentalism*. An appropriate and more nuanced understanding of the late-modern

transformation of eco-politics requires more complex approaches. What European–American comparison reveals is the important difference between established varieties of *anti-environmentalism* and the new phenomenon of *post-ecologism*. Whilst the American situation – at least in the somewhat reductionist account by Shellenberger and Nordhaus – seems to be, first and foremost, one of the *marginalisation* and *exclusion* of *environmentalist* demands, the European experience is more than anything one of the *exhaustion* and *reframing* of *ecologist* concerns amidst overwhelming adoption and absorption. In this sense, the European condition is much more literally *post-ecologist*, and the distinction between *anti-environmentalism* and *post-ecologism* is crucially important for any research into what we are calling the politics of unsustainability.

The Politics of Unsustainability: A Research Agenda for Environmental Sociology

The diagnoses of the *death of environmentalism*, the *end of nature* and the *post-ecologist turn* have triggered at least five different objections:

- demands for empirical verification with calls to 'Show us the data' (Dunlap, 2006);
- arguments that surveys and opinion polls provide no evidence of any social movement decline (Rootes, 1999, 2003) and that indeed environmental activism represents a growing part of 'civil society on a global scale' (Dalton, 2005: 453);
- the rejection of the *end of nature* in McKibben's sense on the grounds that 'a lot of external nature remains' and paradigms of naturalness continue to be available (Yearley, 2006: 17);
- the denunciation of the theory of post-ecologism as 'profound conservatism' (Barry, 2004: 184) equivalent to 'US President George W. Bush's denial of global warming' (Barry, 2004: 183);
- attempts to 'reverse these trends' (Cohen, 2006: 75) and to 'resurrect environmentalism' (Dunlap, 2006: 95ff.), either by reconstituting major NGOs as a 'progressive vanguard' (Cohen, 2006: 75) or by going 'back to the grassroots' (Devall, 2006: 171).

Reflecting on these different critical responses helps to avoid potential misunderstandings and to clarify what the sociological investigation of the politics of unsustainability involves. Each of these responses can be addressed firstly at the level of the substantive argument they make, and secondly at the level of the underlying question they raise. Looking at the substantive level first, it is important to understand that polls and surveys indicating that despite 'the current political impotence' of the eco-movement (Dunlap, 2006: 90), the public 'continue to support values of the environmental movement' (Devall, 2006: 167) do not constitute an argument against what is engaged with here as

the post-ecologist turn. Similarly, empirical evidence of stable and perhaps even rising levels of environmental activism can be entirely consistent with the formal politics of unsustainability (e.g. Blühdorn, 2007c). The surveys which Dunlap, Devall, Dalton and many others are referring to tend to have an undifferentiated understanding of environment-related values, concern and activism, and are insensitive to the qualitative transformation of such values and activism. This transformation also escapes Yearley, who reassures us that there is still plenty of nature and naturalness around and that, anyway, the end of nature is not a singular event but a continuous process of ending and (re)creation (2006: 20). Exactly this transformation, however, i.e. the reframing and repackaging of environmental concerns and commitment, is at the centre of the paradigm of post-ecologism. The new forms of expression adopted by movement-based, party-political and other actors are of critical importance. In party-political terms strange bedfellows are emerging highlighting the shifting ground upon which environmental politics stands. In the UK Zac Goldsmith, editor of the radical journal the *Ecologist,* is now advising the Conservative Party, whose leader introduced the slogan 'Vote Blue Go Green'. Across Europe major political parties need to (re)position themselves in relation to 'the green vote', not simply because of Green parties – which are themselves engaged in a process of repositioning – but because of the environmental posture of other mainstream parties. In terms of movement-based actors, such realignments and the absence of any radical ecologist content are equally striking.

Attempts to 'reverse' the post-ecologist turn and 'resurrect' what is supposedly 'dead' overlooks the question of whether it is actually *possible* to resuscitate particular forms of eco-political thought and action once their historical context has passed away (see Blühdorn, 2006; Welsh, 2007). According to the account provided here, these older forms of thought and activism have become exhausted because in the process of ongoing modernisation their specific social and cultural foundations have been superseded by very different constellations. Problem perceptions and priority lists have changed and do not allow for a simple resuscitation of older movements. Beyond this, a revival based on major environmental organisations becoming a vanguard would have a top-down ethos of social engineering. Clearly any genuine rejuvenation could only emerge from the bottom up, but the potential for radical renewal from within the movement milieux is constrained, firstly, by the fact that the late-modern condition is much more conducive to populist right-wing than emancipatory left-wing mass mobilisation; secondly, by the growth of self-experience and self-interest movements (Blühdorn, 2006; McDonald, 2006), which reflects a wider decline in collective identity movements. And thirdly, the networking of diverse activist communities that consolidated into the misnamed anti-globalisation movement constituted a 'unity in diversity' actor (Chesters & Welsh, 2006) that *de-centres* traditional environmental movements rather than infusing them with new energy.[10] Thus established environmentalism has been incorporated from

above at the same time as being superseded and emasculated from below. The defiant insistence that diagnosing this fundamentally new condition is profoundly conservative or outright reactionary is unlikely to reverse the post-ecologist turn and is, anyway, based on a confusion of the categories of academic description and analysis with those of political campaigning.[11]

So each of these responses can and ought to be contested at the level of their substantive content, but in the present context this is actually less important than recognising that none of them raises the really important questions. If the objective is to understand the specific conditions and constellations which determine the ways in which late-modern societies are framing and processing their environmental problems, the question is not:

- whether environmental issues and concerns in the most general sense are still present in the public sphere;
- whether the number of eco-political actions and the membership of environmental groups is rising or falling;
- whether there are residues of nature and naturalness 'out there';
- how the post-ecologist turn may be reversed and the eco-movement resuscitated;
- or whether tentative conceptualisations of the ongoing shift in late-modern society's eco-politics are ideologically acceptable or politically helpful for ecologist activists.

All of these questions are valid and important in their own right, but they are all missing the point that is at the centre of our research agenda into the eco-politics of the post-ecologist era. As we have argued above the politics of unsustainability is unfolding amidst the simultaneity of, on the one hand, a general acceptance that the achievement of sustainability requires radical change in the most basic principles of late-modern societies and, on the other hand, an equally general consensus about the non-negotiability of democratic consumer capitalism – irrespective of mounting evidence of its unsustainability. It is this tension and the multiple ways in which it materialises in contemporary politics that need to be researched in much more detail. For environmental sociology to embrace this agenda, something like a paradigm change is required. So far environmental sociology has predominantly served as a 'handmaiden' (Welsh, 2000b) helping to resolve environmental problems and paving the way towards an ecologically more benign modernity. This work has been important and remains indispensable, but in the era of post-ecologism it needs to be supplemented by a second line of enquiry. Given the proven failure of ecological modernisation strategies to secure sustainability and the continuing addiction of western(ised) societies to consumer capitalism, it is no longer enough to ask how technological and managerial efficiency revolutions may help to secure, further improve and spread the lifestyles associated with that system. Another equally important line of research will have to focus on the question: *How do advanced modern capitalist consumer*

democracies try and manage to sustain what is known to be unsustainable? This is the politics and sociology of unsustainability. Questions figuring prominently on this research agenda include *inter alia*:

- How has the progressive project that some environmentalists would like to *resurrect* instead been *recast*?
- What were the factors that triggered this process of recasting, and which parameters are shaping it?
- How does this recasting affect political actors historically associated with agendas of radical change? To what extent can they reinvent and reposition themselves in a political landscape that has fundamentally changed?
- By what mechanisms are advanced consumer democracies sustaining simultaneous discourses of radical change and uncompromising defence?
- Why are both discourses being sustained at the same time, and who benefits?
- How does this simultaneity of discourses affect established understandings and institutions of representative democracy?

Asking these questions in no way implies the justification or approval of late-modern society's unsustainability or the assertion that things cannot be different. It is true, however, that research into the politics of unsustainability is not immediately about building ecological consciousness, revealing eco-political implementation deficits or devising new policy suggestions. Instead it first of all focuses on detecting and investigating the strategies by which late-modern societies are trying to cope with the awareness and the apparent inescapability of their unsustainability and the full range of its ecological, social, cultural, political and economic consequences. The paradox of post-ecologist politics is that whilst embracing ecological modernisation and elements of progressive social movement agendas, contemporary democracies are failing to provide the 'level playing field' fundamental to developing environmental economies. It is only by beginning to unpick this paradox and the tensions highlighted above that the transformation of eco-political (and wider social movement) agendas through selective accommodation within political systems and their recasting in terms of modernisation and progressive politics can be unpacked. With this volume we cannot do more than sketch a conceptual framework and a research agenda for this post-ecologist environmental sociology. The contributions assembled here begin to make tangible what the ambitious and at times counter-intuitive investigation of the politics of unsustainability might entail.

An Itinerary for This Collection

The two contributions by Petersen and Læssøe focus on Denmark, in eco-political terms one of the most ambitious and advanced European countries. Both pieces investigate how, since the early 1990s, environmental issues and

policy have been reframed in Denmark. Lars Kjerulf Petersen compares Danish terrestrial television news coverage of the 1992 and 2002 Earth Summits and analyses the interpretive themes used in the portrayal of climate change and wider environmental issues. He argues that between 1992 and 2002 the framing of the environment as a collective good threatened by consumption and economic growth had been replaced by the portrayal of the environment as an economic cost needing to be balanced against other opportunities and priorities within this coverage. He suggests that the master frame of the early 1990s in which environmentalism was depicted as a common and integrating concern had in the 2002 reportage been replaced with a frame that emphasises the contested nature of environmentalist claims, depicting nature as resilient and questioning the wisdom of prioritising climate change as an area requiring action. Adopting a somewhat wider temporal horizon, Jeppe Læssøe focuses on the reframing of citizen participation in Danish environmental politics from the 1970s to the present. He investigates how in Denmark the relationship between citizen involvement and environmental policy has changed over the decades. Based on empirical research on *the mediating agents*, i.e. those who have tried to involve citizens in environmental issues and sustainable development, Læssøe identifies a number of stages through which a *post-ecologist* approach to participation has gradually taken shape. This transformation, Læssøe argues, has not been strategically promoted by particular actors, but has come about in an inclusive process in which environmentalists themselves have played an active part.

These two pieces are followed by a set of three contributions which focus on different varieties of symbolic politics. Stirred by the contradiction between the mainstreamed castigation of *merely symbolic* eco-politics and the firm resolve of advanced consumer democracies to defend the core principles of democratic consumer capitalism, Ingolfur Blühdorn undertakes a meta-critique of the critical discourse of symbolic politics. He argues that a comprehensive cultural shift which he conceptualises as the *post-ecologist turn* is responsible not only for a fundamental transformation of the ways in which late-modern societies frame and process their environmental problems, but also for the exhaustion of *authentic* eco-politics which, by implication, renders the critique of *merely symbolic* politics questionable. Blühdorn develops the concept of *simulative politics* as a more appropriate conceptualisation of late-modern eco-politics and suggests that practices of simulative politics are a key strategy by which late-modern societies are trying to sustain what is known to be unsustainable.

Further elaborating on the issue of symbolic politics, Jens Newig focuses on symbolic environmental legislation, which is widely held responsible for the absence of really effective environmental policy. Using two pieces of environmental legislation in Germany as empirical case studies, Newig identifies a series of external factors which are conducive to the production of primarily symbolic laws, and argues that such legislation must not be understood as wilfully deceiving citizens, but can also be read as reflecting a certain readiness of citizens to be deceived. Thus, the incidence of symbolic legislation is

indicative of practices of societal self-deception. Susan Baker in turn looks at symbolic politics at the EU level, highlighting the discrepancy between the EU's declared commitment to the goal of SD and its policy practice which is determined by the paradigm of ecological modernisation (EM). Baker elaborates on the distinction between SD and EM and suggests that the EU's symbolic commitment to SD contributes to the construction of the Union's identity and external image as a green global actor whilst permitting economic considerations to subordinate eco-political interests.

Emma Hughes then analyses print media coverage of the GM debate in the UK through a combination of textual analysis of press coverage and interviews with editors, campaigners and GM companies. Her contribution traces how these multiple circuits of communication symbolically structure the GM debate around traditional notions of the nation despite widespread knowledge of trans-boundary gene flows. The persistence of the modernist notion of the nation as a closed system maintains established notions of British identity rather than the renegotiation of identity central to theories of reflexive modernisation. This societal self-deception is co-constructed by all the parties to this issue, including Friends of the Earth campaigners, suggesting that the creation of *apparent* certainty is preferable to acknowledging global complexity.

Bron Szerszynski focuses on the potentials for moving beyond the paradigm of post-ecologist politics. He argues that irony is a necessary means of both engaging with and overcoming the post-ecologist predicament. Irony is presented as an indispensable means of transcending the familiar juxtaposition of enlightenment rationality and romanticism associated with environmental debates. Szerszynski posits a cultural modernism which acknowledges the contributions of both conscious human action and forces beyond conscious control in structuring both the human condition and human–environment relationships. Irony, mounted from this perspective, becomes both a resource for environmental campaigning and a means of redefining an environmental politics which neither over-rationalises nor over-romanticises human natures.

Ian Welsh finally examines the re-emergence of *civilisation* and *terror* as central rhetorical categories within political discourse in the post 9/11 era. He argues that this represents both a resurrection and an extension of previous uses. Through a consideration of US and UK measures to defend civilisation against external and internal enemies, Welsh argues that sections of the environmental movement aligned with the alternative globalisation movement become subjects of this discourse. This enemy within is targeted by security services because of the mobilisation of symbolic stakes corrosive of both global and national institutions orchestrating the neo-liberal axiomatic central to unsustainability.

Thus the contributions to this volume are a first attempt to capture very different dimensions of the politics of unsustainability. They are beginning to map out the tasks an environmental sociology for the post-ecologist era might have to perform, but more than anything, they are an invitation to

environmental sociologists to reach beyond the dominant service provider mentality and embark on a research programme that restores the discipline's academic and eco-political integrity.

Notes

1. Note that even the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) identified the recognition of limits to growth and a shift of focus away from the insatiable needs of western consumers and towards the fundamental needs of human beings worldwide as the constitutive principles of sustainable development.
2. See Blühdorn in this volume for a much more comprehensive version.
3. McKibben was referring to North America. In Europe the last areas of *wilderness* had obviously been conquered at a much earlier point in time. But the significance of McKibben's book was that it facilitated the reflection on the end of nature within a context sensitised by a broad societal discussion of environmental deterioration.
4. The same argument can obviously be made for environmental problems which are widely believed to be *objectively existing out there*. The recognition that these problems always have the status of social constructions rather than ontological realities can, of course, easily be misinterpreted as the denial of major anthropogenic environmental change, but it remains a fact that what environmental politics negotiates are issues which *appear* as problematic from particular social perspectives, but which are not problematic *in themselves* (Blühdorn, 2000: 40–8; 2004: 41–3).
5. Late-modern identity construction arguably takes place first and foremost *within* the confines of the system of consumer capitalism and largely relies on the means this system holds available (primarily acts of consumption). This contrasts sharply with the modernist – and the ecologist – tradition which saw identity construction as a matter of creating and developing spaces *outside* the established system. It was only in *opposition* to the *wrong modernity* that authentic identity and life and the categories of the natural could be acquired or reinstated.
6. In the sense that they are turning into central tools of ecological modernisation, technological innovation, green consumerism, etc. are in fact regarded as indispensable.
7. This comparison does not mean to brush over the obvious differences between Lomborg's project of denying any eco-political urgency and the project of ecological modernisation to use technological and managerial innovation in order to make environmental improvement economically profitable.
8. This rather reductionist perspective on and assessment of US environmentalism clearly ignores the wide spectrum of environmental and environment-related movements which are not represented by the mainstream environmental NGOs.
9. It could however be argued that eco-political movements in certain European countries like the UK encountered aggressive neo-conservatism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and that this encounter was central in the following reconfiguration of radical grassroots movements.
10. The associated networks include environmentally orientated initiatives but environmentalism as a prioritised movement is not credible within this constellation.
11. Of course, any attempt to make a watertight distinction between these categories will remain subject to inescapable limitations, but for environmental sociology it is still imperative to at least try to separate the two.

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