

# A Cultural Account of Ecological Democracy

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## **Abstract:**

*In the debate around ecological democracy, a pivotal point of contention has long been the question why democracy should actually be expected, as some claim, to deliver (more) ecological outcomes. This point is empirical as well as conceptual: It is difficult to conceive why voters would support any policies that – as is often (perceived to be) the case with environmental legislation – would leave them worse off; whilst democracy conceptually must remain open to all outcomes rather than being tied to any particular agenda ex ante. Yet both empirically and conceptually, the nature and extent of this key puzzle has always hinged on the particular definitions used. This paper re-considers the link between democracy and ecological sustainability from a cultural angle: I argue that conceiving of both sustainability and democratisation as essentially cultural transformations resolves the puzzle and thus makes a renewed case for ecological democracy. Only as cultural processes – the creation of new meanings of sustainable prosperity in people’s everyday lives, and a culturally rather than institutionally based form of democratisation – can these transformations be deep-seated rather than superficial, and thus self-perpetuating rather than merely enforced.*

## **Keywords:**

Ecological democracy, sustainability, democracy, culture, meaning-making

## **Acknowledgements:**

I would like to thank the organisers and participants of the workshop “Ecological Democracy – Always Greener on the Other Side?” at the University of Sydney in February 2017 for the stimulating discussions and valuable feedback, especially David Schlosberg, Karin Bäckstrand, and Jonathan Pickering. My own attendance and my work on this article was made possible with the financial support of the Economic and Social Research Council for the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (ESRC grant no. ES/M010163/1), which is gratefully acknowledged.

## Introduction

What are the political foundations of an ecologically sustainable society? In particular, can – or must – it be democratic? This question has long been discussed in a range of different literatures. Empirical political science has sought to establish the causal link between democracy and environmental performance of nation states; political philosophy has addressed the question of the congruency of ‘green’ and democratic values; and political theorists have applied the more recent surge of democratic innovations to the governance of environmental sustainability. At the same time, green parties around the world typically endorse grassroots forms of democracy as part of their fundamental commitments; and in recent years, new participatory practices and commitments to transparency, accountability and inclusion have become commonplace in environmental governance in particular. Yet despite much scholarly commitment to endorse and prove a link between democracy and ecological sustainability, a key puzzle has remained that questions its possibility both conceptually and empirically: Conceptually, how can democracy be tied to a specific outcome *ex ante*? Likewise, empirically, why would people actually demand environmental policies that leave them (materially) worse off?

Despite their long history, these questions are now more relevant than ever. While it used to be a topic mainly for philosophers and green activists, the increasing urgency of environmental threats such as climate change has propelled it into the public-political arena, with a growing number of voices sympathising with top-down, authoritarian responses to environmental threats over the former association of environmentalism with principled democratic commitments (Beeson 2010). Although promising empirical accounts of stronger environmental commitment in democratic contexts (e.g., Neumayer 2002) as well as a surge of innovative participatory approaches to democratic environmental governance (e.g., Bäck-

strand et al. 2010, 12-3; Baber and Bartlett 2005, 28) go a long way towards refuting such arguments, the strongest possible response – applying as it does as a matter of principle rather than empirical contingency – would be a *conceptually necessary* link between democracy and ecological sustainability.

Therefore, this paper sheds new light on the unresolved puzzles of ecological democracy not through practice-based case studies, but as an abstract conceptual account.<sup>1</sup> I argue that the decisive link between democracy and sustainability lies in the nature of both as essentially *cultural* processes. Although the concept of culture is often equated with more or less fixed, homogeneous values across societies, recent anthropology stresses the creative, even subversive potential that inheres in dynamic practices of ‘meaning-making’ (Spillman 2014; Carriere 2014) – an account of culture that remains alert towards cultural imposition and structural power dynamics (Bourdieu 2010), yet still also sees room within the cultural realm for individual agency and bottom-up reflective processes. This opens up a pertinent new angle on as value-guided a vision as ecological democracy. It brings to light that democracy and sustainability may not presuppose each other when defined in fixed, institutional terms, which rightly give rise to the two plausibility puzzles. Yet once it is recognised that both are processes situated in the realm of cultural meanings, a new potential avenue for a democratic approach to sustainability opens up, in which it is precisely the open-endedness of democratic engagement that makes popular demand for sustainability possible in the first place, and then constitutes sustainability in the long run. Therefore, this cultural perspective on both resolves the underlying puzzle, and suggests a new vision of ecological democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> A different, but posterior, question would then be *what form* of democracy can be linked to ecological sustainability. It would go beyond the scope of this paper to review the literature specifically on deliberative (Dryzek 2000; Meadowcroft 2004; Baber and Bartlett 2005; Lövbrand and Khan 2010), participatory (Bulkeley and Mol 2003; Stirling 2009), and network, partnership and stakeholder (Bäckstrand 2006; Glasbergen et al. 2007) theories, to name just a few, in great detail; rather, what I engage with here is the more abstract conceptual standing of democracy according to a general liberal definition, such as Dahl’s (2006). However, towards the end of the paper, I do offer some further reflection on what more specific form democracy must take to be able to fulfil the role advocated in the discussion.

Without understanding these underlying cultural dynamics, on the other hand, new democratic practices in environmental governance may well achieve many local successes, but cannot tap into the broader societal value change needed for a compelling vision of sustainability – and thus, in the same vein, a definitive refutation of the eco-authoritarian agenda.

To develop this argument, the next section first retraces the conceptual debate around ecological democracy, arguing that democracy and ecological aims are incompatible only when the latter are defined as the specific substantive outcomes ascribed to the ecologist ideology. The following section thus introduces a new conception of sustainability as a necessarily inclusive and dynamic process, whose normative value lies in the meanings that people attach to it. Based on this account, the subsequent section then develops the main argument: that sustainability, in line with democracy, is itself an open-ended process, which consists not only in certain material parameters but also in a shift in meanings. As such, it can only (though still will not necessarily) evolve through a genuine *cultural* transformation as opposed to a managerial imposition of outcomes *against* what people consider meaningful to them. This prompts a closer look at how cultural ‘meaning-making’ occurs in societies. Drawing on novel insights from cultural sociology and social psychology, I show how different contexts have the potential to shape these crucial processes in both promising and problematic directions, and conclude that it is therefore precisely the openness and diverse engagement only democracy facilitates that is not just important for, but itself constitutive of sustainability.

### **Ecological Democracy: The Unresolved Paradox**

Democracy has long been regarded as ‘one of the hallmarks’ of green theory (Latta 2007, 378), yet the link between the two has also remained contested. On the one hand, Robert Goodin (1992) questioned the conceptual coherence of democratic procedure and green out-

comes; on the other, empirical findings have been mixed (Ward 2008). Thus, despite continued enthusiasm and innovation in practice (Bäckstrand et al. 2010), the fundamental question of ecological democracy remains: Can, and indeed *must*, ecological ends be tied to democracy – or are the two in fact incompatible?

The conceptual problem identified by Goodin arose as the green movement, with a strong commitment to grassroots democracy, began to inspire political philosophers in the emerging subfield of green political theory (Wong 2016, 137-8). The commitment in practice to democratic procedures, Goodin noted, is an inconsistency within the green ideology, for

‘to advocate democracy is to advocate procedures, to advocate environmentalism is to advocate substantive outcomes: what guarantee can we have that the former procedures will yield the latter outcomes?’ (Goodin 1992, 168).

Thus, those defending ecologism as a substantive and thus ‘pre-political’ ideology could not simultaneously endorse democracy as a green principle in itself, which conceptually implies an openness to all possible outcomes it might yield (Arias-Maldonado 2007, 234; see also Mason 1997; Saward 1993). Even if greens in practice – whether in the movement, in parties, or in their visions of ecologically sustainable societies – happen to endorse grassroots democracy, this does not mean that ecologism can be *conceptually* linked to democracy as a necessary political foundation (Goodin 1996, 835).

Responses to this puzzle were, broadly speaking, twofold. On the one hand, some theorists defended democracy as a green value in itself by deriving it from nature. For example, Andrew Dobson derives ‘natural’ norms of equality, toleration, stability and democracy from the fundamental interdependence characterising ecological phenomena (Dobson 2000, 22). This makes democracy a green value in itself, and thus a part of the substantive ecological programme as opposed to a merely instrumental procedure. This response has been largely refuted as unconvincing, however; for it seems just as plausible to see hierarchical

and aggressive norms in nature as it is to see democracy and egalitarianism as ‘natural’, to the point that ‘just about every human political ideology and political-economic system has at one time or another been justified as consistent with nature’ (Dryzek 2000, 146; see also Seward 1993, 69).

On the other hand, theorists argued democracy must be committed to maintaining the preconditions of its own existence, the precondition *par excellence* being ecological sustainability (Smith 2003, 105). Thus, in the same way as a substantive commitment to (say) equality does not contradict the open-endedness of democratic procedures, so is sustainability already implied by a commitment to democracy itself, rather than constituting a ‘rival’ agenda. This response is plausible, but changes the nature of what is at stake. Rather than defending democracy as a part of ecologism *as a substantive ideology* (Dobson 2000), it highlights ecological sustainability as a meta-value that transcends any ideological disagreement or predetermination (Arias-Maldonado 2007, 246). This means moving away from substantive green values, such as defending the value of nature for its own sake, towards a consideration of sustainability as an intrinsically good and necessary ‘meta condition’ for human societies (which *might* include intrinsic valuing of nature as what supports human survival, too [Westra 1993, 125] – though in others’ particular interpretations might not). Indeed, a concern for ‘sustainability’ as such an overarching goal for human societies has by now largely replaced green theory’s earlier ‘radical dogmatism’ around nature’s values (Arias-Maldonado 2007, 234).

Next to the green theoretical literature, and indeed mostly from this new angle, evolved also an empirical literature seeking to prove a link between democracy and ecological outcomes (e.g., Midlarsky 1998; Neumayer 2002; Ward 2008). Examining existing liberal democracies, these studies see democracy as necessary for sustainability in that it allows for popular demand for a clean environment as a public good to be voiced through political

channels (Ward 2008, 387). Similarly, a broad literature focusing on participatory and deliberative democracy suggests involving citizens in these new modes of governance can bring out more public-spirited attitudes and environmental commitment in people, thus resolving the ‘procedure versus outcome’ dilemma (Bäckstrand et al. 2010, 5-6; Lövbrand and Khan 2010, 51-2). Yet, so far at least, these add to, but do not replace the liberal representative character of democracy at the broad societal level. At this level, the literature arguing *against* democracy holds precisely the opposite view: that polities committed to liberalism and democracy would never be able to resolve issues such as resource scarcity, for people would never voluntarily demand policies that leave them worse off. For instance, Robert Heilbroner suggested the individualistic, selfish and profit-driven character of liberal industrial societies means rationally acting people will not be able to avert environmental catastrophe or handle any economic downturn required to avert it, and so a form of government ‘capable of rallying obedience far more effectively than would be possible in a democratic setting’ would be the only option (Heilbroner 1974, 110). Therefore, the only conceivable form of governance able to navigate the sustainability imperative would be a kind of ‘benevolent dictator’; a steward or guardian with the powers to push through undesirable policies when citizens would not have democratically demanded them (Ophuls 1977). Even though some empirical literature has been successful at proving a positive impact of democracy on ecological outcomes, overall the findings have been mixed and hinge on the specific variables used (Ward 2008, 388); and, if anything, the likelihood of the demos demanding ecological policies seems bound to *decrease* the more severe and thus costly environmental crises become in the future. Indeed, the eco-authoritarian argument now appears to be gaining new ground in the wake of the climate crisis, in both theory and practice (Beeson 2010; Shahar 2015). For instance, David Shearman and Joseph Smith argue liberal democracy cannot ‘grasp’ the extent of the climate crisis (Shearman and Smith 2007, 1), whose resolution thus necessitates new authoritarian

government models in which technocratic elites, as found for instance in Singapore, override democracy (Shearman and Smith 2007, 124-6).

The problem, then, with ‘proving’ an empirical link between democracy and ecological sustainability is that undertaking research based on past or even present-day data says little about how much this link will hold in the face of more severe future crises. The more ‘painful’ environmental policies are seen to become for citizens – for instance, necessitating material cutbacks, if not moving away from materialism altogether – the more doubtful becomes the popular demand argument for democracy.

Hence, these are two sides to the fundamental puzzle of ecological democracy. Conceptually, an open-ended procedure like democracy could not be tied to particular substantive outcomes like ecological sustainability; yet if democracy did remain so open, why should voters be expected to demand outcomes that leave them materially worse off (worse off, that is, according to current widespread values that prioritise short-term gain over long-term safety [Westra 1993, 129])? Despite its popularity as a vision, there can be a democratic form of sustainability only if it is possible to treat democracy as a fully open-ended procedure and *still* expect it to bring about sustainable outcomes; or, conversely, if a reason can be found why democracy is a necessary component of sustainability *even if* no specific outcomes are prescribed in advance.

I argue that it is for both of these sides to the puzzle that the right ‘meta’ conception of sustainability – as opposed to traditional substantive ‘ecologism’ – is the answer. The conceptual puzzle is resolved by a conception of sustainability as an intrinsic and universal rather than ideological and particular norm of human societies, which presupposes an open-ended political system like democracy precisely because of its own dynamic and open-ended nature. The empirical puzzle is resolved, I argue below, by conceptualising sustainability as distinct from mere survival. According to the definition I put forward, beyond the mere physical sur-



vival of individual persons, sustainability denotes the unending construction of future society that is normatively *meaningful* to its members (Robinson 2004, 379-80). This implies the heart of sustainability to be the possibility (and necessity) of a *cultural* transformation – in the sense, based on the above definition, of a transformation of meanings – which in turn suggests sustainability does not come from imposing certain outcomes against citizens’ democratic wills, but rather from citizens’ transforming what they find valuable. As I argue below, this is what ties sustainability to democracy: namely to the critical, reflective and inclusive processes that are the precondition for a vibrant and open sphere of precisely such ‘meaning-making’.

Given the emergent return of the eco-authoritarian agenda in the context of climate change (Beeson 2010; Shahar 2015), revisiting this question is now ever more acute. Whereas in the past there was ‘real-world’ commitment to green democracy yet ambiguity at the theoretical level, the current weakening of such ‘real-world’, principled commitment to democracy even amongst ‘green’ academic circles (Shearman and Smith 2007) demands revisiting the conceptual argument as the strongest possible refutation of this agenda: showing democracy to be not just an ideologically desirable, but a causally necessary component part of any vision of sustainability. The starting point for this argument is to shift the attention from ecologism to sustainability, the conceptualisation of which I turn to in the next section.

## **Sustainability**

Whereas ‘ecologism’ styled itself as a distinct ideology and thus a substantive programme (Dobson 2000), ‘sustainability’ conceptually only implies the continued existence of human societies in the face of ecological change, even though it has been defined in numerous substantive ways that go beyond this conceptual core (Thiele 2013). Not only does this render the concept non-ideological – to the point that, today, ‘nobody seems inclined to say a word

*against* sustainability anymore' (Arias-Maldonado 2012, 1) –, but it is also misrepresented as a set of specific outcomes that either occur or don't occur. Rather, sustainability is more plausibly conceived as a never-ending process within which each specific state is only a temporary step towards what is essentially a moving target (Robinson 2004, 381; Thiele 2013, 9). On the one hand, as a response to the limits and threats imposed by socio-ecological change, sustainability deals with an underlying phenomenon that is itself in constant change. On the other, deriving its normative value from being more than mere survival, it cannot be separated from the opinions and meanings different people attach to it at different times (Robinson 2004).

The first aspect, that sustainability is a moving target, is often misrepresented in both scholarly and policy circles, in which sustainability is typically defined as a set of indicators. Today's most commonly used scientific variant is the framework of planetary boundaries (Rockström et al. 2009). Although there are indeed such specific 'boundaries' in the form of thresholds or tipping points which can set in motion new feedback loops, defining sustainability in this way reduces it to a technical matter of keeping within certain ecological parameters, when the real challenge, given 'the dynamic and unstable character of the Earth system', is more profound than this (Dryzek 2016a, 940). Ecological processes are fundamentally complex, unpredictable, and intricately interlinked with equally complex social processes, all of which unfold a more explosive potential precisely the more one tries to control them (Holling and Meffe 1996). Thus, rather than being a purely technical matter of meeting certain indicators, sustainability is also politically negotiated (Rametsteiner et al. 2011). Given its complexity, it demands continuous reflexivity and openness (Dryzek 2016a). The momentary achievement of a specific indicator alone says little about whether this was the result of sustainable evolutionary patterns or, in contrast, a mere coincidence or the result of relocating the source of the problem elsewhere in time or space (Robinson 2004, 379). As

such, sustainability cannot be defined as, or ascertained in, a single moment. Rather, it manifests itself over time, in response to changing socio-ecological processes; it is itself a never-ending process as opposed to an end state.

The second aspect, the inherent normativity of sustainability, likewise reveals substantive indicators as insufficient. Similar to scientific thresholds, policy indicators of sustainability are typically defined in specific metrics, grouped into the main categories of environmental, economic and social indicators (e.g., UNEP 2012). While these do not indicate ecological tipping points, but mere guidelines, they equally suggest a managerial approach to sustainability governance, allowing little consideration for its ethical and normative dimensions. Yet as an intrinsically valuable end for societies, sustainability goes beyond mere physical survival, for which certain tangible, technical parameters would be sufficient. Rather, it must then stand for a new form of prosperity; a dynamic *normative* vision of what a meaningful society can look like in the context of socio-ecological constraints (Jackson 2017). As such, material ecological conditions still matter as well, for flourishing ecosystems provide a part of the preconditions for a meaningful range of possible normative visions to be available in the first place (whereas severely degraded ecosystems restrict such options through threats and scarcities). Yet sustainability still could not be achieved by material-ecological solutions alone, but also *consists in* the normative meanings imbued in it. As John Robinson (2004, 379-80) puts it:

‘[S]ustainability is ultimately an issue [not just of science but] of human behavior, and negotiation over preferred futures, under conditions of deep contingency and uncertainty. It is an inherently normative concept, rooted in real world problems and very different sets of values and moral judgements.’

As a normatively valuable end for societies, sustainability constitutes a dynamic process of continually (re-)constructing not just a biologically possible, but also socially worthwhile and meaningful future. As such, it cannot but be discursively shaped by all those it concerns; that

is, inclusively and democratically by all members of the society in question (Arias-Maldonado 2007, 246-7).

If sustainability is defined in this way, introducing open-endedness and normativity as two essential dimensions (alongside, that is, the material-ecological conditions the term ‘sustainability’ might usually more narrowly be associated with), both sides of the ecological democracy puzzle can be shown to be mistaken. The conceptual puzzle arises only if sustainability is defined as a specific set of substantive outcomes that clash with democracy as an open-ended procedure. Yet defining sustainability in substantive terms contradicts the nature of the socio-ecological phenomena it is the response to: It is not just democracy, *but also ecology itself* that is incompatible with the imposition of fixed outcome desiderata (Holling and Meffe 1996). The empirical puzzle, on the other hand, is given further nuance. If sustainability can be defined as a process an essential part of which is the creation of new normative meanings, it has at its heart a possibility (and, for those societies that do need or seek to enhance their sustainability, a necessity) of such change in meanings. In fact, it is then only through such a *normative* transformation that sustainability can evolve. As such, sustainability *cannot* be forcefully imposed against people’s wishes; rather, it consists precisely in a meaningful and thus self-driven transformation of their wishes in response to socio-ecological learning. It is only when sustainability is (too narrowly) defined in a managerial manner as a set of purely technical indicators that it could be ‘imposed’ in an undemocratic fashion – yet this would then contradict its essence as a vision of flourishing that is meaningful to the society.

Take the example of material consumerism – in the sense of a ‘continually expanding material paradise’ as the prevailing ‘vision of prosperity’ (Jackson 2017, 47). The unsustainability of a growth-based economy has led some to suggest that sustainability can only be achieved through the suppression of consumerist mindsets and the forceful imposition of al-

ternative behaviour (Heilbroner 1974). This is incompatible with democracy; and so democracy, according to this view, must be constrained or abolished, for specific outcomes to be prioritised instead (Shearman and Smith 2007). Yet even though this might lead to improvements on certain outcome indicators, seeing these outcomes themselves as tantamount to the achievement of sustainability leaves the underlying cause of the problem – the collective meanings attached to consumerist lifestyles – out of the conceptual picture. Inasmuch as sustainability as a normative vision is composed not just of certain biophysical properties, but also of values and meanings, it emerges (but can equally be undermined) by change in those meanings. For instance, if consumerist norms are found to cause unsustainability, sustainability as a characteristic of a society would imply a self-reflexive learning process through which the norms change towards ‘an alternative hedonism’ not primarily based on material consumption (Jackson 2017, 126). Yet were this to occur (which, crucially, cannot be forced or engineered), and new meanings replaced the materialist norms, it would no longer imply an undemocratic imposition, for the shift would then be meaningful to citizens themselves.

Hence, my argument is that from the starting point of sustainability as a universal, holistic and inherently normative concept, it is possible to develop an account of sustainability as a cultural process – a process of ‘meaning-making’ – which would resolve the puzzle underlying ecological democracy. For Anthropology, the study of culture, all individual and collective life is imbued with meanings and values, which drive people’s specific actions and behaviour by providing a ‘*meaningful* basis for action’ (Kashima 2014, 81, emphasis added). If at present it is consumerist values that give meaning to people’s lives, yet this is unsustainable, sustainability would be enhanced through a shift towards new sources of meaning. Yet genuine meaning cannot be readily fabricated or imposed; if it could, that very fact would simultaneously erode the subjective meaningfulness central to the concept’s essential normativity. Hence, it is only as a cultural and thus self-driven, rather than enforced or engineered,

change in behaviour that a transformation of what is seen as meaningful can evolve. Taking the cultural dimension of sustainability seriously alongside its ecological and material conditions thus offers a new pathway not just out of the ecological democracy puzzle, but towards a more comprehensive, inclusive and deep-seated politics of sustainability overall.

### **Sustainability as a Cultural Transformation**

This shifts the key question behind sustainability away from ‘What are the specific indicators that we need to accomplish?’ (implying, for some, ‘by whatever means necessary’), and towards ‘What determines the meanings people attach to their behaviour, as well as openness and change therein?’. Since meanings constitute the realm of culture, sustainability as open-ended change in what is seen as meaningful is tantamount to a process of cultural transformation. ‘Culture’ is here understood in the modern anthropological sense of dynamic practices of ‘meaning-making’ (Spillman 2001; Carriere 2014); a definition that explicitly distances itself from outdated accounts of culture as either distinguishing societies on a hierarchical ‘ladder of civilisation’ (Stocking 1968) or ‘cultural nobility’ within one society (Bourdieu 2010), or as a *homogeneous* set of patterns of behaviour through which societies achieve social coordination (Geertz 1973). Given the multitude of ways in which culture has been defined over the years and in different disciplines, this inevitably leaves aside other dimensions of culture; and it is clear that all cultural processes are profoundly complex, interacting as they do with diverse tangible as well as intangible societal structures and institutions. Still, what I hope to show is that this particular angle has important new insights to offer for democratic sustainability governance, which are worth exploring further.

As a practice-based account, meaning-making is significant at the individual level as the process by which people construct their life stories and identities (Fivush et al. 2011). Yet at the collective level, thus endowing otherwise meaningless events and actions with meaning

also continually re-creates the social reality (Spillman 2014, 91): Meanings ‘construct what we take to be real’ (Kuper 1999, 72), and are thus central to all human experience. For this, culture need not be conceptualised as a homogeneous whole that ‘structures’ and ‘organises’ the otherwise chaotic life. Rather, we must ‘think of worlds of meaning as *normally* being contradictory, loosely integrated, contested, mutable, and highly permeable’ (Sewell 1999, 53). As meaning-making, culture is thus not a fixed ‘inheritance’ that determines our personalities and behaviour. As an open, fluid realm of meaning-making that is shaped by everyone in society, it has a potential precisely for *transforming* social reality: It

‘can [then] be regarded as a system of symbolic meanings that are in a constant process of being invented ... a *transformative* process in which the meanings we impute to culture in turn shape the way individuals think and act’ (Zhou 2005, 37, emphasis added).

As such, these processes of meaning-making (partially) determine the space of the imaginable and hence (politically as much as individually) doable in the course of evolution of a society – including with regard to sustainable lifestyles.

According to this definition, it is thus in the realm of culture where new values related to sustainability can emerge, and lead to societal change in a ‘bottom-up’ rather than imposed fashion. However, it should be stressed from the start, this is only a potential: Not all cultural change is self-driven and productive like this. What studies of culture have also long shown are the complex ways in which cultural meanings and symbols reproduce hierarchy and inequality in societies (Bourdieu 2010). In this form, they would still imply imposition rather than democracy, and a narrow reproduction of the status quo rather than societal openness towards new futures. Therefore, the potential within the cultural realm for a democratic change towards sustainability is not a given, but hinges on the existence of a corresponding independent and creative space in society in which such new starting points can indeed arise,

and dynamically challenge cultural symbols of a narrower, more fixed, and more hierarchical sort.

However, given the centrality, as I have argued, of normative meanings for sustainability, it is worth exploring where this potential lies. Such an account of sustainability as a cultural transformation then stands for reflexive, open-ended processes of meaning-making that transform individual orientations as well as the collective social reality in such a way as to make sustainability a meaningful and hence self-driven vision. As argued above, without such openness to transformation, a society cannot respond to the dynamic nature of ecological processes; and without normatively driven meaning-making, societies might *survive* specific, momentary ecological threats, or change certain practices superficially or contingently, but could not achieve sustainability in the relevant fundamental sense. Yet when meaning-making does occur in societies, it can be a powerful instrument of sustainable change. Whilst belief in the impossibility of change can itself perpetuate a certain status quo to the benefit of vested interests, visioning as the exact opposite practice has the power to expand the very frameworks of our perceptions and tangible options (Böker 2017a). Because what is at stake are not just new technical options or possibilities, but the meanings that ‘shape how individuals think and act’, cultural change in this sense – unlike more directed or sporadic governance innovations – touches their intrinsic motivations.

For example, if a growthless, yet still prosperous society becomes *imaginable*, this new imagination can be what transforms the widespread meaning of ‘prosperity’ from conventional material growth into other, non-material conceptions; and if the latter then become regarded as meaningful, this would unleash an innate drive towards developing new options that realise these new meanings over previous priorities. Conversely, only if a genuine cultural transformation can be said to have taken place – that is, if the meanings people attach to sustainability-related goals, behaviours and visions have changed – is a societal transforma-



tion towards sustainability supported from the bottom up, and hence self-driven rather than in need of authoritarian enforcement.

In reality, things are of course not that simple, and not all cultural transformations are the same: Cultural change *can* enhance openness and sustainability, but, as highlighted above, it can also indicate the exact opposite as an instrument at the hands of powerful manipulators and entrenched hierarchies. Thus, what will be crucial to the possibility of sustainability as an inherently democratic, inclusive, and thus genuinely meaningful transformation are cultural processes that fit these same descriptors. The following subsections, by shedding new light on how cultural meaning-making ‘works’ and how it relates to political structures, develop this necessary nuance.

#### *Meaning-making practices as cultural transformation*

The questions how exactly society-wide meanings are constructed, and to what effect, have been studied by the field of cultural sociology (Maines 2000); whilst social psychology considers the intra- and interpersonal processes that drive this at the individual level (Kashima 2014). At the individual level, Kashima (2014) explains that cultural ideas and practices are generated ‘largely randomly’ and are ‘transmitted in situ while people engage in their ordinary, everyday activities in their socio-cultural niche’ (Kashima 2014, 81). As we exchange information in day-to-day communicative interactions, we also always implicitly transmit meanings, ‘humanising’ the information by attaching value to it such that it is made relevant or meaningful in relation to ‘how to do things’ (Kashima 2014, 82). Since this happens constantly and dynamically, a given culture is never fully fixed; rather, understanding the unfolding reality as composed of processes of meaning-making emphasises life as ‘liminal, necessarily uncertain and filled with a range of possibilities’ (Beckstead 2015, 381). Within the normal everyday interactions that implicitly always create, recreate, and transmit cultural mean-

ings (Kashima 2014, 82-3), it is precisely situations in which a meaning is not yet shared or difficult to understand and accept that *new* meaning-making occurs. In other words, it is *disruption* of the common routines, or uncertainty about the sharedness of culture, that ‘appears to be critical for a potential for cultural transformation’ (Kashima 2014, 91). If this is so, new discursive engagement between people might provide a social context in which new meanings can naturally arise, and contribute to the continued construction of the overarching social reality; yet the crucial question is then where (and with what intentions) the decisive ‘disruptions’ originate.

Indeed, sociologically, such meaning-constructions are significant in that they both create reality for people and have the potential, if they are closed and rigid rather than open, to *obstruct* them from seeing it (Glassner 2000, 591). In other words, the reality we perceive around us is nothing but our constructions of it; the meanings we assign our observations and events that occur. Yet at the same time, it is possible to spread certain constructions as a way to obscure what could otherwise be observed to be going on (Glassner 2000, 591). Therefore, it is important not just to understand how meanings are constructed, but to problematise this process to reveal potentially hidden or alternative meanings. While for some (Rancière 2010) the expressive and transformative potential of cultural change implies a space of resistance, for others (Bourdieu 2010) culture is a key instrument for the use of power. If the upshot is the potential of cultural processes to constitute either, the implication for sustainability is likewise an ambivalent picture: Cultural change driven by a genuine concern for a flourishing society meaningful to all, and within correspondingly open and inclusive politico-cultural spaces, is decisive for deep-seated sustainability; yet without such a context, there is a potential for the same processes to be instrumentalised in the opposite direction.

Thus, overall, it is important to understand the construction of meanings at different levels; such as locally through patterns of discourse (Glassner 2000, 592), through intersub-

jective communication (Kashima 2014), but also through large-scale cultural artefacts (Märtin 2012, 428). It is *both* face-to-face interactions between small groups of individuals that ‘provoke changes in structural conditions’ and larger-scale, deliberate influences via ‘news media, advocacy, political, and other organizations that concurrently alter both meanings and structural conditions’ (Glassner 2000, 592). Once created, cultural meanings are hugely influential in that they powerfully interact with political, economic and associational relationships in society, predetermining fates of oppression and privilege (Maines 2000, 579-80). In this form, cultural constructions close down rather than open up visions and pathways – typically in a way that benefits a dominant elite with vested interests. Recognising this, cultural sociology has increasingly turned to the situated, contextual study of cultural semiotics (Alexander et al. 2012, 6), making it possible to uncover difference, dissent and conflict, and the ways in which ‘meaning-making *struggles*’ (Spillman 2001, 7, emphasis added) play a role in spawning new, inclusive and thus more open processes of social change, like those constitutive of sustainability.

Hence, while new meanings are always created, what matters for sustainability is *what kinds* of settings and institutions shape *how* we create them. Even though meanings are constantly constructed ‘by the people, for the people’ (Carriere 2014, 272), there are some settings (and not others) that enable this to occur in the required open and normatively conscious (as opposed to manipulative and thus interested and closed-minded) ways. Having raised the possibility of a cultural sustainability politics precisely to tie it to democracy instead of imposition, it will be obvious that this is highly relevant for sustainability. As long as a particular meaning of ‘prosperity’ remains powerfully consequential, it perpetuates the political and economic structures to match it – such as liberal capitalism as the embodiment of a consumerist, growth-oriented understanding of ‘prosperity’ – and close off an inclusive and normatively driven search for meaningful alternatives. And yet, cultural meaning-making still

also has the decisive potential to resist just this, and transform the most deep-seated of societal structures through the innate openness of new meaning horizons.

Taken together, this makes the realm of culture a crucial contestatory space from which sustainability must be addressed. To facilitate a cultural transformation towards sustainability, it is vital to create the *general* spaces in which cultural meanings can be unmasked, challenged, contested and explored, as a precondition for the open emergence of new meanings that can then be reflected in a change in institutions. It is in this sense that ‘sustainability demands imagination’ (Thiele 2013, 5); it demands imaginative spaces of meaning-making so reflective as to prompt a ‘shift in how humans see the world’ (Giddings et al. 2001, 195; see also Baber and Bartlett 2005, 114-5). Given the intractability of the dominant materialist meanings, and the impossibility for genuine meaning to be simply engineered or forced, this can only be achieved through a deep reflexivity (Dryzek 2016a) in a vibrant, critical public sphere (Torgerson 1999).

#### *A new role of democracy*

Thus, it is cultural transformability as a meta-condition of sustainability that implies a necessity of democracy – albeit in a different role than the previous characterisation of democracy as just another ‘green value’ within the substantive programme of ecologism. For sustainability as an open and perpetual process of adaptation (rather than a specific ideology), the decisive political foundation is not that which brings about specific outcomes or a specific new narrative, but rather a suitable general cultural context; namely one in which meanings can evolve in an open and normatively driven way rather than cementing themselves structurally as a result of powerful interests seeking to inhibit any such change. Thus, it is crucial not just to advocate new processes of meaning-making as such, but to problematise who influences these with what effect, and to ensure that meanings are constantly challenged and

unmasked. It is easy to see that only democracy supports such a context: For maximum exchange and challenge, a *diverse* culture is important; for the more diverse the meanings and ideas that come together in societal processes, the more transformative processes are sparked, and cultural transformation is advanced. Likewise, access to such cultural processes must be *equal, fair and free*; for anything else would only lead to new imbalances that could disproportionately benefit those with an interest in the status quo, or other power effects. Since it is through narratives that meanings create powerful effects (Maines 2000, 580), it is the overall discursive space in society that is the relevant point of access. In short – critical, reflective meaning-making presupposes an open, *democratic* society.

Hence, from this perspective, democracy is necessary not because it realises sustainability as such, but as a key precondition for a healthy and vibrant *cultural* context that does so in a much more deep-seated manner. The role of democracy, in other words, shifts from one of facilitating or legitimating a certain set of outcomes, towards providing a foundation for cultural change towards sustainability. Democracy is necessary for this because it invites participation in a public dialogue in the first place; it ensures that everyone has an equal right to take part in shaping the public culture; and it makes cultural reflection rewarding for individuals, by ensuring it has political consequentiality. Moreover, if new cultural meanings are created through disruptions of common routines, the critical exchange of different perspectives that democracy facilitates is crucial.

However, at this point, a further complication arises. Because democracy is itself an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Dryzek 2016b), defining democracy in particular substantive terms – i.e., as one specific model – can make it a ‘consequential construction’ in itself that exerts power and perpetuates the status quo (Maines 2000, 580). To avoid this, democracy must itself also be imbued with such normative meaning as to motivate *continued* struggles for empowerment, and thus an ongoing ‘democratisation of democracy’ that continually

pushes even against its own boundaries (Giddens 2000). Crucially, because it is meanings that make empowerment meaningful and self-driven, democracy in this sense is then itself best conceived as a political culture rather than a procedure or formal-institutional construct (Böker 2017b). What matters is that a society is *normatively oriented* towards political values that promote critical questioning and inclusive dialogue out of a normative concern for a meaningful common future of all – that is, towards a vision of democratic sustainability.

## **Conclusion**

In the debate around ecological democracy, the key question has long been whether democracy or authoritarianism are better at (or, respectively, either necessary for, or in contradiction with) *producing* sustainability. Yet as an inherently dynamic as well as normative vision that concerns and thus includes all, the very meaning of ecological sustainability can neither be fixed, nor defined by some for others; rather, it relies on being normatively valuable – that is, *meaningful* – to all members of the society. As such, the fundamental puzzle of ecological democracy cannot only be resolved, but has actually never existed: For a sustainability that has no meaning as such is only an illusion of sustainability; yet one that does have this meaning no longer has to be imposed or enforced.

From the given starting point of *unsustainability*, then, key to creating a lasting foundation for sustainability is not the momentary realisation of certain substantive ecological values, but the facilitation of cultural transformability: an inclusive, open-ended process of normative meaning-making. Without such a process of new meaning-making, not only are there limits to how large a change can plausibly be enforced in people (such as by authoritarian means), but sustainability as a *normative* vision of a *meaningful* future could not emerge.

Affecting nothing less than individuals' identities and collectives' shared reality, however, cultural change is a hugely powerful phenomenon. The potential for powerful

agents in society to use cultural constructs to consolidate power structures is therefore not only disturbing, but problematic for sustainability as well: As a response to complex socio-ecological processes, sustainability consists in a fundamental openness to adapting to changing ecosystemic conditions, while any rigidity and narrow-mindedness only enhances the threat of more catastrophic shocks. Hence, it is not *any* meaning-making that creates sustainability; but only that which takes place in a context of utmost reflexivity, inclusiveness, critique and imagination. It is their unique creation of such a context, in turn, that makes democratic norms and structures key to sustainability governance. As itself a normative end rather than a substantively defined procedure, only democracy keeps open the maximum space for such critical and inclusive engagement – including, importantly, by self-reflexively questioning its own boundaries as well.

From this perspective, neither sustainability nor democracy can be merely put in place strategically, let alone guaranteed. Rather, they *both* hinge on the self-driven emergence of a certain cultural ethos. In this sense, sustainability does not just require democracy as a political foundation, but it *is* democracy (of the critical, self-reflexive variant). A critical discursive culture in itself contributes to the sustainability of the society; for it embodies the reflexivity that is the most fundamental characteristic of what makes a society sustainable in the most genuine sense: being able to adapt to changing constraints in a way that makes the new futures so created meaningful and deep-seated rather than merely enforced and thus superficial.

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