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Perspectives

How to cite:

Wagner, Felix. "A Culture of Sustainability." Commentary by Marcus Andreas. In: "Realizing Utopia: Ecovillage Endeavors and Academic Approaches," edited by Marcus Andreas and Felix Wagner, *RCC Perspectives* 2012, no. 8, 57–72.

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Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087

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Deutsches Museum 



Felix Wagner

A Culture of Sustainability

With commentary by Marcus Andreas

Introduction

Sustainability and societal change have long been topics of public debate. The German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) declared sustainability the focus of the year 2012, hosting various activities and events related to the subject.¹ Also, numerous research collaborations have emerged to tackle this topic.² The majority of these aim to provide technical solutions for the problem of climate change. But there are also other approaches. For example, since 1999, “socio-ecological research,” which aims to develop strategies for social sustainability by connecting ecological transformation with social justice and economic demands, has been a frequently sponsored approach.³ It appears, however, this socio-ecological perspective has not yet reached the more general public. According to a survey presented in *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (20 October 2011), 43 percent of the German population is familiar with the term “sustainability,” of which 18 percent have no understanding of its meaning and only 4 percent associate sustainability with a responsibility to future generations, alongside environmental protection. In other words, social aspects of sustainability were missing entirely from respondents’ understanding of the term. While one could interpret this as a result of an insufficient implementation of the United Nation’s Education for Sustainable Development initiative,⁴ it is also a reflection of how science and politics approach this topic. From a technical perspective, there are currently numerous promising initiatives to address climate change and promote the development of an ecologically sustainable society. However, in comparison, there is little research and knowledge concerning the possible structures for a

This essay was originally written in German and has been translated for *RCC Perspectives* by Rachel Shindelar. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of German sources are also the translator’s.

1 See <http://www.bmbf.de/en/17858.php>.

2 Such as FONA (Framework Programme Research for Sustainable Development), NaWis (Verbund für Nachhaltige Wissenschaft [Network for Sustainability Studies]), and EcoRnet (Ecological Research Network).

3 See <http://www.sozial-oekologische-forschung.org/>.

4 See <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/>.

society that is sustainable on all levels. In general, research focuses on single aspects of sustainability and not on the entirety of such a collective lifestyle.

How do the three pillars of sustainability—environment, economy, and society—come together in the daily routines of a society? At Research in Community we call this societal way of living a “culture of sustainability.” We are not alone in our use of this term and in this search for a viable communal lifestyle. As early as 2002, the German federal government wrote the following in a chapter entitled “Developing a Culture of Sustainable Development” from its national strategy for sustainable development:

Sustainable development is not simply the technocratic route to efficient methods of business, production that does [not] cause waste, and a healthy life. Technical innovations are important, but on their own they are not sufficient to act as the driving force for sustainable development. Sustainable development has a lot to do with the imaginative and creative vision of how we want to live in the future. In this sense, it is a creative task, which challenges the creative potential of our society on the basis of values, social models and our cultural tradition as a whole. Sustainable development does not simply mean the continuation of trends from the past. It invites us to leave the old beaten track and find new directions. Over and above the material constraints, the question of how we want to live in the future returns politics to the creative task and social discussion on this question to the crucial point at which sustainable development becomes relevant.⁵

Researchers at the Institute for Interventional Research and Cultural Sustainability in Austria have discussed and presented “concepts, perspectives, and positions” on the argument that “sustainability is a cultural question.”⁶ More and more advocates of the sustainable development model support the idea of adding “culture” as a fourth pillar to illustrate the connection between culture and sustainability.⁷ The tenor here is that,

5 German Federal Government, *Perspectives for Germany: Our Strategy for Sustainable Development* (Berlin: 2002), 21.

6 L. Krainer, ed., *Kulturelle Nachhaltigkeit: Konzepte, Perspektiven, Positionen* (Munich: oekom-Verlag, 2007).

7 V. Holz and U. Stoltenberg, “Mit dem kulturellen Blick auf den Weg zu einer nachhaltigen Entwicklung,” in *Die unsichtbare Dimension: Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung im kulturellen Prozess*, ed. G. Sorgo (Veinna: Forum Umweltbildung, 2011); M. Wehrspau and H. Schoemps, “Schwierigkeiten bei der Kommunikation von Nachhaltigkeit: Ein Problemaufriss,” in *Kultur—Kunst—Nachhaltigkeit: Die Bedeutung von Kultur für das Leitbild Nachhaltige Entwicklung*, eds. H. Kurt and B. Wagner (Bonn: Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft e.V. / Essen: Klartext, 2002), 43–57. cf. O. Parodi, G. Banse, and A. Schaffer, eds., *Wechselspiele: Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit: Annäherungen an ein Spannungsfeld* (Berlin: edition sigma, 2010).

with regard to sustainability, the aspect of “culture” is frequently overlooked, and that true societal change will require increased engagement with this topic.⁸ The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) emphasizes this in a chapter in its report from 1999, stating, “The environmental crisis is a cultural crisis.”⁹

To date, a universally accepted definition, which unambiguously clarifies what a culture of sustainability is and how it comes about, is lacking. This is not surprising, considering that such a definition ultimately requires the combination of two not-so-straightforward terms. The question of “culture” is entwined in a long conceptual history and discussion.¹⁰ And the term “sustainability” is so diffused that there is no real uniform understanding of it, and its use has become so ubiquitous that it has been referred to as “an empty word,”¹¹ as well as a “plastic concept”¹² or even an “elastic concept.”¹³ The elusiveness of the phrase is due in part to the fact that, while conceivable in theory, the concept of holistic sustainable development remains difficult to operationalize and the methodological implementation has so far achieved only mixed success.¹⁴

How RIC Understands and Uses “Culture of Sustainability”

Research in Community (RIC) (see essay by Wagner et al. on page 95) has given itself the goal of building a network to investigate and promote a culture of sustainability. This includes, of course, specifying and defining what is meant by a culture of sustain-

- 8 J. Kopfmüller, “From the Cultural Dimension of Sustainable Development to the Culture of Sustainable Development,” in *Sustainable Development: Relationships of Culture, Knowledge and Ethics*, eds. O. Parodi et al. (Karlsruhe: KIT Scientific Publishing, 2011), 44; Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung, *Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit*, 2001; German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), *Welt im Wandel: Gesellschaftsvertrag für eine Große Transformation*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: WBGU, 2011).
- 9 WBGU, *World in Transition: Conservation and Sustainable Use of the Biosphere* (London: Earthscan, 2001), 170.
- 10 Cf. A. Reckwitz, *Die Transformation der Kulturtheorien: Aktuelle Tendenzen der Kulturtheorien* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2006); R. Hauser and G. Banse, “Kultur und Kulturalität: Annäherung an ein vielschichtiges Konzept,” in Parodi et al., *Wechselspiele*, 21–41; and E. Boesch and J. Straub, “Kulturpsychologie: Prinzipien, Orientierungen, Konzeptionen,” in *Theorien und Methoden der kulturvergleichenden Psychologie*, eds. Trommsdorff and H.-J. Kornadt (Göttingen: Hogrefe, 2007), 27–95.
- 11 Renn et al., *Leitbild Nachhaltigkeit: Eine normativ-funktionale Konzeption und ihre Umsetzung* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007), 9.
- 12 P. Heintel, “Über Nachhaltigkeit: Geschichtsphilosophische Reflexionen,” in *Kulturelle Nachhaltigkeit: Konzepte, Perspektiven, Positionen*, ed. L. Krainer (Munich: oekom-Verlag, 2007), 29.
- 13 M. Vogt, “Konzept Nachhaltigkeit,” (lecture, Amerikahaus, Munich, Germany, November 2011), 1.
- 14 Cf. G. Bachmann, *Zehn Jahre Nachhaltigkeitsstrategie: Der lange Weg zur Langfristigkeit* (Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung, 2012); Kopfmüller, “From the Cultural Dimension of Sustainable Development,” 50; and Statistisches Bundesamt, *Nachhaltige Entwicklung in Deutschland* (Wiesbaden: 2012).

ability. In this type of research process, it is inherent that not everything can be clearly defined, because then the search would have already found what it was looking for. This investigation has two elements: figure out, first, how a culture of sustainability can be constructed (i.e., the identification of relevant elements and dynamics of such a social system) and second, how such a culture may develop (in terms of sustainable development). Of course, the research and results for both elements are mutually dependent. We are not concerned so much with finding a definitive definition of a culture of sustainability, but rather with searching for evidence of what already exists and determining whence and whither the search will go.

Culture in the broad sense refers to the aggregation of all social lifestyles.¹⁵ It encompasses how human beings treat themselves and each other, as well as how they treat the natural and the human-made world. This refers not only to physical characteristics, but also to values, norms, attitudes, and worldviews, which in turn affect human lifestyles and daily routines. Culture, therefore, is inherently circular, as Haderlapp and Trattnigg emphasize:

Culture and the resulting cultural imprinting of a society have a considerable influence on how a society deals with itself, with the environment, and with the future. To this effect, culture could be referred to as both the basis and result of the respective societal values.¹⁶

Central to this argument is the idea that culture is not a fixed end product, but rather a continuous process of creating, negotiating, and reflecting on social practice, which constantly needs to be revised and, subsequently, realigned. Jürgen Kopfmüller came to this conclusion:

‘Culture’ . . . means the way in which we live or want to live and how we shape social development.¹⁷

A culture of sustainability brings with it a normative bias. In this sense, the concept of sustainability is the “guiding culture,” which lays out the objective and basis of social

¹⁵ In contrast to culture in its more narrow sense, which refers to art, literature, music, and theater.

¹⁶ T. Haderlapp and R. Trattnigg, “Nachhaltige Entwicklung als kulturelles Projekt und große Erzählung,” Parodi et al., *Wechselspiele*, 348.

¹⁷ Kopfmüller, “Cultural Dimension,” 93.

existence and social action. A culture of sustainability is a societal lifestyle in which the pillars of sustainability (environment, economy, and society) are inherent and can be implemented in daily life. On this topic, Oliver Parodi writes the following:

In theory, a culture of sustainability is, in my opinion, the result of the concepts of sustainability and, in practice, the true implementation of sustainable development: a collectively borne, mutually understood, and understandable sustainability, which is institutionalized and internalized, and is passed down through conventions, patterns, habits and even feelings.¹⁸

In its practical form, the guiding principles of sustainability no longer appear to be prescribed patterns of action and interpretation from outside or from above (in the sense of governmental regulation), but have become a common part of the collective representation. As a result, certain interpretations and behaviors become second nature and seem more self-evident and relevant for participants in the community.¹⁹ In this manner, sustainability would evolve from a voluntary concept to something completely normal and self-evident and, thereby, an inherent part of our culture.

From this perspective, RIC does not regard “culture” as another pillar in the model of sustainable development, in terms of a cultural dimension of sustainability. Rather, culture should be understood as a meta-category and, thus, a comprehensive part of all aspects of sustainability.

Change Toward a Culture of Sustainability

Now that what is meant by a culture of sustainability has been outlined, an interesting question arises: How could such a culture emerge? There are a plethora of proposals in answer to this question. In its national strategy report for sustainable development, the German government declares the necessity of an “intensive social dialogue” that inspires creative forces instead of existential fears and resignation.²⁰ This “cultural-political process of reflection, discussion, and change” deals with questions such as:

¹⁸ Parodi et al., *Wechselspiele*, 99.

¹⁹ cf. K. Hörning, “Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit im Netz alltäglicher Lebenspraktiken,” in Parodi et al., *Wechselspiele*, 336.

²⁰ German Federal Government, *Perspectives for Germany*, 3.

How do we want to live? What kind of society is sustainable? What can we contribute? Which changes and innovations are necessary, and what should be preserved and revived?²¹

To achieve such a “transcendence of the system,”²² it is necessary to successfully manage the Great Transformation.²³ This will primarily take place through processes of negotiation and collective decision-making within society. As Krainer put it, “A sustainable culture is a conscious decision-making culture.”²⁴

It is therefore necessary to clarify who, what, how, and in which areas decisions will be made. The debate around this topic has made it more and more obvious that it is crucial to integrate as diverse actors as possible into this process. According to the WBGU, the key players here are a constitutive state and pioneers of change, which produce social-ecological innovations in social niches.²⁵ Therefore, a combination of “good governance” models (i.e., top-down) and the commitment and participation of civil society (i.e., bottom-up) is necessary. Science and research can act as both a facilitator and a catalyst by conducting interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary transformation research.

It is clear there is no one starting point for the “Great Transformation,” in the sense of an Archimedean point from which the “new world” is created, but rather change is essential—in many places and very different ways.

These changes affect each individual and the society as a whole, creating the context and conditions for each person. This illustrates the interdependence of the different areas, because in turn, individuals and their actions constitute society. Changes for the individual and for the collective need to apply to both external reality (the material, technical, and explicit) and inner reality (individual experience, consciousness, values, and norms).

21 Haderlapp and Trattnigg, “Nachhaltige Entwicklung,” 359.

22 Krainer, *Kulturelle Nachhaltigkeit*, 11.

23 “Great Transformation” is the term the German Advisory Council on Global Change proposed for the necessary societal change; WBGU, *Welt im Wandel*.

24 Krainer, *Kulturelle Nachhaltigkeit*, 93.

25 WBGU, *Welt im Wandel*, 7.

It is important for the process of change that, while the view remains on the “big picture,” solutions for specific problems can also be found. The Council for Sustainable Development gave the following advice:

The more an actor digs into the material, the more they become experts on specific topics and, therefore, the less they are able to communicate sustainability for that which it really is: the key to the vision of a just world, the vision of a humane, tolerant, and solidary society, which deals cautiously with their human and natural resources and places the optimization of interests over their maximization.²⁶

Guidelines are necessary for the process of reflection, negotiation, alignment, and the resulting implementation and evaluation to ensure the success of this organizational task.

The Wheel of Sustainability

The “Wheel of Sustainability” was developed as part of the research at RIC by Felix Wagner and Sandra Mende. It is intended to help illustrate the elements and the dynamics of a culture of sustainability and thereby give guidance for the societal organizational process, which includes reflection, negotiation, implementation, and evaluation. The objective of the Wheel of Sustainability is to encourage reflection on the relationships between different elements of a culture of sustainability and lead to new approaches, which, in addition to offering concrete solutions to specific problems, always have the “big picture” in sight.

The challenge of a culture of sustainability is to bring human needs and lifestyles in alignment with the system requirements of sustainable development.²⁷ In the Wheel of Sustainability, this is represented as three levels (fig. 1). The outermost level, or the “Level of System Requirements,” symbolizes the requirements (and, concurrently, the objectives) of societal sustain-

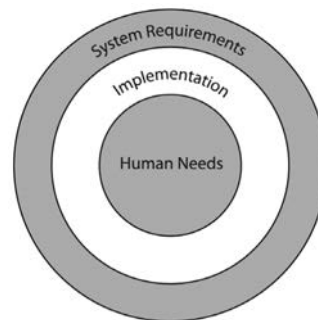


Figure 1:
The three levels
of the Wheel of
Sustainability.

²⁶ Council for Sustainable Development, *Kultur und Nachhaltigkeit*, 4.

²⁷ As they have been defined since the publication of the Brundtland Report. World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

able development. The innermost level, or the “Level of Human Needs,” represents, from the individual’s perspective, those socially shared human needs and living conditions necessary for a certain quality of life. Connecting the first and third levels, the middle level is the “Level of Implementation,” corresponding to the design process towards a culture of sustainability.

The content of the levels is specified in Figure 2. The Level of System Requirements constitutes the traditional areas of the sustainability debate (i.e., environment, economy, and society). The Level of Human Needs is filled with examples of relevant aspects of human endeavors. The number and nature of these individual aspects are not definitively defined, but rather are the subject of ongoing debate based on the current research on these topics.

The goal of the research conducted by RIC is to explore and concretize the Level of Implementation. RIC’s research classifies elements of social organization that can provide a connection between the Levels of Systemic Requirements and of Human Needs. We divide these into six areas:

a) Social Structures and Living Together

This section provides answers to questions such as the following: How do humans co-exist (i.e., as a small family, in neighborhoods, or communally)? What does the “culture of coexistence” look like, in terms of dealing with each other, communication, rituals, and daily activities? How is social cohesion organized, and how does cohesion—and, with it, belonging, connectedness, and sense of community—evolve? Is it supported by cooperation in social networks and in the work area?

b) Technical and Physical

This area includes all technological transformations, from supply and disposal to mobility and production, to information technology. It also includes physical transformations of architecture, urban planning, product design, and so forth.

c) Arts and Aesthetics

This refers to the deliberate inclusion of creativity in the organizational process, in both the technical/physical and the social areas. It is about experiencing sustainability through all the senses and the perception of their (potential) aesthetics, with regard

to the attractiveness of sustainability. Fundamental aspects of this area are the artistic exploration and mediation of the complexity of sustainable systems and the relationship between humans and the environment.²⁸

d) Values and Norms: Collective Representations

This area takes into consideration the explicit and inherent values, norms, and ideals upon which social existence and action are based. Which worldviews determine how we deal with ourselves, with others, and with the natural world? What are the rules and patterns followed by the “fabric of civilization”?

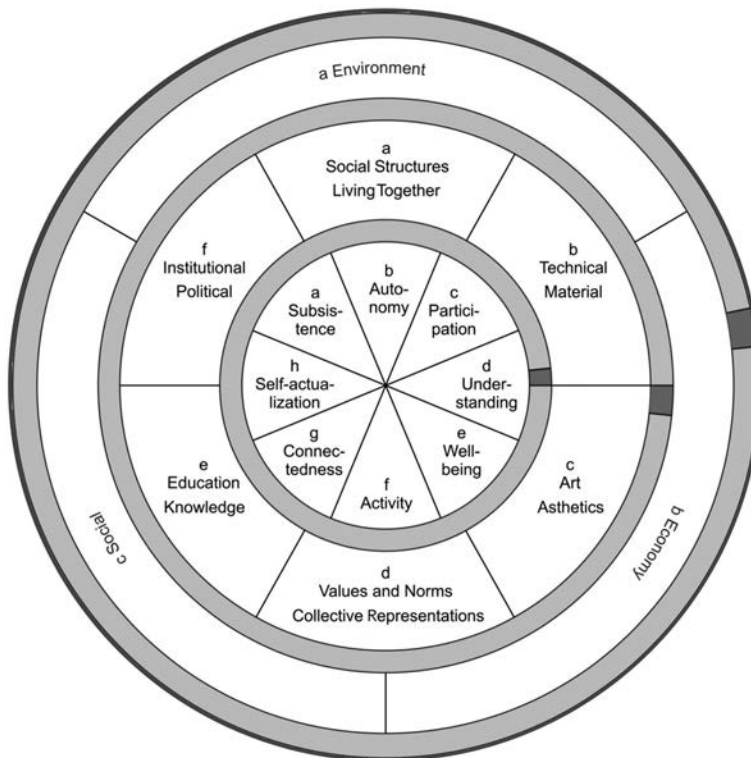


Figure 2:
Conceptualization
of the Wheel of
Sustainability.

28 cf. A. Goehler, *Konzeptgedanken zur Errichtung eines Fonds Ästhetik und Nachhaltigkeit*, Publication Series Ecology, vol. 10 (Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2012); H. Löschmann, preface in *Toward Global (Environ) Mental Change: Transformative Art and Cultures of Sustainability*, by S. Kagan, Publication Series Ecology, vol. 20 (Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2012); and S. Kagan, *Art and Sustainability: Connecting Patterns for a Culture of Complexity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011).

e) Education and Knowledge

The handing-down of practical and transformational knowledge on sustainable lifestyles is the topic of this area—the practice of communicating values, standards, and skills to educate sustainable and competent human beings.

f) Institutional and Political

Which institutions and what kinds of governance promote sustainability? How can there simultaneously be meaningful institutional regulation and civil participation? This area deals with the processes of decision-making and of negotiating various needs and requirements.

To do justice to the complexity and dynamics of a culture of sustainability, the three levels are considered flexible with respect to one another. This means new combinations of different aspects and elements, which can provide impetus for reflection, are continually emerging. The Wheel of Sustainability can, therefore, encourage the development of new hypotheses about the relationship and implementation of various combinations of the three levels. For example, the combination of “connectedness” from the inner circle, “social structure/living together” from the middle ring, and “environment” from the outer ring is a thematically very appropriate template, because ecovillages are a perfect example of this. Through the social form of a community, they meet human needs for connectedness with others and the natural environment. As studies have shown, life in communities is significantly more ecologically sustainable than the usual individual households.²⁹

Local currencies are an example of the combination of “participation” (center), “institutional/political” (middle ring), and “economy” (outer ring). They create an institutionalized system—a regionally stable, or resilient, economy, which often creates spaces of participation and identification for the people involved.

There are not always previously existing examples for the numerous possible combinations (144 possibilities), but innovation can be stimulated through reflection.

²⁹ S. Tinsley and H. Gorge, *Ecological Footprint of the Findhorn Foundation and Community* (Forres: Sustainable Development Research Centre, 2006); K.-H. Simon, *Zusammenfassender Endbericht zum Vorhaben „Gemeinschaftliche Lebens- und Wirtschaftsweisen und ihre Umweltrelevanz“* (Kassel: Universität Kassel, 2004).

The Wheel of Sustainability is deliberately an unfinished model that serves as a basis for discussion. First and foremost, the goal is to find a structure that supplies a foundation upon which the organizational process can begin, and in which as many actors as possible can participate.

Conclusion

On the path towards a viable society, it is of the utmost importance that sustainable development does not merely constitute abstract goals or political assurances and regulations, but becomes part of the societal daily routine. This requires a culture of sustainability. The Wheel of Sustainability provides a tool to guide the organizational process of such a change. The scientific studies of “pioneers of change” can make innovations socially acceptable and inspire the development of new forms. Ultimately, the key to “doing culture”³⁰ is the actions of all actors involved—this is, how we as a society shape our lives and its structures.

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Commentary by Marcus Andreas

I welcome my colleagues's suggestion of a praxis-orientated model that both inspires and encourages reflection on a culture of sustainability. The "Wheel of Sustainability" provokes us to connect ideas in new ways and puts implementation center-stage. Nonetheless, I would like to further elaborate on the concept of a culture of sustainability and, thereby, also on the Wheel. Although not intended by its authors, the Wheel might lead one to assume that a culture of sustainability can be implemented. It is this notion that I am concerned with, as the concept risks being misunderstood and instrumentalized.

The term "culture" is contentious. In a culture of sustainability, the term is seemingly employed with the kind of monumentalism that hasn't been seen since the beginning of postmodernism. Culture in this sense appears static and homogenous, and we have to make some mental effort to add dynamism and diversity. Moreover, due to the possessive "of," sustainability seems to have a firm grip on culture, even though cultural evolution and sustainable development are mutually dependent—according to the first principle of the 1998 UNESCO conference on culture and development.³¹

But what are the alternatives? Using the plural form, cultures, as a solution is already passé; the modern understanding of culture no longer conforms to the "cookie-cutter" principle,³² with one cultural cookie here and another one there. And "cultural sustainability" is neither an adequate solution, for culture is not a "nonrenewable resource," which will eventually run out. In an ethnological sense, culture as a resource crops up anywhere there are humans who interact and develop meanings.³³

Instead, it would be better to refer to a cultural dimension or landscape, including (but not exclusively composed of) the distortions, breaks, and discords of postmodernism. Clifford Geertz speaks of the "various modes of involvement in a collective life."³⁴ Instrumentalizing this diversity, as something solely in the possession of sustainability,

31 Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development, *Action Plan on Cultural Policies for Development* (Stockholm: UNESCO, 2 April 1998), 2, http://www.unesco.org/pv_obj_cache/pv_obj_id_5BFA265FF63CDC298CB5EB0E309D6F1D1B850000/filename/cultural.pdf. See also http://ifa.de/pdf/abk/inter/unesco_kulturpol_entwick.pdf (accessed 07.03.2012).

32 Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 250.

33 Frank Heidemann, *Ethnologie. Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 11.

34 Geertz, *Available Light*, 254.

would take away its playfulness. Nonetheless, we would do well to choose the premises of sustainability as a basis for our involvement in collective life—and ecovillages offer remarkable examples for how to do this. In this regard, the Wheel of Sustainability is a suitable means, not for ontological questions, but for ideas, serendipitous connections, and the pleasure of playfulness.

In my opinion, we will reach a complete, utopian societal transformation³⁵ when we no longer need to talk about a culture of sustainability. Instead, we will be guided by the ideal of sustainability, without stopping to think about it, just as we are guided by the ideal of peace, without talking about a culture of peace. It is in the process of critical engagement with the concept of utopia that, on the basis of current foresight, it is evident we are unlikely to ever reach such a goal.³⁶ But we nevertheless need to build up resilience and sustainable pathways. So let the vision of a culture of sustainability inspire us, without limiting our horizons too much. Thankfully, ecovillages are already charting a possible course, but alternative courses are also needed. Culture is not a placeholder between internal needs and cultures requirements; cultures need and take the freedom to blossom and grow in unexpected ways.

Finally, perhaps it would help to recall the original Latin root of the word culture: *Colere*, meaning the cultivation and maintenance of tilled land, as well as its veneration. Thus, we should cultivate the social, ecological, and economic qualities that seem to us worthy of veneration and, in doing so, foster the cultural development of sustainability. At best, we will reap the reward: a culture of sustainability that is blooming.

35 I use the phrase “societal transformation” in reference to the concept outlined by the German Advisory-Council on Climate Change, or WBGU; see WBGU, *World in Transition: A Social Contract for Sustainability. Flagship Report 2011* (Berlin: WBGU, 2011).

36 J. Lockyer, “Sustainability and Utopianism: An Ethnography of Cultural Critique in Contemporary Intentional Communities” (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2007).

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