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Rethinking Progress. On the Origin of the Modern Sustainability Discourse, 1970–2000

Current research has emphasised that with the end of the boom in Western economies there was a «shift from optimism about the future, expectations of uninterrupted economic growth and rise in the standard of living [...] to a more pragmatic or even more pessimistic view of the future».¹ In this picture, the crises of the 1970s had caused notions of progress to fade² and a new awareness of the limits to growth had begun to emerge.³ Reference to this awareness of «Limits to Growth» brings at once to mind the report the Club of Rome published in 1972 with that very title,⁴ and indeed an understanding of the debate surrounding this report is central for grasping the notions of progress held at the time. The report stirred up a global dialogue about the present and future consequences of modern industrialism and the value of economic growth. It thus not only activated crisis perceptions circulating in the 1970s but helped to instigate alternative understandings of progress. The debate had a particular role in forming the future-oriented concept of *sustainable development*, which has become a vague and therefore very attractive guiding principle in politics and business.⁵

In the literature, the origin of the sustainability idea is often referred back to the eighteenth century and to Hans Carl von Carlowitz, an inspector of mines in Saxony. In a treatise on forestry he advocated «*beständige und nachhaltende Nutzung*» («consistent and enduring use») of wood in times of scarcity and growing industrial

1 H. Kaelble, «The 1970s: What Turning Point?», in: *Journal of Modern European History* 9 (2011) 1, 18–20, 18.

2 A. Doering-Manteuffel / L. Raphael, *Nach dem Boom. Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970*, Göttingen 2010, 135.

3 E. Wolfrum, *Die geglückte Demokratie. Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland von ihren Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Bonn 2007, 327.

4 D. L. Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth. A*

Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind, New York 1972.

5 See J. Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth*, Oxford 1997, 123–124; M. Rödel, «Die Invasion der «Nachhaltigkeit». Eine linguistische Analyse eines politischen und ökonomischen Modewortes», in: *Deutsche Sprache* 2 (2013), 115–142; A. Grunwald / J. Kopfmüller, *Nachhaltigkeit*, Frankfurt a.M., New York 2012, esp. 161–181.

demand.⁶ The foresters should cut down only as many trees as could be naturally replaced in the immediate period, so that the wood could remain a long-term resource. In the years following Carlowitz's treatise, his insight was exported to Europe and the United States, and «sustainable yield» (Carlowitz's «*nachhaltiger Ertrag*») became a forestry and fishery term in several world languages.⁷ In this article I am going to explore the different shades of meaning and patterns of order comprising «sustainable development» and «sustainability» from the 1970s to 2000, and thus the *sustainability discourse*. As language is itself an element in the construction of concepts, «sustainability» should not be seen as a concept that can be precisely defined but as a discourse activated in specific communication situations. The sustainability discourse is linked to the societal and political power that provided the context for such discourses and structured them.⁸

This article will first analyse the origins and character of the growth debate in the early 1970s which laid the foundations for the sustainability discourse. Next, it will examine the new discursive dynamic arising at the end of the 1980s with the Brundtland Report and the Rio Earth Summit, which led to the formation of «sustainable development» or «*nachhaltige Entwicklung*» as a guiding principle in international politics. And third, the article will shed some light on a new phase in the discourse around «sustainability» or «*Nachhaltigkeit*» beginning in the mid 1990s. The article examines shifting semantic nets and discourses transcending national boundaries and focuses on politics and the political influence of circulating knowledge.⁹ It explores politics in the West, particularly in West Germany, where sustainability was explicitly successful in penetrating political language, but also looks at the global perspective epitomised by the United Nations – since the sustainability discourse was shaped by the UN and inextricably linked with thinking globally. I argue that the political notions of progress that had dominated in the 1950s and 1960s – the striving for economic growth based on modernisation theory and linear temporal thought – came under fire around 1970, some years before the first oil crisis occurred. Notions of growth and progress were reconceptualised, with more attention being paid to ecological and social issues and within an inherently global

6 H. C. von Carlowitz, *Sylvicultura Oeconomica oder: haußwirthliche Nachricht und Naturmäßige Anweisung zur Wilden Baum-Zucht*, 1713, cit. C. Mauch *Mensch und Umwelt. Nachhaltigkeit aus historischer Perspektive*, München 2014, fn. 18; see U. Grober, *Die Entdeckung der Nachhaltigkeit. Kulturgeschichte eines Begriffs*, München 2010, 111–116; F. Uekötter, «Ein Haus auf schwankendem Boden. Überlegungen zur Begriffsgeschichte der Nachhaltigkeit», in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 31–32 (2014), 9–15.

7 Grober, *Entdeckung*, 210–214.

8 M. Foucault, «The Order of Discourse», in:

R. Young (ed.), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, Boston 1981, 51–78; Dryzek, *Politics*, 125; P. M. Barnes / Th. C. Hoerber, «Introduction», in: Barnes / Hoerber (ed.), *Sustainable Development and Governance in Europe. The Evolution of the Discourse on Sustainability*, London, New York 2013, 1–17.

9 On the flow of knowledge between politics and experts see, among others, M. G. Ash, «Wissenschaft und Politik als Ressourcen füreinander», in: R. vom Bruch / B. Kaderas (ed.), *Wissenschaften und Wissenschaftspolitik*, Stuttgart 2002, 32–51.

perspective. In general, from the late 1960s to the turn of the millennium, notions of progress were rethought by a redefinition of growth and by conceptualisation of sustainability.

1. The Growth Discourse in the Years Around 1970

During the period of economic boom experienced in the West from the early 1950s onwards, economic growth became the main criterion of a nation's prosperity – as a yardstick symbolic of progress. Neo-classical growth theory dominated economics and gross national product served as a central indicator for success, both in international comparisons between Western countries and in Cold War competition.¹⁰ A central aim of political planning was to promote further growth. Current research has shown that the long 1960s were the heyday of political planning in Western Europe and the USA. This in turn was based on the economic boom, which offered new possibilities for action, and on political trust in science which seemed to lay the foundations for steering the future in the medium- to long-term. Politicians from different parties, but especially the Social Democrats came under the sway of a new spirit of reform and modernisation, which was also epitomised in the breakthrough of Keynesianism. The future was thus mainly thought of in *linear* categories.¹¹

The growth paradigm also shaped understandings of development in international politics. The Western conception of «catch up development» was based on a more or less linear modernisation theory, which assumed that the developing world would take the same path towards industrialisation and growth. Hence, the UN proclaimed the 1960s to be a «Development Decade» in a bid to intensify efforts by both developed and developing countries aimed at accelerating «progress towards self-sustaining growth of the economy».¹² This specific notion of growth and progress began to crumble in the second half of the 1960s.

The questioning of the economic growth paradigm was very much bound up with growing concerns about the environment. Environmentalism was not a new phenomenon. Traditional European and US *nature conservation* groups had already focused on

10 M. Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth. The Making and Remaking of the Economic Growth Paradigm and the OECD* (forthcoming); D. Speich Chassé, *Die Erfindung des Bruttosozialprodukts. Globale Ungleichheit in der Wissensgeschichte der Ökonomie*, Göttingen 2013; R. Steurer, *Der Wachstumsdiskurs in Wissenschaft und Politik. Von der Wachstumseuphorie über «Grenzen des Wachstums» zur Nachhaltigkeit*, Berlin 2002.

11 G. Metzler, *Konzeptionen politischen Handelns von Adenauer bis Brandt. Politische Planung in der pluralistischen Gesellschaft*, Paderborn 2005; G. O'Hara, *From Dreams to Disillusionment: Eco-*

nomie and Social Planning in 1960s Britain, Basingstoke, New York 2007, and his chapter in this volume; see, for futures studies, E. Seefried, *Zukünfte. Aufstieg und Krise der Zukunftsforschung 1945–1980*, Munich 2015; more literature on planning, see M. Steber's article.

12 Cited in R. Jolly et al., *UN Contributions to Development Thinking and Practice*, Bloomington, Indianapolis, IN 2004, 86; critically, W. Sachs, «Global Ecology and the Shadow of «Development»», in: Sachs (ed.), *Global Ecology. A New Arena of Political Conflict*, London 1993, 3–21.

environmental problems and the conservation of flora and resources in a time of industrial high modernism. *Preservationists* sought to preserve nature and the wilderness from all encroachments except recreation. After the Second World War, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) was set up by UNESCO to promote the natural environment. In this context, some books such as Henry Osborn's *Our Plundered Planet* on resource scarcity due to industrialisation and population growth were published in the US and West Germany. Whereas the approach of traditional nature conservation and preservation was mainly concerned with resources and nonhuman habitants, the «new environmentalism» which emerged in the mid 1960's focused on humanity and the human environment in advanced industrialised modernity, and on the *global* interdependencies of the ecosystem.¹³ Quite clearly, the new environmentalism was dynamised by reactions to growing environmental pollution and environmental disasters such as the Torrey Canyon oil spill of 1967 – thus by obvious problems. However, it was not only the obvious problems that played a central role for the new environmentalism, but also *perceptions* and *discourses*, and these involved a questioning of the economic growth paradigm.¹⁴

First, the new questioning of the economic growth paradigm and environmental concern were part of the exploration of a new understanding of welfare and development that grew out of the Western consensus-liberalism agenda.¹⁵ Key liberal intellectuals argued that in an age of prosperity, government should not only ensure material comfort but upgrade environmental quality and quality of life. The US economist John Kenneth Galbraith understood «quality of life» to be an alternative to the concept of material prosperity in affluent societies, comprising not only prosperity but also aspects of social balance, environment and individual happiness. Galbraith and others raised doubts about an understanding of progress based solely on economic growth.¹⁶ The reflections on the dimensions of societal development were utilised by governments, initially within the framework of 1960s reform

13 J. McCormick, *Reclaiming Paradise. The Global Environmental Movement*, Bloomington 1989, 1–46; H. F. Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet*, Boston, MA 1948; for the «ecological revolution» around 1970 see J. Radkau, *Die Ära der Ökologie. Eine Weltgeschichte*, München 2011, 134–168; J. I. Engels, *Naturpolitik in der Bundesrepublik. Ideenwelt und politische Verhaltensstile in Naturschutz und Umweltbewegung 1950–1980*, Paderborn 2006, 43–86.

14 On environmental degradation, C. Pfister, «Das 1950er Syndrom. Die umweltgeschichtliche Epochenschwelle zwischen Industriegesellschaft und Konsumgesellschaft», in: Pfister (ed.), *Das 1950er Syndrom. Der Weg in die Konsumgesellschaft*, Bern 1995, 51–95; on the changing *perceptions* see J. R. McNeill, «The Environment, Environmentalism, and International Society in the Long

1970s», in: N. Ferguson et al. (eds.), *The Shock of the Global. The 1970s in Perspective*, Cambridge, MA 2010, 262–278; P. Kupper, «Die 1970er Diagnose. Grundsätzliche Überlegungen zu einem Wendepunkt der Umweltgeschichte», in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 43 (2003), 325–348.

15 A. Rome, ««Give Earth a Chance»: The Environmental Movement and the Sixties», in: *The Journal of American History* 90 (2003), 525–554, 527–529.

16 J. K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, Cambridge, MA 1958; idem, *The New Industrial State*, London 1972 (orig. 1967), esp. 410; H.-H. Noll, «Social Indicators and Quality of Life Research: Background, Achievements and Current Trends», in: N. Genov (ed.), *Advances in Sociological Knowledge over Half a Century*, Paris 2002, 151–181.

policy. Lyndon B. Johnson's «Great Society» concept of 1964 was rooted in Galbraith's deliberations: it addressed not only the «quality of life» theme but also environmental concerns.¹⁷ The OECD's Scientific Affairs Directorate problematised the «challenges of modern society» in general and environmental pollution in particular, and the UN decided to organise a conference on human environment.¹⁸ In the late 1960s many Western governments – for example, the Brandt coalition – conceptualised environmental policy as a distinct sphere of activity.¹⁹

Second, ecology was revitalised in science and political culture from the mid-1960s onwards. Ecology, the science of the interactions between living organisms and the environment, stressed the cohesive ecosystem on which our planet depends and focused on the evolutions and crises of global equilibrium. The ecology boom rooted in drastically increased knowledge about the earth,²⁰ but also had to do with the ubiquitous planning and steering conceptions. Ecology, due to its cyclic logic, was very much susceptible to cybernetics and the systems approach that had dominated futures studies and political planning of the 1950s and 1960s.²¹ An ecosystems approach highlighting the tipping balance that existed between mankind and nature was part of Rachel Carson's evocative best-seller *Silent Spring*²² and the richly symbolic metaphor of «Spaceship Earth» propagated by the British economist Barbara Ward. The image of the spaceship encapsulated both the earth's fragility and its systemic and cyclical nature, dictated by the constant reproduction of resources. Consequently, the metaphor was characterised by *cyclical*, not linear, notions of time. The image became particularly popular after the *Apollo* moon landing of 1969, when the pictorial image of the fragile blue planet was widely disseminated and came to shape the nascent environmentalism.²³

Third, environmentalism and a questioning of growth arose from the Western counter-culture. Students and leftist intellectuals like Herbert Marcuse criticised

17 Rome, «Earth», 531–534.

18 Groupe de coordination inter-Secrétariat sur les problèmes de la Société Moderne, 1ère reunion, 11.2.1970, in: OECD Archives, 218236; see M. Schmelzer, «The Crisis before the Crisis. The «Problems of Modern Society» and the OECD, 1968–1974», in: *European Review of History* 19 (2012), 6, 2012; T. Schulz-Walden, *Anfänge globaler Umweltpolitik. Umweltsicherheit in der internationalen Politik (1969–1975)*, München 2013, 79–152.

19 See McCormick, *Paradise*, 56–60; K. F. Hünemörder, *Die Frühgeschichte der globalen Umweltkrise und die Formierung der deutschen Umweltpolitik (1950–1973)*, Stuttgart 2004, esp. 121–181; Engels, *Naturpolitik*, 282–294.

20 L.-G. Engfeldt, *From Stockholm to Johannesburg and beyond*, Stockholm 2009, 29–30.

21 M. Hagner, «Vom Aufstieg und Fall der Kybernetik als Universalwissenschaft», in: idem / E. Hörl (eds.), *Die Transformation des Humanen. Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte der Kybernetik*, Frankfurt a.M. 2008, 38–72; for more literature, Seefried, *Zukünfte*, 53–62.

22 R. Carson, *Silent Spring*, New York 1962; McCormick, *Paradise*, 55–56.

23 B. Ward, *Spaceship Earth*, New York 1966; K. Boulding, «The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth» (1966), in: H. Daly / K. Townsend (eds.), *Valuing the Earth: Economics, Ecology, Ethics*, Cambridge, MA 1994, 297–310, 304; see S. Höhler, ««Spaceship Earth»: Envisioning Human Habitats in the Environmental Age», in: *GHI Washington Bulletin*, 42 (Spring 2008), 65–85; McCormick, *Paradise*, 67–68.

the artificial capitalist consumer culture, with its generation of need for superfluous commodities and encouragement of unrestrained economic growth.²⁴ The US environmental movement, which was on display on the «Earth Day» in 1970, had close links to ideas and practices found in this counter-culture.²⁵

Fourth, an international discourse on growth was set going by «futures studies». Whereas in the 1960s futures studies had been shaped by technological optimism, now they highlighted ecological aspects. The *Limits to Growth* study, commissioned by the Club of Rome, was written by an interdisciplinary group formed around the economist Dennis Meadows of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).²⁶ Very much Western-centred despite its global remit, the Club was united by the conviction that mankind was in a «predicament»;²⁷ it spoke of a global «*problematique*» as technical and economic progress confronted mankind with complex problems such as global overpopulation and the degradation of the ecosystem.²⁸ Their aim was to conduct systems analysis studies on politics and «world planning».²⁹ Basing it on the theoretical foundations of cybernetics, the MIT group devised a systems analysis computer simulation. The standard run of this model indicated that exponential population and economic growth would lead to a global collapse within the next one hundred years. The model not only projected the limits to growth (in natural resources, environmental pollution and population) in a finite world, but it also questioned the principle of growth as such. In the end, the authors called for an «equilibrium state» to be maintained globally, a «controlled end to growth» of both population and capital. This equilibrium would «not be free of pressures», as basic freedoms such as having large families and inordinate consumption would be limited. People were accordingly advised to concentrate on activities not requiring a large flow of resources, such as art and education.³⁰ As for the temporal dimension, the study worked within a very long time horizon «because of the increasing speed at which events follow and influence each other» – in other words, because of the perceived acceleration of (technical and other) developments and their interrelatedness.³¹ Since the future appeared so extremely problematic, Meadows called for immediate action, for it seemed «not possible to wait until

- 24 H. Marcuse, «Das Individuum in der «Great Society»» (1966), in: idem, *Ideen zu einer kritischen Theorie der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt a.M. 1969, 157–190; M. Bess, *The Light-Green Society. Ecology and Technological Modernity in France*, Chicago, IL, London 2003, 79–81; Rome, «Earth», 542–546.
- 25 Rome, «Earth», 541–552; McCormick, *Paradise*, 47.
- 26 Meadows et al., *Limits*; see McCormick, *Paradise*, 69–87; P. Moll, *From Scarcity to Sustainability. Futures Studies and the Environment. The Role of the Club of Rome*, Frankfurt a.M., New York, 49–81; P. Kupper, «Weltuntergangs-Vision aus

dem Computer». Zur Geschichte der Studie «Die Grenzen des Wachstums» von 1972«, in: F. Uekötter / J. Hohensee (eds.), *Wird Cassandra heiser? Die Geschichte falscher Ökoalarme*, Stuttgart 2004, 98–111.

- 27 A. Peccei, *The Chasm Ahead*, London 1969, xvi.
- 28 A. Peccei to E. van Lennep, OECD, 22.3.1970, in: OECD Archives, 218055.
- 29 Peccei, *Chasm*, 243; see Seefried, *Zukünfte*, 235–254.
- 30 Meadows et al., *Limits*, 170, 179.
- 31 A. Peccei, Facing the Emergence of Global Problems, 2.6.1969, in: OECD Archives, 218035; see

complete knowledge is available».³² Although the authors did emphasise that «equilibrium» was not the same as stagnation, the equilibrium they urged pointed to a sort of a *steady state*.³³

The Limits to Growth stirred up a scientific, intellectual and political debate. At the heart of the discourse dynamics was the fact that the study conveyed a belief in computer models and in steering conceptions that had shaped the 1960s, *as well as* drawing on currently circulating ecological ideas that questioned growth. Thus, the study enhanced criticism of growth and endowed it with scientific credibility.³⁴ Moreover, the Club of Rome and its founders – the Italian industrial manager and development expert Aurelio Peccei and the Scottish head of the OECD Scientific Affairs Directorate, Alexander King – were bound to the networks of consensus liberalism (to the Johnson administration, the Ford Foundation and the OECD).³⁵ These connections and a particular interest of the mass media on the study helped to merchandise it, too. Lastly, the growth discourse was temporarily stimulated by the oil crisis in 1973, which seemed to demonstrate the fragile foundations of world resources.

The scientific and intellectual debate sometimes conveyed an apocalyptic sense of crisis, but just as much revolved round the methodological weaknesses of the anti-growth model. Thus, it quickly threw the arguments for abandoning growth onto the defensive. Economists who followed the neo-classical theory of growth argued that growth was a necessity for securing people's well-being and employment opportunities. Others maintained that technological advances would unleash problems such as widespread pollution. Nevertheless, many of these voices conceded that GNP would have to be modified to take the social costs of pollution into account and to start applying a long-term perspective suited to bring to bear the rights of future generations. In the end, a working consensus did come out of this intense dialogue over growth in 1972/1973, encapsulated in the elusive formula of «qualitative growth». This sought to maintain «quality of life», thus integrating economic, environmental and social criteria in the understanding of growth.³⁶ Hence, in this discourse the three «pillars» of sustainability we speak of today were conceptualised for the first time.

D. L. Meadows / J. Randers, «Adding the Time Dimension to Environmental Policy», in: *International Organization* 26 (1972), 213–233.

32 Ibid, 215; see A. Peccei, «Reflections on Bellagio», in: E. Jantsch (ed.), *Perspectives of Planning*, 517–519.

33 H. Daly, *Toward a Steady-State Economy*, San Francisco, CA 1973.

34 See Seefried, *Zukünfte*, 271–272; K. F. Hünemörder, «1972 – Epochenschwelle der Umweltgeschichte?», in: F.-J. Brüggemeier / J. I. Engels

(eds.), *Natur- und Umweltschutz nach 1945. Konzepte, Konflikte, Kompetenzen*, Frankfurt a. M., New York 2005, 124–144, 142; Kupper, *Weltuntergangs-Vision*; F.-J. Brüggemeier, *Tschernobyl*, 26. April 1986. *Die ökologische Herausforderung*, München 1999, 201.

35 Seefried, *Zukünfte*, 243–252; Schmelzer, «Crisis».

36 See Seefried, *Zukünfte*, 273–292; Moll, *Scarcity*, 115–122.

This was also true for the *political* growth discourse which brought together environmental and developmental issues and thus activated a new notion of development. In the face of the ongoing failure of international development policy, current theories and conceptions of development were thrown into doubt. With the creation of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964, the developing countries had assumed more self-reliance, supported by use of dependency theories, and called for joint international action to improve trade policies conducive to development.³⁷ In 1972, this became bound up with the growth debate. At the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in June 1972, Maurice Strong, secretary-general of the conference, pointed out that ecological threats on the one hand, and questions of poverty and economic underdevelopment on the other, were closely interrelated.³⁸ Indeed, the representatives of the developing countries had been very sceptical when discussing global environmental problems. They argued that they were not willing to be held back in their quest for rapid economic development and their rights to exploit their natural resources; not least with the *Limits to Growth* debate in mind, they refused to let the industrialised North colonise their futures all over again. Anyway, zero-growth was not seen as a viable policy in Stockholm, but quality of life served as a consensual concept to balance environmental and developmental issues and the interests of North and South. Growth was only used in the sense of «intellectual, moral, social and spiritual growth».³⁹

The European political Left in particular drew on the growth discourse in 1972/1973 as the recommendations somehow fitted with the aim of distributive justice as well as planning ideas. This became particularly clear in Sicco Mansholt's European central plan. Drawing on the theses of *The Limits to Growth*, the Dutch Social Democrat and Vice President of the European Commission proclaimed an end to growth orientation by prioritising environmentally sound production and goods rationing. Most of the European Social Democrats voted against this plan, as zero-growth seemed a taunt to those who lived in poverty.⁴⁰ In the main, the Social Democrats were still led by industrial patterns of order guided by the traditional capital-labour cleavage. However, many of them, particularly those in West Germany, now propagated «quality of life», as it helped fill the somewhat technocratic

37 Jolly et al., *UN Contributions*, 104–123; O. Stokke, *The UN and development. From aid to cooperation*, Bloomington, Indianapolis, IN 2009, 171–175, 307–309.

38 M. Strong, «The United Nations and the Environment», in: *International Organization* 26 (1972), 169–172; on Stockholm Engfeldt, *Stockholm*, 44–89.

39 Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. Report of the United

Nations Conference on the Human Environment held at Stockholm, 5–16.6.1972, A/Conf.48/14, 3.7.1972, in: *The Results from Stockholm / Les Résultats de Stockholm / Stockholmer Resultate*, Berlin 1973, 17–22, 17; see Engfeldt, Stockholm, 44–46, 56–61; Schulz-Walden, *Anfänge*, 177–243.

40 H.-J. Wischnewski to SPD Präsidium, 7.6.1972, in: Archiv der sozialen Demokratie (AsD), Helmut Schmidt Papers, HSAA005764.

and cold 1960s' planning atmosphere with social and ecological sensibility, as well as a notion of global solidarity. Indeed, the West German chancellor, Willy Brandt, and Erhard Eppler, the minister for development policy, along with others, voted for restructuring the growth paradigm and used «quality of life» as a new paradigm in 1972/1973, not least because «quality of life» fitted in well with their call for «humanising work», in which they were backed by the unions.⁴¹ In this, the idea of progress was reconceived, as economic growth was no longer seen as «the sole yardstick of progress» («*der alleinige Maßstab für den Fortschritt*»⁴²).

Reception of the ecological critique was even stronger amongst those in the West German counter-culture and left-aligned «alternative» circles which had helped hatch the environmental movements of the 1970s.⁴³ These circles rejected the economic growth goal inherent in capitalism and blamed the affluent societies of the northern hemisphere for the pressures being put on the environment. A handful of Conservatives joined in their beliefs, which they identified with a call to return to a life closer to nature.⁴⁴ Because the new understanding of growth held both leftist and conservationist ideas together, the Green party emerged out of the joint discourse at the end of the 1970s and voted for qualitative growth.⁴⁵

The concept of the «sustainable society» had surfaced in the discourse around growth, but it did not become properly established until the 1980s. This was the case because the concept aimed at abandoning the idea of growth. The interdisciplinary group of authors of *The Limits to Growth* had taken up the term from the literature on forestry and agricultural development, and it advocated a «sustainable» world system in which a stable equilibrium could be assured through birth control and limits to production.⁴⁶ Not long after the publication of the report, Meadows spoke of a «sustainable steady state»: «[The] sustainable steady state forces attention to ways of making zero material growth consistent with equity, personal liberty, cultural progress, and the satisfaction of basic physical and psychological needs.»⁴⁷

41 Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, *Wahlprogramm der SPD 1972. Mit Willy Brandt für Frieden, Sicherheit und eine bessere Qualität des Lebens*, Bonn 1972; W. Brandt, «Umwelt als internationale Aufgabe», in: *Bulletin der Bundesregierung*, 28.6.1972, 1285–1289; E. Eppler, «Die Qualität des Lebens», in: *Aufgabe Zukunft. Qualität des Lebens*, Frankfurt a. M. 1973, Vol. 1, 86–101; E. Seefried, «Towards the «Limits to Growth»? The Book and its Reception in West Germany and Great Britain 1972/73», in: *GHI Bulletin* 33(2011), 3–37.

42 W. Brandt, «Die «Qualität des Lebens»», in: *Die neue Gesellschaft* 19 (1972), 739–742, 741; similarly Eppler, «Qualität», 98.

43 S. Reichardt, *Authentizität und Gemeinschaft. Linksalternatives Leben in den siebziger und frühen achtziger Jahren*, Berlin 2014.

44 See M. Steber's article; R. Graf, «Die Grenzen des Wachstums und die Grenzen des Staates. Konservative und die ökologischen Bedrohungsszenarien der frühen 1970er Jahre», in: D. Geppert / J. Hacke, *Streit um den Staat*, Göttingen 2008, 207–228.

45 Die Grünen, Bundesprogramm 1980, 7, in: http://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/assets/boell.de/images/download_de/publikationen/1980_001_Grundsatzprogramm_Die_Gruenen.pdf (accessed 1.5.2014); for the whole paragraph see S. Mende, *Nicht rechts, nicht links, sondern vorn. Eine Geschichte der Gründungsgrünen*, München 2011.

46 Meadows et al., *Limits*, 158.

47 D. L. Meadows, «Introduction», in: idem (ed.), *Alternatives to Growth I: A Search for Sustainable Futures*, Cambridge, MA. 1977, xxi–xxvii, xxiii.

Thus, being «sustainable» seemed to be compatible with the principle of sufficiency. Not surprisingly, this notion was not very popular in a modern consumer society, as compared with the polyvalent «quality of life» and «qualitative growth» concepts that focused on balancing economic, social and ecological goals. But even these concepts dwindled in the second half of the 1970s. Increasing unemployment during a time of economic crisis reminded people of the benefits *economic* growth could bring. Also a fundamental change began to take place in the economics and economic policy of Western societies. These changes will be addressed in the next section.

2. From Growth to Sustainable Development: The Brundtland Report and the Earth Summit

The move from the growth discourse of the early 1970s to new conceptions of sustainable development in a fresh phase of intensive discourse stemmed from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which had been established in the course of the Stockholm Conference in 1972.⁴⁸ As the tenth anniversary of the Stockholm Conference approached, experts on international environment policy were already disillusioned. Although Stockholm had had some impact on the implementation of the European Community's environmental policy, many of the recommendations in the Action Plan went unheeded and the spirit of getting ahead was fading.⁴⁹ There were many reasons for this, but basically they were rooted in a changing economic climate and a shift in economic policy in the Western industrialised countries. Due to economic stagnation and high inflation, consensus liberalism and Keynesianism had given way to monetarism and a new neo-liberal faith in market forces. Within this new system, the state's role was more or less confined to simplifying the taxation framework conditions and boosting private initiative with the aim of strengthening competitiveness and generating economic growth. Planning and mid-to-long-term allocation of resources appeared to limit growth, and the tendency of neo-liberalism now was to take more of a short-term and «presentistic» temporal perspective. Particularly in the USA, neo-liberal economic ideas began to penetrate politics, business and the sciences. Although the «Global 2000» Report to US President Carter, published in 1980, had more or less confirmed the *Limits to Growth* projections,⁵⁰ the Reagan presidency led an environmental backlash which had effects on international development policy. Both Reagan and the British premier, Thatcher, stressed that their main interest was to support free markets and keep the IMF and World Bank free from UN influence and from calls for a just and

48 S. Johnson, *UNEP. The first 40 Years. A Narrative*, Nairobi 2012.

49 I. Borowy, *Defining Sustainable Development for our Common Future. A History of the World Commission on Environment and Development*

(*Brundtland Commission*), New York 2014, 48; Engfeldt, *Stockholm*, 17–18.

50 *Global Two Thousand Report to the President of the US. Entering the 21. Century. A Report*, New York 1980.

equitable «New International Economic Order» that had been raised by the developing countries at the 1974 UN General Assembly.⁵¹

Against this background, UNEP initiated a «Process of Preparation of the Environmental Perspective to the Year 2000 and Beyond» in 1982, which apparently referred back to the «Global 2000» report. At the centre of the process was the setting up of a special commission. Its brief was to «propose long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development to the year 2000 and beyond», and to recommend ways in which concern about the environment could be translated into greater cooperation among developing countries and between countries at different stages of economic and social development. Explicitly, the commission was to trail a long-term perspective, as this should help define shared perceptions on long-term environmental issues and set a «long-term agenda for coming decades». ⁵² Led by an «eminent person», the commission was to maintain an exchange of views with the scientific community, environmentalists and other sections of public opinion and reflect both government and intergovernmental opinions.⁵³

Why did UNEP choose the term «sustainable development» for the commission's brief?⁵⁴ It goes back to the World Conservation Strategy (WCS), developed by IUCN, UNEP, the World Wildlife Fund, and a group of experts in 1980. The WCS championed «Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development», understood as being a project to maintain essential ecological processes and life-support systems to preserve genetic diversity and to ensure the sustainable utilisation of species such as «fish and other wildlife, forests and grazing lands». ⁵⁵ The report touched on the linkage between environmental degradation and poverty, but its understanding of «sustainable development» was mainly concerned with the conservation of resources,⁵⁶ thus reflecting the IUCN's nature conservation background as well as the forestry and fishery origins of «sustainable yield». Another reason why UNEP chose the term «sustainable development» for the special commission was that it seemed to epitomise the interests of both North and South. Most developing countries that had to cope with the rise in oil prices and fundamental debt problems had opposed UNEP's special commission project, as they believed it would «hamper their development». ⁵⁷ More accurately than the older consensus term «quality of life», «sustainable development» seemed to reflect the global «interrelationships

51 T. Borstelmann, *The 1970s. A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*, Princeton, NJ, Oxford 2012, 122–174; Borowy, *Defining*, 36–47; Jolly et al., *UN contributions*, 145–149.

52 UN Resolution 38/161, adopted 19.12.1983, www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/38/161&Lang=E&Area=RESOLUTION, (accessed 3.1.2014).

53 Press Conference by UNEP, 31.5.1983, in: UN Archives, S 1051 0014 0004; see UN Resolution 38/161.

54 Barbara Ward, who wrote the unofficial report of the Stockholm conference, is said to have first coined the term; Engfeldt, *Stockholm*, 15, 48.

55 *World Conservation Strategy. Living Resource Conservation for Sustainable Development*, 1980, VI.

56 See also Borowy, *Defining*, 39–41.

57 Olivares, Note for the Secretary General, 20.7.1983, in: UN Archives, S 1051 0014 0004.

between people, resources, environment and development»⁵⁸ and to balance Northern and Southern interests both currently and in the future. It had as much to do with *development* – that is, the specific growth interests of the developing countries – as it had to do with *environment* and considerations of a balance between replenishment and use of resources. The focus was laid on achieving a balance between the mid-term and more distant future of the environment and the immediate, present interests of the developing countries, thus between the North and the South. A connection with the growth debate of the earlier 1970s can clearly be drawn, which was also marked by an awareness of the North-South divide. The Japanese economist Saburo Okita, a member of the Club of Rome, now was part of the special commission, and also UNEP referred explicitly to the «environmental and global *problematique*»⁵⁹ – the phrase Peccei, the founder of the Club of Rome, had used for the global predicament mankind was in.⁶⁰ In order to emphasise the equal importance given to environment *and* development, the special commission was named the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). This was largely the decision of the commission's chairman, the former Norwegian Prime Minister and Minister for Environmental Affairs, Gro Harlem Brundtland.⁶¹

The WCED consisted of 22 politicians and academics from the industrial West, the socialist states and the «Third World».⁶² In sessions and public hearings in Oslo, Jakarta, São Paulo and Harare, it kept coming back to the reciprocal interaction between development and environment. As in Stockholm, the representatives from the Western industrial states – now seeing things also in the light of climate change – made out that environmental problems stemmed mainly from industrialisation, and they urged that all countries should comply with basic environmental standards. Representatives from the socialist states were more hesitant. However, the representatives from the South argued that, due to lack of development, poverty was often the starting point for environmental problems – for example in huge-scale stripping of forests. The fight against poverty should therefore come first and growth should be generated in the developing countries, specifically through better terms of trade, transfer of technology and the writing off of debts.⁶³ Accordingly, the North voted unequivocally for justice evened out between the generations, present and future (*intergenerative Gerechtigkeit*), and put the future development of the environment at centre stage, whereas the demand of the South was for justice *now* (*intragenerative Gerechtigkeit*) – for immediate, present-day fairness of distribution between the two

58 UN Resolution 38/161.

59 Ibid.

60 Seefried, *Zukünfte*, 246, 250.

61 For appointing Brundtland, UN Secretary General Pérez de Cuéllar to Brundtland, 22.12.1983, in: UN Archives, S 1051 0014 05; Borowy, *Defining*, 51–52, 56.

62 Correspondence between Brundtland and vice chairman Mansour Kahlid, in: UN Archives, S 1051 0006 03.

63 For the meetings see Borowy, *Defining*, 75–161.

hemispheres. The World Commission's report, «Our Common Future», was published in 1987. In a somewhat loose compromise, it stressed the needs of both sides – the present generation and the generation to come. But the understanding of «sustainable development» in an «if – then» context was shifted towards present-day needs: «Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable – to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.»⁶⁴ The commission explicitly emphasised that technology and social organisation could both be managed «to make way for a new era of economic growth».⁶⁵ Although the Brundtland Report claimed its aim was to change *quality* of growth in order to raise the quality of life on earth, it was preoccupied (much more than the Stockholm Declaration) with *economic* growth, and *present* needs made up the key focus. Further, the report recommended legal structures recognising the responsibility of states to maintain ecosystems in general and biological diversity in particular and to observe the principle of optimum sustainable yield in the exploitation of natural resources. It also envisaged automatic financial transfers and taxes on international trade in order to make economies sustainable, and in particular to support developing countries.⁶⁶

Initially, the WCED aroused only limited public and political interest in Western societies. In a climate of circulating neo-liberal ideas, a strategy of sustainable development and a global fund to finance it seemed for many to be out of date. This was especially the case of the Reagan government, which had not been willing to pay any funding to finance the World Commission and which now militated against the creation of new regulations.⁶⁷ In West Germany too, the Christian-Liberal coalition kept its distance. Though the coalition was not pursuing a radical neo-liberal course freeing the forces of the market, as was Reagan (or Thatcher), it was inclined to a supply-side conception of economic policy.⁶⁸ From this viewpoint, the CDU-led finance ministry and the CSU-led home office feared that the Commission would chiefly make transfer demands on the West, justifying them with the argument of environmental preservation.⁶⁹ So, at first, the West German government refused to give financial backing to the World Commission.⁷⁰ Perhaps surprisingly, the Green party and the environmentalist groups were sceptical as well. This was because they

64 World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, Oxford, New York 1987, 8.

65 *Our Common Future*, 8.

66 *Ibid.*, 330–331, 340–342; see Borowy, *Defining*, 153–156.

67 A. de Soto to Secretary-General, 15.12.1983, in: UN Archives, S 1051 0014 05; Deutsche Botschaft Genf to Auswärtiges Amt, 3.3.1986, in: Politisches Archiv Auswärtiges Amt (PAAA), 132283; Borowy, *Defining*, 67–68, 160, 172–181.

68 See A. Wirsching, *Abschied vom Provisorium. Ge-*

schichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1982–1990, München 2006, 242–264.

69 Auswärtiges Amt, 415–495.05/3 SB 14, to Staatssekretär, 26.11.1984, in: PAAA, 132176; Bundesministerium des Innern to Auswärtiges Amt, 17.1.1985, in: *ibid.*, 132283.

70 Auswärtiges Amt, 415–495.05/3 Sb 14, to Staatssekretär, 6.12.1984, and Telex Bundesministerium der Finanzen to Auswärtiges Amt, 17.1.1985; on financial support in 1986, German Permanent Mission Geneva, 21.3.1986, all in: PAAA, 132283.

saw a hidden inclination towards economic growth in the Brundtland Report. Further, environmental groups such as Greenpeace protested against Brundtland's decision to resume Norwegian whaling in the north Atlantic in the early 1990s.⁷¹

The concept of «sustainable development» was mainly introduced to the West German political sphere by Volker Hauff, a Social Democrat member of the Brundtland Commission and a friend of Eppler.⁷² Hauff initially translated the concept as «*dauerhafte Entwicklung*» («lasting development»), partly because Carlowitz's original definition was not known in German environmental policy debate.⁷³ Subsequently, this term filtered through into the agenda of the SPD, which, during its time in opposition, had built up a strong social and ecological wing in which Eppler was the central figure.⁷⁴ In its Berlin Manifesto of 1989, the SPD advocated «sustainable development» with the same connotations as found in the Brundtland Report – as a balance in North-South politics between long-term environmental concerns and current developmental interests. Thus, for the SPD, sustainable development meant considering the carrying capacity of the world and securing quality of life and work, as well as self-determination for all, along with respecting the needs of both contemporary and future generations in North and South. Only «sustainable development» could offer «sustainable progress» («*dauerhaften Fortschritt*»), the SPD claimed. The SPD defined sustainable development in the same way as Brandt and Eppler had done at the beginning of the 1970s: as a guiding principle balancing social, ecological and economic goals; but it now coupled it more strongly with the present-day development interests of the South. The party continued to stress the important connection between growth and employment, but it now conceived progress as *sustainable* and as oriented towards making advances in a «quality of life» that went beyond economic growth and the 1960s' concepts of development or modernisation. «Not all growth is progress», the SPD proclaimed. «We need progress that aims not at quantity but at *quality* – at a higher quality of life for humanity.»⁷⁵

By the end of the 1980s, a new politico-ecological dynamic developed, which in turn enlivened global development policy. This grew out of reactions to the Chernobyl Disaster of 1986 and the discovery of holes in the ozone layer. All this coincided

71 Author's interview with Hauff, May 2014; P. Chatterjee / M. Finger, *The Earth Brokers. Power, Politics, and World Development*, London 1994, 21–23, 168–171.

72 Author's interview with Eppler, June 2011; author's interview with Hauff, May 2014; Kommission für Umweltpolitik beim SPD-Parteivorstand, chaired by Hauff, 1984–1986, in: AsD, Hauff Papers, VHAA000072.

73 V. Hauff, «Vorwort», in: Hauff (ed.), *Unsere gemeinsame Zukunft. Weltkommission für Umwelt*

und Entwicklung, Greven 1987, XI–XVII, XV; author's interview with Hauff, May 2014.

74 See minutes of the Programmkommission meetings, in: AsD, Eppler Papers, 1/EEAC000138.

75 Grundsatzprogramm der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands. Beschlossen vom Programm-Parteitag der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands am 20. Dezember 1989 in Berlin, http://www.spd.de/linkableblob/1812/data/berliner_programm.pdf (accessed 15.12.2014), 18, 41, 7.

with the end of the Cold War in 1989/1991. The collapse of the decades-long stand-off between the Western and Eastern blocs set off a new dynamic in the societies of both West and East that favoured international regulation in the environmental sphere.⁷⁶ At the same time, the developing countries hoped for new possibilities to further their own interests.⁷⁷ The Brundtland Commission had recommended a universal UN Declaration and a convention on sustainable development to extend legal principles and to guide state behaviour.⁷⁸ These arrangements were discussed at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), which took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The so-called «Earth Summit» gathered together 15,000 representatives from 175 nations and more than a hundred heads of government, which raised strong media attention. Representatives of almost 1500 NGOs were also present (without being part of the negotiations).⁷⁹ With UNCED, the vague «sustainable development» concept gained highly intensive discursive dynamics and went on to become the hegemonic political discourse on global environmental issues.

Indeed, UNCED breathed a spirit of new departures. It passed the Rio Declaration and an action plan named «Agenda 21» as well as conventions on climate change and on biological diversity, although US objections hampered firm commitments on the former. Though not legally binding, the Rio Declaration defined «sustainable development» as the core concept for the twenty-first century. It aimed at achieving economic growth in a way similar to that recommended in the Brundtland report, but put the needs of actual and future generations and of the South and the North on an equal footing: «The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations.»⁸⁰ However, the Declaration noted that the particular situation and needs of developing countries should be given special priority. Additionally, it maintained that indigenous peoples should have a vital role in environmental management and development due to their knowledge and traditional practices. In this way, the Declaration referred explicitly to traditions and historical aspects in its reflections on sustainable development. The crucial aspect of population growth was only briefly mentioned in a reference to promoting «appropriate demographic policies».⁸¹ Crucially,

76 Radkau, *Ära*, 498–506.

77 F. Uekötter, «The End of the Cold War: A Turning Point in Environmental History?», in: J. R. McNeill / C. R. Unger (eds.), *Environmental Histories of the Cold War*, Washington D.C., Cambridge, MA 2010, 343–351, 344.

78 *Our Common Future*, 332–333.

79 S. P. Johnson, «Introduction: Did We Really Save the Earth at Rio?», in: Johnson, *The Earth Summit: The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*, London 1993, 3–10; Jolly et al., *UN contributions*, 181–183.

80 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, 1992, Principle 3, <http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=78&ArticleID=1163> (accessed 10.1.2014).

81 Rio Declaration, Principle 8; see Sachs, *Global Ecology*; W. Engelhardt, «UNCED: Anspruch, Wirklichkeit und Konsequenzen», in: Engelhardt / H. Weinzierl (eds.), *Der Erdgipfel. Perspektiven für die Zeit nach Rio*, Bonn 1993, 107–136, at 110–113.

the South (epitomised by the G77) rejected any binding commitment on the protection and sustainable development of forests – not least because the Northern representatives were also partly led by their economic interests. Some OECD governments, and especially the US, were very reluctant to bargain away their existing consumption and production patterns, so the Declaration could only propose, rather vaguely, to «reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of consumption and production» to achieve sustainable development.⁸² Further, the North rejected the South's claim that their efforts to comply should receive financial support over and above the official Development Assistance the developed countries already gave. Under pressure from industry, all discussion of the role of the transnationals was left out of discussion.⁸³ Because of all this, UNCED has been negatively characterised as «the unholy alliance between development enthusiasts in the South and growth fatalists in the North», working «not only against the environment but also against greater justice in the world».⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the Earth Summit was successful in fuelling a participatory dimension to «sustainable development», which was emphasised in the Declaration as well as in Agenda 21, and had mobilising consequences.⁸⁵ This was due to the democratic revolutions in the socialist states which were closely related to a «strong and widespread upsurge of interest in human rights and good governance» in the early 1990s.⁸⁶

In West Germany, «sustainable development» now penetrated into the language used about the environment and development across the political spectrum. In 1991, while in opposition, the SPD proposed a parliamentary commission of enquiry on «the protection of humanity and the environment» so as to assure «*zukunftsverträgliche Entwicklung*» («sustainable development» [sic!]) – development aiming at causing the least harm for future generations. The coalition agreed to this.⁸⁷ In 1995 the Christian Union parties, the SPD, the Greens and the FDP proposed a continuation of the Commission. At that time the talk was about «*nachhaltig zukunftsverträgliche Entwicklung*».⁸⁸ The CDU had already adopted «sustainable

82 Rio Declaration, Principle 8; see Agenda 21, 4.3, in: <http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=52&ArticleID=52&l=en>; A. Schmitz / P. Stephan, «Die Weltkonferenz zu Umwelt und Entwicklung in Rio de Janeiro 1992. Ausweg aus dem Interessendschungel?» in: D. Messner / F. Nuscheler (eds.), *Weltkonferenzen und Weltberichte*, Bonn 1996, 175–185; Johnson, «Introduction», 5–7.

83 See Borowy, *Defining*, 190.

84 Sachs, «Global Ecology», 8.

85 Rio Declaration, Principle 10.

86 Jolly et al., *UN Contributions*, 169; see Borowy, *Defining*, 192.

87 Antrag der Fraktion der SPD, Einsetzung einer Enquete-Kommission «Schutz des Menschen und

der Umwelt – Bewertungskriterien und Perspektiven für umweltverträgliche Stoffkreisläufe in der Industriegesellschaft», 10.10.1991, in: *Verhandlungen des Deutschen Bundestages*, printed matter 12/1290.

88 Antrag der Fraktionen CDU/CSU, SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen und FDP, Einsetzung einer Enquete-Kommission «Schutz des Menschen und der Umwelt – Ziele und Rahmenbedingungen einer nachhaltig zukunftsverträglichen Entwicklung», 31.5.1995, in: *ibid.*, printed matter 13/1533; *Konzept Nachhaltigkeit. Vom Leitbild zur Umsetzung. Abschlußbericht der Enquete-Kommission «Schutz des Menschen und der Umwelt. Ziele und Rahmenbedingungen einer nachhaltig zukunftsverträglichen Entwicklung» des 13. Deutschen Bun-*

development» into its 1994 Hamburg Manifesto. The party shaped it in the mould of its own traditional (Christian) approach, grounding it in the protection of the natural fundamentals of life as created by God. In the light of the Chernobyl accident, the emphasis of the CDU was more on environmental security and on balancing economic and environment issues than on redistribution of resources and wealth. Referring to the worldwide *Risikogemeinschaft* («risk community»), the CDU propagated «a new understanding of progress», which had to respect the limits of what nature could bear.⁸⁹

In 1994 the CDU minister of the environment, Klaus Töpfer, was appointed chairman of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, whose mandate was to monitor and review the implementation of Agenda 21 and to activate a dialogue within and between UN institutions and NGOs.⁹⁰ His successor, Angela Merkel, put international politics on climate change forward with two summits in Berlin and initiated a dialogue with NGOs on this Agenda. But in the last throes of the Kohl government, recommendations were not put into practice.⁹¹

3. Economisation and Technological Optimism: The Sustainability Discourse Around 2000

The sustainable development discourse was again transformed in the mid 1990s, and this had to do not only with changing patterns in the global economy but also with specific perceptions of the latter, now understood as «globalisation». Processes of global interconnection had intensified, neo-liberal deregulation and trade liberalisation had globalised the markets, capital mobility had advanced and likewise global communications, thanks to the revolution in information technology. In addition, the ascendancy of the capitalist powers at the end of the Cold War seemed to justify neo-liberal ideas. At the same time and for the same reasons, the developing countries lost the leverage they had for a while been able to exert. Many had hoped that, in the post-Cold War disarmament process, resources would be freed for development assistance – but they were to be disappointed.⁹²

This wave of liberalisation influenced the discourse on sustainable development enormously. Now the term «sustainability» was increasingly employed alongside

destages, Bonn 1998; K.-W. Brand / G. Jochum, *Der deutsche Diskurs zu nachhaltiger Entwicklung*, München 2000, 68–98.

89 Freiheit in Verantwortung. Grundsatzprogramm der CDU Deutschlands, Hamburg, 1994, in: http://www.kas.de/upload/ACDP/CDU/Programme_Beschluesse/1994_Grundsatzprogramm_Hamburg.pdf (accessed 4.6.2014); *Verhandlungen des Deutschen Bundestages*, 30.10.1991, 4300, 4306.

90 Borowy, *Defining*, 193.

91 H. Weidner / M. Jänicke, «Vom Aufstieg und Niedergang eines Vorreiters. Eine umweltpolitische Bilanz der Ära Kohl», in: G. Wewer (ed.), *Bilanz der Ära Kohl*, Opladen 1998, 201–228, 212; Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und Reaktorsicherheit, *Nachhaltige Entwicklung in Deutschland. Entwurf eines umweltpolitischen Schwerpunktprogramms*, Bonn 1998.

92 Jolly et al., *UN contributions*, 170, see *ibid.*, 169–170; Borowy, *Defining*, 183.

«sustainable development» as a *criterion* in future-oriented politics. The concept had a range of different meanings in the scientific debate,⁹³ but in political language it was the *economic* pillar that now came to dominate over the environmental and social ones. «Sustainability» was «economised» as it became increasingly understood as an instrument for raising national competitiveness in the globalisation process. Critics argue that, in the end, the Rio Process and the Johannesburg Summit of 2002 yielded little success because leading political and business-interest players insisted on pushing their own interests.⁹⁴ In this, it was not just a matter of some national governments equating sustainable development/sustainability solely with economic growth. The UN itself saw globalisation partly as a lever for the process, with the «UN, governments, business and civil society coming together to increase the pool of resources».⁹⁵ Further, to some extent, UNCTAD sought to synthesise neo-liberal ideas and poverty-reduction strategies, understanding «sustainability» as constancy of economic growth: «The sustainability of economic growth stemming from these reforms is questionable in most countries. [...] It is well understood now that a sustained process of economic growth and poverty reduction is best realised by giving a greater role to market forces and private initiative.»⁹⁶ Putting the stress on market forces was obviously a reaction to the previous over-reliance on the state, but it also seems that the UNCTAD development policy came partially under a neo-liberal sway.⁹⁷

The extent to which the sustainability discourse had altered from the mid 1990s onwards can be shown in the case of Germany. The 1998 coalition agreement of the Red-Green government expressed this in its announcement of «a new awakening and renewal on our path to the twenty-first century»: «We are oriented towards the ideal of sustainability. The template we attach most importance to is Agenda 21. Our aim is to achieve sustainable development – that means development that is economically effective, socially just and ecologically responsible. The development and introduction of new technologies and procedures, innovative products and services which are integrated in their production so as to focus on the causes of environmental damage, will contribute to the creation of viable jobs.»⁹⁸ Though the government did refer to Agenda 21, it aimed at pursuing «sustainable growth». This bringing together of the «sustainability» and «growth» concepts put the economic

93 See Grunwald / Kopfmüller, *Nachhaltigkeit*, 54–106.

94 U. Brand / C. Görg, «Nachhaltige Globalisierung? Sustainable Development als Kitt des neoliberalen Scherbenhaufens», in: C. Görg / U. Brand (ed.), *Mythen globalen Umweltmanagements. Rio + 10 und die Sackgassen «nachhaltiger Entwicklung»*, Münster 2002, 12–47, 15.

95 «Sustainable Development Summit Concludes in Johannesburg: UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan

Says It's Just the Beginning», 2002, in: http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/whats_new/feature_story39.htm (accessed 10.5.2014); see Brand / Görg, «Globalisierung».

96 UNCTAD, *The Least Developed Countries 2000 Report*, New York, Geneva 2000, VIII, XII.

97 Jolly et al., *UN contributions*, 166–168.

98 Aufbruch und Erneuerung. Deutschlands Weg ins 21. Jahrhundert. Koalitionsvereinbarung zwischen der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutsch-

aspect of sustainability in prime position. New technologies were supposed to create viable employment (and thereby *Zukunftsfähigkeit* or future viability),⁹⁹ and «sustainability» was largely bound up with maintaining the country's place in world economic competition. Similarly, a commission of enquiry set up jointly in 2000 by the SPD, the Christian Union parties and the FDP with Bündnis 90/the Greens, aimed for «provision of energy, sustainable under the conditions of globalisation and liberalisation» in order to create «sustainable development» in the «global competition» for energy reserves.¹⁰⁰ A concrete result of the new understanding of sustainability was the Renewable Energy Law passed by the Red-Green government in 2000.¹⁰¹

The Ecological Modernisation Theory served as scientific basis for this. Although different versions of ecological modernisation circulated transnationally, they were mainly rooted in some form of «green capitalism»,¹⁰² focusing on the environmental benefits of technical innovations. Through efficient use of raw materials and fuels, environmentally-friendly technologies and recycling, it was assumed to preserve the environment and to gain a double usefulness from both ecological and economic aspects, which would ease the politics of the job market.¹⁰³ The Ecological Modernisation Theory had strong connections with intellectual debates on so-called reflexive modernisation and late modernity; and the latter seemed to be characterised by the emergence of new supra-national arrangements and globalisation, together with processes of individualisation and increasing lack of safeguards against ecological risks.¹⁰⁴ To many of the political players, therefore, the concept of ecological modernisation appeared to be an ideal instrument to cushion globalisation, which they saw as a challenge. Also, in the formula of «sustainability», it could be an instrument that linked green ideas with the market philosophy. Therefore, the Greens stressed that the use of resources could and should be uncoupled from

lands und Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen, IV/1, 20.10.1998, in: http://www.gruene.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Dokumente/koalitionsvertrag_gruene_spd_1998.pdf (accessed 25.3.2015; translation by the author).

99 Ibid., «Präambel»; see, for the central aspect of economic efficiency, Brand / Görg, «Globalisierung».

100 Einsetzung einer Enquete-Kommission «Nachhaltige Energieversorgung unter den Bedingungen der Globalisierung und Liberalisierung», Antrag der Fraktionen SPD, CDU/CSU, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen und FDP, 15.2.2000, in: *Verhandlungen des Deutschen Bundestages*, Printed matter 14/2687.

101 L. Mez, «Ökologische Modernisierung und Vorreiterrolle in der Energie- und Umweltpolitik? Eine vorläufige Bilanz», in: C. Egle / T. Ostheim /

R. Zohlnhöfer (eds.), *Das rot-grüne Projekt. Eine Bilanz der Regierung Schröder 1998–2002*, Wiesbaden 2003, 329–350.

102 A. P. J. Mol / G. Spaargaren, «Ecological Modernization Theory in Debate. A Review», in: *Environmental Politics* 9 (2000), 17–49, 22.

103 M. Jänicke, «Ökologische Modernisierung. Optionen und Restriktionen präventiver Umweltpolitik», in: U. E. Simonis (ed.), *Präventive Umweltpolitik*, Frankfurt a. M., New York 1988, 13–26, 23; see Dryzek, *Politics*, 137–154; A. Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse*, Oxford 1995.

104 U. Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, New York 1992 (Orig. 1986); U. Beck / A. Giddens / S. Lash, *Reflexive Modernization. Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Stanford, CA 1994; Mol / Spaargaren, «Ecological Modernization».

economic growth.¹⁰⁵ The FDP jumped on the same bandwagon, presenting itself as «the party for ecological modernisation».¹⁰⁶

It was the SPD that pursued ecological modernisation most strongly, stating that it was the «fundamental innovation for securing prosperity in the twenty-first century». This, the party claimed, was because as well as generating jobs, it would preserve the environment and consequently would stimulate «sustainable growth».¹⁰⁷ Here, the SPD came under specific transnational influences revolving around the «Third Way». The British political scientist Anthony Giddens, adviser to Tony Blair, recommended that the European Social Democrats should pursue a «Centre-Left» course. In this Third Way, market dynamics would become part of the public agenda and would be used for multiple purposes: to reconcile state and civil society, to reform the welfare state with a focus on encouraging self-development and flexibility amongst individuals, and to propagate an understanding of ecological risks, so that ecological modernisation would be seen as an opportunity for innovation. The aim was thus the «modernising of social democracy itself».¹⁰⁸ Although its ideas were not fully put into practice, the Third Way opened up the Social Democrats to elements of the neo-liberal market philosophy.¹⁰⁹

And so, from the mid 1990s, «sustainability» became one of the main political guiding principles, fitting in with a mood of technological optimism and reflecting a changed understanding of progress. In a temporal perspective, the interconnectedness of future, present and past in defining sustainable development dwindled into a point of view that gave predominance to the short-term future. In this understanding of sustainability, a rhetoric of modernisation and «launching out» came to dominate. In the 1960s «modernisation» had been ubiquitous in politics and had clearly shaped the classic progressive party, the SPD, with its general aim of social emancipation.¹¹⁰ Now in the late 1990s, as in the 1960s, it was the SPD that linked sustainability with modernisation, technological optimism and somewhat euphoric expectations of the future. But no longer was this to come from mid- and long-term state planning; rather, modernisation, it was thought, grew out of market forces.¹¹¹

A counter-movement soon developed, though. Firstly, the ecological modernisation-based understanding of sustainability lost much of its dynamic when the bubble of the New Economy burst in 2000, bringing with it a crisis in the world economy.

105 Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, Programm zur Bundestagswahl 1994, 10, in: https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/assets/boell.de/images/download_de/stiftung/1994_Wahlprogramm.pdf (accessed 30.3.2014).

106 FDP, Wahlprogramm für die Bundestagswahl 2002, XI; http://www.documentarchiv.de/brd/2002/wahlprogramm_fdp_2002.html (accessed 20.2.2014).

107 Arbeit, Innovation und Gerechtigkeit. SPD-Pro-

gramm für die Bundestagswahl 1998, in: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bibliothek/retro-scans/a98-04467.pdf> (accessed 20.2.2014).

108 A. Giddens, *The Third Way. The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge 1998, 45, 67.

109 F. Walter, *Vorwärts oder abwärts? Zur Transformation der Sozialdemokratie*, Berlin 2010, 43–57.

110 Seefried, *Zukünfte*; Metzler, *Konzeptionen*, 289–293.

111 Walter, *Vorwärts*, 33, 49–50.

In this context, the Christian Union parties and the FDP brought out an interpretation of sustainability that stressed the importance of tidying up state finances as an element of intergenerational justice. With this dimension to the fore, the aim was more on financial equilibrium and *keeping the future safe* than on modernisation.¹¹²

Secondly, the Red-Green government created a Council for Sustainable Development – the *Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung* (RNE) – following the recommendations of Agenda 21. The Council, set up in 2001, included not only experts and politicians, but representatives from the churches and the unions and ordinary citizens. With Hauff as its first chairman, the RNE worked out a multi-dimensional interpretation of «sustainable development», seeking to integrate the disparate criteria of justice to future generations, quality of life, social cohesion, and international responsibility. Technological efficiency played a role too – but only a role amongst others. In some cities and communities, environmental groups sprang up, which busied themselves with local initiatives to meet the goals of Agenda 21, looking especially at an efficient use of resources, local energy production as well as at environmentally-friendly transport systems.¹¹³ With this, the dominance of the economy and the rhetoric of competition in the political «sustainability» discourse slackened. But in the sphere of big business, a slippery «Global Business Perspective on Development and the Environment» was beginning to take shape.¹¹⁴

Thirdly, the political understanding of sustainability built on ecological modernisation had a number of critics gathering – as they still do – in the multi-faceted Degrowth Movement (*Postwachstum*). Scientists, activists from green circles and NGOs such as Greenpeace and members of groups like Attac critical of globalisation, have urged a stop to economic growth, or even a reduction in output. The Degrowth Movement draws in part from trenchant critics of capitalism, rejecting the market economy and its orientation towards perpetual growth. These critics also sometimes use the term «sustainability», focusing on an «ecological sustainability» (*ökologische Nachhaltigkeit*), which puts the ecological dimension absolutely up front. The Degrowth Movement takes the focus away from technological efficiency because studies have shown that increasing efficiency – which reduces prices and thus boosts demand – has a rebound effect.¹¹⁵ Instead, this movement demands political and economic reforms which will lead to a reduction in the throughput of

112 *Verhandlungen des Deutschen Bundestages*, 29.10. 2002; Gemeinsames Wahlprogramm der CDU/CSU 2002, 4, in: http://www.kas.de/upload/ACDP/CDU/Programme_Bundestag/2002-2006_Regierungsprogramm_Leistung-und-Sicherheit.pdf (accessed 20.2. 2014).

113 <http://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de> (accessed 15.3.2014); J. Geiß, «Akteure, Handlungsebenen und Problemlösungsansätze im System des Sustainable Development», in: M. Sebaldt (ed.),

Sustainable Development – Utopie oder realistische Vision?, Hamburg 2002, 112–157.

114 S. Schmidheiny with the Business Council for Sustainable Development, *Changing Course. A Global Business Perspective on Development and the Environment*, Cambridge, MA 1992.

115 H. Daly, *Beyond Growth. The Economics of Sustainable Development*, Boston; MA 1997; D. Meadows et al., *Limits to Growth. The 30 Year Update*, White River Junction 2004; Grunwald / Kopfmüller,

materials, to a drastic lowering in the use of non-sustainable resources, to restraint in habits of consumption, and to a switch in society to activities *not* involving the processing of material goods.¹¹⁶ Parts of the Degrowth Movement are re-engaging with steady-state thinking and the very arguments *The Limits to Growth* put forward in the early 1970s.

4. Conclusion

Sustainability has become a central part of the national and international policy discourse. Critics argue that it is often merely used as a catchword for «greenwashing» politics and business groups, who like to label their work as socially and ecologically responsible.¹¹⁷ The present article has shown that the polyvalence of the concept, which has made it attractive for politics, derives from various historical discursive dynamics transcending national boundaries. Around 1970, the dominating notions of development and progress, which were bound up with the economic growth paradigm and linear temporal thought, began to be questioned in Western industrialised societies. These notions were partly reconceptualised to incorporate long-term ecological and social issues and an inherent awareness of global interdependency. Thus, the three «pillars» of the present understanding of sustainability – economic development, environmental protection and social equity – have then been conceptualised. In the temporal perspective, the early 1970s growth discourse was laden with scenarios of crisis, partly steady-state thinking and a long-term perspective on environmental problems. Around 1990 the sustainable development discourse interlaced past, present and future more tightly¹¹⁸ by focusing both on the long-term environmental interests of the North and the present-day development-interests of the developing countries. Then, about the middle of the decade, the sustainability discourse adopted a new semantics of modernisation and technological optimism. Here, parallels can be seen with 1960s notions of modernisation and planning. But the state was no longer the central agent of planning; rather, in the framework of perceived globalised competition, a stronger role was given to market forces. This ecological modernisation basis of sustainability was brought back into question by the Degrowth Movement, which revived thinking on the lines of a sustainable steady state.

Nachhaltigkeit, 54–56; T. Bode, «Die Zukunft des Wachstums» in: Greenpeace / Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung (eds.), *Wirtschaft ohne Wachstum?*, Wiesbaden 1999, 173–180.

116 T. Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth*, London 2009, which came out of the Redefining Prosperity Project conducted by the British Sustainable Development Commission; Grunwald / Kopf Müller, *Nachhaltigkeit*, 73–75.

117 D. Worster, «The Shaky Grounds of Sustaina-

bility», in: Sachs, *Global Ecology*, 132–145; R. von Detten, «Einer für alles? Zur Karriere und zum Missbrauch des Nachhaltigkeitsbegriffs», in: D. Füsslein (ed.), *Die Erfindung der Nachhaltigkeit: Leben, Werk und Wirkung des Hans Carl von Carlowitz*, München 2013, 111–125.

118 On the thesis of a «late modern» interlacing of past, present and future see A. Assmann, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne*, München 2013.

The political understandings of sustainable development/sustainability epitomised a changing mode in which politics dealt with the future. In the 1960s, West German political planning had integrated all the new scientific methods into itself (such as systems analysis and Keynesian «*Globalsteuerung*»), and all these were combined with the goal of maintaining and expanding economic growth. But, because of exaggerated expectations and problems in the forecasting and planning processes being run, political planning had got itself into a certain amount of crisis.¹¹⁹ «Sustainable development» and «sustainability» seemed to offer political concepts for the future that, being explicitly vague, appeared to balance economic, ecological and social goals – the «pillars»¹²⁰ – in both short-term and long-term perspectives. Further, «sustainable development» and «sustainability» kept the global aspect in view. Of course, environmental concerns were often subordinated to economic objectives. However, «sustainable development» insinuated and partly served as a political process-perspective far from steering ideas (which were anyway not really transferable to the global level) but still engaged with the shaping of the future.

In general, political notions of progress, so strongly linked with economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s, fell into crisis in the early 1970s. But this should not mean an «end to confidence».¹²¹ Rather, we can see that the talks on growth, sustainable development and sustainability have oscillated between crisis perceptions and a new semantics of modernisation. With each new viewpoint in this ambivalent process, understandings of progress have been recodified and reconfigured.

119 See T. Schanetzky, *Die große Ernüchterung. Wirtschaftspolitik, Expertise und Gesellschaft in der Bundesrepublik 1966 bis 1982*, Berlin 2007; Metzler, *Konzeptionen*, 404–418; for more literature Seefried, *Zukünfte*, 411–452.

120 Engfeldt, *Stockholm*, 20.

121 K. Jarausch (ed.), *Das Ende der Zuversicht? Die siebziger Jahre als Geschichte*, Göttingen 2008.

ABSTRACT

Rethinking Progress. On the Origin of the Modern Sustainability Discourse, 1970–2000

Sustainability has become a key concept in the national and international policy discourse, and nonetheless it has not been clearly defined. This article argues that it is precisely the vagueness of the concept that has made it so attractive for politics. Focusing on the international politics arena and the West German case, the article shows that dominating political notions of development and progress were partly reconceptualised in order to incorporate long-term ecological and social issues around 1970. Against this backdrop, from the late 1980s onwards, «sustainable development» and «sustainability» became political concepts for the future which, explicitly vague, appeared to balance economic, ecological and social goals in both short-term and long-term perspectives. The notions of sustainable development and sustainability oscillated between crisis perceptions, steady-state thinking and a new semantics of modernisation from the 1970s to 2000. In this light, it is argued that there is no «end of confidence» but rather that understandings of progress have been reconfigured.

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