

**CAROLINE
WALZ**

Social and Environmental Responsibility of Action and the Role of Future Expectations

Introduction

Social and environmental responsibility of action is a topic to reflect and debate on, not only in the Mediterranean area, but also worldwide, both at academia and at home. It is also on the agenda of social organizations, NGOs, various supranational and multilateral bodies (IPCC, OECD UN, WEF, WWF, etc.), international cooperation agencies and in some countries, the States itself.

It is directed to environmental topics such as sustainability, climate change, loss of biodiversity and depletion of natural resources and it argues for more effort in social science research about personal life and the responsibilities towards these issues. It is a very current issue because it contributes to rethinking the role of humans in society, as well as the forms of relationships in this world and on this planet from which we derive and have reconstructed significantly, and keep reconstructing continuously.



The aim of bringing these ideas together in an article responds to the fact that while living on this earth and being part of materialistic and consumerist societies (referring to the developed worlds), a need can be detected, not only to be aware of our actions and behaviors concerning social and environmental justice, but also to take responsibility for them in order to avoid the depletion of natural resources and to maintain an ecological balance on this earth for our future generations. More specifically, the approach of this article is to analyze Beckert's (2014) theory of 'Imagined Futures' as a starting point for the debate on intergenerational responsibility and environmental issues. Also addressed in this article is the precautionary approach towards the challenge of scientific uncertainty about the future and our environment.

Analysis

'Progress in regard to wellbeing', which is one of the main aspirations of modernity, is functional to capitalism, the instrumentalization of nature and the subordination of non-western worldviews. Since the problems of modernization are nowadays better acknowledged and even new rights, such as the right to enjoy a healthy environment, have become more familiar to citizens, the possibilities of reinventing 'good life' in such a way is open to social imagination (Rueda, E. A., 2016).

The starting point of expectancies has always to do with uncertainty. There is always something we don't know about the future. Beckert (2014) assumes that if humans' action is based on certain expectations for the future, it will help us to form the future. The basis is always our imagination. For instance, if one comes up with a fiction - something that's created out of nothing - if it's a fiction that others can relate to, then they begin to imagine that this fiction can exist.



If at least a certain amount of people believe that it can exist, then there is something there. Thus, due to their imagination people create expectations for the future. This approach shows us that we as a society don't exactly know how the future will be, but we also can't live with a radical uncertainty. Therefore, it is important to have common expectations.

In regard to the reinvention of 'good life', where humans care about the right to enjoy a healthy environment and the right of future generations to do so too, organizations such as the UN, IPCC or OECD try to stabilize the expectations about the future by filling the gap of uncertainty with knowledge and facts that humans can relate to. These organizations therefore channel expectations with the knowledge that they produce.

Though, regarding the past and the future, there is little that we know about climate change. Scientific uncertainty is immanent in all international environmental laws because we don't have a full understanding of the natural system or of our interactions with it. Our scientific understanding is always changing, as is our technological knowledge and know-how (Weiss, E. B., 1993). But again, institutions create certainties, and certainties create stability, which humans need. Thus, imaginary expectations of the future shape a society that responds appropriately to the challenge of reinventing 'good life'.

Equality, Environmental Justice & Intergenerational Justice

In developing a new definition of equity for environmentally sustainable development, several factors and issues must be noted and addressed. First, the global environment knows no political boundaries; its components are spatially and temporally interdependent (Weiss, E. B., 1993).



Environmental justice is referred to as a situation in which the costs and harms of climate change are carried in proportion to contributions to its case, highlighting that the opposite is typically the case, with richer people and countries disproportionately causing and poorer disproportionately suffering harms (Jamieson, L., 2016).

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Thus, sustainable development is inherently intergenerational.

International justice requires acknowledgement of responsibility to future generations (Jamieson, L., 2016).

Yet, according to Weiss (1993), future generations' interests have not been identified and adequately represented in the negotiations, the implementing measures, or in the compliance mechanisms of international environmental agreements. The present generation obviously has a built-in bias in favor of itself. Indeed, the instruments that have been developed in the marketplace to consider environmental effects on future generations, namely externalities and discount rates, start from the perspective of the present generation. Thus, in regard to future expectations, it will be important to develop an international consensus on the definition and outlines of the concept of intergenerational equity.

Precautionary Approach

The precautionary approach, or precautionary principle is one response to the recognition that we face with the necessity to act in the presence of scientific uncertainty about the future.



The precautionary principle lowers the burden of proof required for taking action against proposed or existing activities that may have serious long-term harmful consequences. According to Weiss (1993), there is no agreement on the content of this principle, or even as to whether an actual principle has emerged or only an approach to address a problem. Nevertheless, countries have begun to develop precise and useful formulations of the principle in specific contexts. For example, the implementation of the London Ocean Dumping Convention (1972). As our understanding of the environment has grown, we have recognized that agreements need to be directed to conserving ecological systems, not only to controlling specific pollutants or conserving particular species. This insight has been increasingly reflected in international instruments.

Jamieson (2016) argues that in social and physical systems the conduct of family and personal life plays a major role in how demanding the population is on finite resources. Family practices overlap with practices of consumption and consumption is a moment in every practice. For example, the meanings and competences of cleanliness and mobility that are constructed in families respond to the electric shower and the car. They became a key part of how the shower and car were adopted into family practices. The materials lock people into high consumption much more powerfully than the meanings and competences of cleanliness and mobility themselves (Jamieson, L., 2016). If these family practices are remarginalized and their role to support materials diminishes, there can be a change. Families and informal supply networks are thus not separated from the vast social worlds because they perform their functions of creating and sustaining "individuals", and they are not only servants of the capitalist system.



For example, private life is impaired by commercialization, but not typically dictated or destroyed by it. Most family lives are not eroded by hyper consumption, a "work to spend" cycle that poisons all other logics. Nevertheless, regarding the precautionary approach, it is not 'individuals' who have to change but social and physical systems.

According to Jamieson (2016), families are such social and physical systems created by family practices. Research suggests that, when parents or other family members communicate appreciative interest in the natural world to children (future expectations), this both enhances the wellbeing and the impacts on children's awareness of environmental issues, influencing future willingness to take pro-environmental action; similarly, children who are engaged by aspects of the natural world can enhance the engagement of receptive parents (Jamieson, 2016).

Researchers have also explored parents' aspirations for children. In a qualitative UK study involving 47 parents, Shirani and co-authors (2013) consider whether parenting and the temporal extension of the self through caring for a younger generation modifies attention to the future and influence views and practices around energy use in both the present and the future. They found that parents of primary school children were the most likely to consider lifestyle changes for the future of their children (Shirani et al, 2013). To conclude, youth and family studies have researched the way in which future orientations, or a sense of extended present plays out in transitions to adulthood and family transitions, but only rarely with a focus on whether and how issues of environment are an aspect of future.



Conclusion

In this article Beckert's (2014) 'Imagined Futures' theory is introduced, in order to understand how humans creates the future with imagined expectations. This only works, if we have common expectations. Institutions or organizations like e.g. the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) try to stabilize expectations for the future. They channel expectations with the knowledge that they produce, and that people can relate to. We know that the past exists by the way we think about it and by the way we remember it. The future yet can only be imagined. Thus, the past shapes the future. Over time, humans' aspirations have changed and so have humans' aspirations of 'progress in regard to well-being'. The most important aspect that has been analyzed in this article is intergenerational justice.

Sustainable development is inherently intergenerational. Although the present generation's behavior in the 'developed worlds' seems rather in favor of itself (Capitalism, Materialism, Consumerism) (Weiss, 1993), in regard to future generations, it appears more and more important and urgent to develop an international consensus on the definition and outlines of the concept of intergenerational equity. The state plays an important role in this and cannot be disregarded. In order to reduce environmental issues policies and effective state regulations are needed. Nevertheless, the global environment knows no political boundaries. No country or even group of countries has the capacity to protect the environment over time by isolated efforts (Weiss, 1993). The challenge is therefor, how to solve a global problem on national levels.



The third main topic addressed in this article is the precautionary approach, which is one response to the recognition that we face with the necessity to act in the presence of scientific uncertainty about the future. As our understanding of the environment has grown, we have recognized the need to conserve ecological systems, and not only to control specific pollutants or conserve particular species. This insight has been increasingly reflected in international instruments, yet, Jamieson (2013) points out the need for much more effort in social science research about personal life in regard to the environment. Individuals make decisions based on cognitive patterns (social media, networks, institutions). This is how individuals are influenced, how they form their opinions and get their knowledge. Essentially, in social and physical institutions such as families, individuals are influenced to behave in a certain way.

In conclusion, there can be change in these social and physical institutions through inventing the future expectations within them. This starts by humans rethinking family practices, acting socially and environmentally responsible and changing their lifestyle, communication and education in order to meet the aspirations of ‘progress in regard to well-being’ and the equality towards future generations.

Bibliography

Beckert, J. (2014). Imagined Futures: Fictionality in Economic Action. *Ssrn*.
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2464088>

Göthlich, Stephan E. (2003). Fallstudien als Forschungsmethode: Plädoyer für einen Methodenpluralismus in der deutschen betriebswirtschaftlichen Forschung, Manuskripte aus den Instituten für Betriebswirtschaftslehre der



Universität Kiel, No. 578, Universität Kiel, Institut für Betriebswirtschaftslehre, Kiel.

Jamieson, L. (2016). Families, relationships and “environment”: (Un)sustainability, climate change and biodiversity loss. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 5(3), 335–355.
<https://doi.org/10.1332/204674316X14758387773007>

Rueda, E. A. (2016). Anti-Antimodernity: Understanding Modern Narratives in (of) Latin America. In: *Social Images*, vol. 2, 2016, no. 2.

Shirani, F., Butler, C., Henwood, K., Parkhill, K., Pidgeon, N. (2013). Disconnected futures: Exploring notions of ethical responsibility in energy practices, *Local Environment* 10, 4, 455-68.

Weiss, E. B. (1993). *International Environmental Law: Contemporary Issues and the Emergence of a New World Order*. *L.J* (Vol. 675). Retrieved from <http://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/facpub/1628>
<http://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/facpub>

