**Sustainability as a Cultural Transformation:   
The Role of Deliberative Democracy**

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**Abstract:**

What might break the ‘glass ceiling’ that has so far prevented a deep sustainability transformation beyond smaller environmental reforms? Here, I consider the cultural dimension of such a transformation. Cultural meanings provide not only the building blocks of individuals’ life stories, but collectively also construct (what is taken to be) the social reality, powerfully shaping how people think and act. Any glass ceiling to societal transformation is thus partly cultural, and can be reproduced by a society’s ‘political grammar,’ which constrains what future visions can be perceived and politically advanced. Contesting these limits is vital for making glass ceilings visible and opening up new transformative potentials beyond them. Consequently, overcoming the glass ceiling of the environmental state, and unleashing a more profound sustainability transformation, must be understood as a *cultural* transformation: a process of ‘meaning-making’ that re-orientates people’s fundamental norms and outlooks. This perspective adds further nuance to the debate around democracy and sustainability, suggesting that it is not just democracy in general, but only a particularly vibrant and critical deliberative sphere that can provide the necessary political foundation.

**Keywords**: Sustainability, social transformation, glass ceiling, culture, meaning-making, deliberative democracy

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**Introduction**

Despite the reforms made by ‘environmental states’ over past decades to integrate environmental concern into the core of government activity (Duit *et al.* 2016), a deeper sustainability transformation is still needed in Western societies. Although awareness of threats like climate change and biodiversity loss has inspired widespread environmental concern as well as reform, the fundamental drivers of unsustainability persist. This can be attributed to a number of economic, political, ecological and other tangible structural factors, and their complex interplay (see the introduction to this volume). Here, however, I explore a different dimension of what holds back more radical transformation: I argue that not just progress on specific environmental problems, but also a general propensity for structural transformation is needed for sustainability in this deeper sense. Such a propensity is not just material, but also cultural in nature. The upshot is that sustainability governance requires not only technical-scientific and managerial capacity, but also widespread democratic engagement able to foster a collective re-thinking of taken-for-granted views, such as through deliberative processes.

Transformability is at the heart of sustainability. Rather than constituting a mere temporary management challenge, sustainability denotes a society’s long-term response to socio-ecological phenomena that are complex, unpredictable, and constantly changing. Inasmuch as the causes of unsustainability are dynamic in nature, sustainability too must be understood as an open-ended, reflexive process, and transformability thus as a key component. The failure of environmental states to move beyond piecemeal reform suggests transformability is woefully lacking: even societies fully intent on responding to the environmental crisis have hit a ‘glass ceiling’ that prevents change of the depth required to adequately respond to the ecological realities at hand. These societies have created environmental government departments, significantly reduced levels of pollution, incentivised green technology and seen widespread environmental concern among the public. Yet despite full awareness that this has not been effective as a response to existential threats like climate change, the deeper culprits of consumer capitalism, industrialism, and resource overuse remain in place, in fact continuing to intensify.

While sustainability has previously been linked to transformability by, amongst others, ecologists (Folke *et al.* 2010), I argue that the necessary transformability is not just ecological and material, but also cultural in nature. Although ecological, economic, and political material facts (for example, how close the level of global warming has already come to catastrophic tipping points, or the degree of formal freedom of the economy and polity) play a part in determining the space for societal change, a capacity for transformation depends also on the society’s *perception* of its social reality and future options, formed by the sum of its members’ thoughts and political imaginations and how they inform public discourse (for example, how open rather than set-in-stone the society’s future paths are perceived to be by citizens, how free and rewarding they find their engagement in public dialogue on it, and how reflexive and creative the ideas put forward within such dialogue). Perceptions of the value of certain features of the environment, but also certain social norms, for human flourishing determine the normative meaning of sustainability in the first place; what avenues of social change are *seen* as viable and worthwhile new directions for society affects which are embarked upon, whether collectively or individually. Hence, it is possible that one part of what has been preventing a deeper breakthrough towards sustainability is a glass ceiling that is *cultural* in nature: one set by a given construction of social reality, made up of a given set of meanings and imaginative horizons. This perspective would suggest that new forms of discursive and imaginative (rather than technical and scientific) engagement with the society’s future could play an important role in the governance of sustainability, in terms of achieving a deeper change in perspective across society. Later, I explore the extent to which deliberative democracy, by fostering new societal spaces for reflection and mutual exchange of perspectives, can provide a political foundation for this.

To be sure, referring to this as a ‘cultural’ dimension of sustainability instantly burdens it with the wide range of interpretations and aspects of society that have been associated with the concept of culture over time (Soini and Dessein 2016, p. 168). I focus on an anthropological conceptualisation of culture that defines it as an overarching, fluid realm of both individual and societal ‘meaning-making’ (Spillman 2001) – a definition that explicitly moves beyond culture as a fixed, homogeneous set of values demarcating collective groups such as nations. From this angle, inasmuch as a shift in ‘meanings’ is required for a society to become environmentally sustainable, culture as the ‘sphere of meanings’ can present one important glass ceiling, but a cultural transformation likewise can present the decisive shift towards (greater) sustainability. However, if continuous, dynamic transformability is the aim, what is needed is not a forceful imposition of one particular ‘cultural revolution’ towards some specific new set of values. Rather, it is the overall *realm* of culture that is significant precisely for its (potential for) dynamic openness beyond the boundaries of established thinking.

This is the dimension of a possible cultural breakthrough towards sustainability that I explore. Meaning-making practices can be seen as the antidote to the most intangible and pervasive of glass ceilings of change – those in our (individual as well as collective) imagination. In terms of governance, against those who see sustainability as an elite-led managerial challenge of realising specific outcomes, unleashing a cultural breakthrough demands a free and inclusive – and thus, I will argue, deliberative democratic – sphere of engagement as one key foundation for sustainability.

To make this argument, I first present an account of sustainability, arguing that conceptually it stands for a process of continuous adaptation to socio-ecological change, to which openness and transformability are central. This highlights the glass ceiling set by a particular ‘grammar’ of political imagination as problematic, and hence the need for cultural transformation of meanings as central. The following section thus proposes an approach to sustainability as a cultural transformation, highlighting processes of individual and collective meaning-making as a way of broadening the society’s imaginative space. I then turn to the political foundations for such processes, exploring the role of deliberative democracy as a key precondition.

**Sustainability, transformability and a glass ceiling in the form of meanings**

Although the term emerged as a concept in ecology – the notion of ‘sustainable yields’ – environmental sustainability has since been associated with a wide range of different definitions, advanced by different stakeholders each trying to take advantage of its openness to interpretation (Thiele 2013; Lélé 1991). Over time, this has led to a complete reinterpretation of the concept from ‘strong’, conservation-oriented definitions inspired by notion of limits to growth towards the notion of ‘sustainable development’ that specifically incorporates economic growth as one key criterion, at the expense of a clear ecological grounding (Mert 2009, pp. 334-5). Arguably because it is more compatible with the liberal economic world order, it is this interpretation that has become dominant in policy circles (Christoff and Eckersley 2013, p. 56). It is typically operationalised as a set of outcome indicators, which are likewise rooted not just in ecological science but also political negotiation (Rametsteiner *et al.* 2011; see also Eckersley 2017, p. 993). Although as an inherently normative concept it cannot be separated from political and cultural constructions of norms, it must still be guided by an understanding of the underlying ecology.

At its core, the concept of sustainability implies the continued flourishing of human societies in the face of changing ecological conditions. As such, it has been argued it is more plausibly conceived as a process rather than a specific end state: given the changing nature of ecological conditions, it can only denote a moving target (Robinson 2004, p. 381; Thiele 2013, p. 9). Although there are limits in the form of ecological tipping points, *defining* sustainability as a set of indicators reduces it to a technical matter of keeping within certain parameters, when ‘the dynamic and unstable character of the Earth system’ means it must be understood as a much more profound challenge (Dryzek 2016, p. 940).

The unpredictability of ecological change has of late received attention as part of political theory scholarship on the ‘Anthropocene’ (Eckersley 2017, p. 985; Dryzek 2016; Dryzek and Pickering 2019). Yet ecological science has long stressed that ecosystem change is not continuous and gradual, but complex, non-linear, and episodic (Holling and Meffe 1996, p. 332). Ecosystems have a propensity for abrupt, catastrophic shifts following what might seem only a minor perturbation, and are so intricately interconnected that such shifts can in turn cause a series of knock-on effects elsewhere (Folke *et al.* 2010). The potential for these critical transitions is greatest precisely the more ecological processes are controlled and ‘managed’ – that is, the more static a definition and technical-managerial an approach to sustainability is taken (Holling and Meffe 1996). Ecologically, therefore, sustainability must go beyond the conservation of a given socio-ecological state, or the containment of what are typically perceived as discrete environmental problems within the status quo (Christoff and Eckersley 2013, pp. 5-6). Rather, it has to do with the general patterns by which an inevitably changing society and ecosystem co-evolve over the long term, which must be ‘*both* creative and conserving’ (Holling 2001, p. 399, emphasis added): driven by the reflexive learning and dynamic adaptation that prevent any more catastrophic ecosystem shifts, and thus preserve not a given *state*, but the society’s general basis for flourishing over time (Hammond and Ward 2019).

Rather than as a set of indicators, sustainability is thus best described as a process of continuous adaptability (Folke *et al.* 2010) and reflexivity (Dryzek 2016) that allows societies to transform themselves in response to ecological change. The more open and able societies are to not just undertake smaller reforms (even though these remain necessary as well), but to undergo structural social change at a more fundamental level, the better they are able to respond to the reality of such complex and changing conditions. Opposed to sustainability, in contrast, are path dependencies, which can be pernicious if they leave the society unable to reflexively adapt to changing conditions (Dryzek 2016). Thus, at its core, sustainability presupposes a fundamental openness and transformability of societal development. This does not imply that *any* transformation enhances sustainability; what constitutes sustainability as a process, and distinguishes it from other, unsustainable processes of societal evolution, is its ongoing adaptiveness to changing socio-ecological conditions, for the sake of continued societal flourishing. In other words, societies must be fundamentally open towards change precisely to conserve what matters for their prosperity in the face of ecosystemic shifts and crises. This implies both: a societal commitment to be adaptive for the sake of human flourishing, i.e., a *commitment* to sustainability; and sufficient *openness* for adaptation to radically new conditions to be possible.

Based on this definition of sustainability, the possibility of a glass ceiling to societal transformation poses a particularly significant threat. It means the society’s future is not open, but path dependent or ‘locked in’; the present exerts limiting conditions on what futures are possible (Moore *et al.* 2014, p. 54; see also Blühdorn 2009). As a result, any commitment to sustainability notwithstanding, the transformability that allows for adaptiveness to the underlying conditions sustainability responds to is compromised. Indeed, from this perspective, the existence of *any* glass ceilings is in itself a sign of unsustainability. The problem is not just that the glass ceiling forecloses certain specific outcomes or policies currently associated with a radical sustainability transformation (say, degrowth) but also that it *generally* closes off options and enforces the continuation of a given path, as opposed to maintaining openness to a range of possible futures. For inasmuch as ecological processes are complex, dynamic and unpredictable, sustainability as the societal response to them *inherently* demands openness to change – including radical transformation if necessary (O’Brien 2011).

This perspective on glass ceilings opens up a new angle on (un)sustainability: the role of cultural meanings. If what renders societies unsustainable are not just specific material or ecological conditions (such as a certain level of greenhouse gas emissions, or a certain economic growth rate), but also a general lack of openness, unsustainability can be unnecessarily perpetuated by a *perception* of the social reality as ‘locked in’ – a glass ceiling that is not material in nature, but that consists in an overly narrow imaginative horizon. A sustainability transformation then hinges not just on specific technical solutions, but it relates in two senses to certain *meanings* articulated by the society in question: the commitment to sustainability depends on the *normative* meanings associated with it, while a fundamental openness of future pathways is determined by the *semantic* meanings of the given ‘grammar’ – the hidden rules and communicative structures that provide the framework for our thinking – with which a given reality is constructed.

To start with, semantically, a glass ceiling consists in the inevitable existence of a political grammar that constrains what is visible, thinkable and sayable at any given time, and thus constructs and potentially ‘locks in’ a given social ‘reality’. Grammar consists of the unwritten rules of communication that assign, as Richard Avramenko puts it, both words and people ‘their proper homes’, such that different grammars yield different types of social relationships (Avramenko 2017, p. 498). For Aletta Norval (2006), this grammar also constructs political identities, which materialise into a certain form of politics. Since this invisible grammar, for Wittgenstein, ‘sets the bounds of sense’ (Norval 2006, p. 231), it structurally predetermines what can be perceived, let alone articulated, as a certain state of being or a future pathway. As such, it can create a glass ceiling that limits the openness of the society’s pathway in a way that is not dependent on tangible facts alone, but on what is intelligible in the society, on the particular manner in which people make sense of the overall ungraspable complexity of facts (Norval 2007, p. 187). This forefronts but also forecloses particular ideas by invisibly prestructuring the political debate and framing key terms. Consider the way in which the meaning of the term ‘sustainability’, as discussed above, has shifted over the past decades in line with the growing dominance of the neoliberal paradigm. For Norval, ‘our political vocabularies … are neither set in stone nor easily amenable to change’ (2006, p. 232), yet in order for a society to be fully open to both perceiving relevant socio-ecological phenomena and responding to them, it must be able to transcend such limitations of what is visible, thinkable, and sayable. If communication in a society is at each moment inescapably bound by a particular grammar, which in turn plays a part in ‘mak[ing] up our world’ (Wenman 2013, p. 151), including its possible futures, radical openness to transformation requires uncovering and challenging that given grammar so as to ultimately transcend such limitations.

This is particularly important insofar as a given grammar is not a ‘neutral’ simplification of the world, but one that is (subconsciously if not strategically) politically driven (Norval 2007). As such, the limitations so imposed are not random, but systematic, actively perpetuating the social order whose protagonists have vested interests in closing off alternatives. It is through these political forces that a given grammar and social order create the path dependencies that are the greatest threat to the fundamental openness sustainability demands (Dryzek 2016).

At the same time, however, a normative – and in this sense always political – dimension to seeing the world is also intrinsic to sustainability. For it to constitute an intrinsically valuable end for societies, sustainability must stand for not just the physical survival of a given population, but a new form of prosperity: a *normative* vision of how a society can flourish despite its inescapable situatedness in socio-ecological constraints and threats (Jackson *et al.* 2016; Jackson 2017). Such dimensions as ‘flourishing’, or leading ‘meaningful’ lives, cannot be reduced to technical solutions alone, but are socially and politically determined over time. To this extent, sustainability is

‘…ultimately an issue [not just of science but] of human behavior, and negotiation over preferred futures, under conditions of deep contingency and uncertainty. It is an inherently normative concept, rooted in real world problems and very different sets of values and moral judgements (Robinson 2004, pp. 379-80).’

As a vision of a socially worthwhile and thus *meaningful* future, sustainability partly *consists in* the normative meanings a society attaches to certain ecological conditions as well as collective ends such as prosperity; this normative dimension defines it for a society. Without such normativity, the conceptual openness of sustainability means it could well be interpreted as basic survival in what would today be viewed as ‘a very sad place’ (Seghezzo 2009, p. 549). The upshot is that shifts in meanings make possible (or impossible) certain visions of sustainability, and thus potential societal pathways towards the future. For instance, within a constrained communicative space, a meaningful societal future might be conceivable only on the basis of material affluence and modern technology, suggesting a politics of ‘green growth’; yet alternative articulations might challenge this, and start a dialogue about wider sources of meaning. The normative dimension of sustainability is deeply political. Therefore, key to sustainability is not to keep a purely semantic grammar of the ‘politically sayable’ as *neutral* as possible, but rather to bring out the distinctly normative and necessarily political discourses that shape its form and the semiotic as well as normative meanings it can thus produce.

In summary, invisible grammars impact on the openness of society by shaping both the visibility and normative desirability of different versions of reality. Sustainability as a process requires openness and transformability; yet integral to it at each stage are visions of normatively meaningful futures. As a result, a key dimension of sustainability governance takes place in the overarching societal realm of ‘meanings’ – the realm of *culture*. What determines both the openness of a society’s future and the latter’s normativity is not a question of fixed, material variables, but of cultural processes of ‘meaning-making’ (Spillman 2001; Carriere 2014). If sustainability partly consists in the construction of new normative meanings, yet these processes must – against the simultaneous persistent forces of ‘sedimentation’ (Laclau 1990) of all such meanings into powerful grammars – always remain open-ended, the cultural realm becomes a decisive arena in which the most fundamental frameworks for sustainability governance are demarcated.

**Sustainability as a cultural transformation**

While culture has been defined in numerous ways, with both positive and very negative connotations (e.g. Geertz 1973; Kuper 1999; Bourdieu 2010), recent accounts emphasise the fluidity and diversity of cultural processes as they interact with individual identity-building: culture as ‘meaning-making’ (Spillman 2001; Carriere 2014). This is the focus adopted here. At the individual level, meaning-making is the process by which people construct their life stories and identities (Fivush *et al.* 2011), whilst at the collective level, endowing otherwise meaningless events with meaning continually creates and re-creates a shared social reality (Kashima 2014, p. 91). As information is exchanged in day-to-day communication, meanings are always created and transmitted, ‘humanising’ the communicated information by attaching value to it that makes it relevant or meaningful in relation to ‘how to do things’ (Kashima 2014, p. 82). This continually ‘cultivate[s]’ the social environment in a certain way (Carriere 2014, p. 270), and can open up new possibilities where new meanings arise precisely through *disruptions* of common routines, or uncertainty about how widely cultural presuppositions are shared (Kashima 2014, p. 91).

As such, in contrast to accounts of cultures as homogeneous structures, meaning-making processes are necessarily dynamic, fluid, and heterogeneous. As William Sewell puts it, we must ‘think of worlds of meaning as *normally* being contradictory, loosely integrated, contested, mutable, and highly permeable’ (Sewell 1999, p. 53). As such an open, fluid realm that is shaped by everyone in society, culture is not a fixed inheritance, but has a potential for transforming social reality. In Simone Chambers’ words (1996, pp. 242-3, emphases added),

‘[W]e are both the creatures and the creators of culture. As creatures, we are the product of our cultural environment. But culture is not some independent external force. We create and reproduce culture through our actions and beliefs; *we make culture…*’;

This is significant for a politics of overcoming glass ceilings in that

‘…Politics takes place within culture and is bounded by the limits and understandings of culture. As we are the carriers and creators of culture, *our understandings and practices set the broad limits for politics within our world*’.

It is this transformative potential of meanings that makes culture a significant force in transcending the grammar – the previous ‘limits for politics’ – of societal glass ceilings. New meanings that people create at the individual and interpersonal level ‘turn [information] into a meaningful basis for action’ (Kashima 2014, p. 81) whilst collectively, the realm of culture as a whole

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

This connects the processes of meaning-making that determine the space of the imaginable (and hence politically doable) with those that create the normative meanings that make a vision such as sustainability *meaningful* for individuals to take action on. An approach to sustainability as a cultural transformation promises a more deep-seated change towards sustainable lifestyles and politics by grounding it in such processes. Its basis is the possibility of processes of meaning-making that continually transform a given grammar to overcome any temporary glass ceilings, whilst being oriented towards sustainability as an open yet – as a general end – normatively meaningful vision. Concretely, this might take the form of critical discourses highlighting the limitations of the ‘green growth’ framing, for instance, and broadening the debate on what a sustainable future might look like. This might generate alternative visions perceived as so meaningful by citizens as to inspire more radical, yet intrinsically rather than superficially motivated action on sustainability where previously there was disenchanted detachment. The more diverse and broad-ranging these discourses, the better able they will be to transcend the boundaries of previously taken-for-granted grammars.

To be sure, this is only a potential, not a guarantee. There is an equal potential for cultural processes to be instrumentalised in powerful elites’ attempts to spread certain constructions or to obscure a certain reality (Glassner 2000, p. 591). It is not just individuals’ discursive interactions with others, but also larger-scale, strategic influences via ‘news media, advocacy, political, and other organizations that concurrently alter both meanings and structural conditions’ (Glassner 2000, p. 592). This is important to recognise because once created, cultural meanings are highly influential in that they powerfully interact with political, economic and associational relationships in society (Maines 2000; Bourdieu 2010) – including those kept in place by powerful actors benefiting from an unsustainable status quo. Crucially, this means the realm of culture embodies the potential *both* for transformation radical enough to transcend pervasive political grammars, and for their very perpetuation through particularly elusive but highly potent elite-led influences that can entrench fates of oppression and privilege (Maines 2000, p. 579). This twofold potential makes the realm of culture not just an optional, potentially useful new avenue, but a crucial contestatory space from which sustainability as transformability must be addressed.

This raises the question of what kinds of settings, institutions and activities shape *how* a society creates meanings. Even though meanings are constantly constructed, the *conditions* in which this takes place determine how open, reflexive, and sustainability-oriented is the manner in which societal meanings evolve – that is, to what extent (if at all) a transformation towards sustainability is taking place.

As Elizabeth Shove (2010) explains, extant approaches to sustainability have focused almost exclusively on rationally motivated change of *behaviours*, incentivised from the top down as a new type of consumer behaviour. In these efforts, policymakers attempt to engineer a given vision of sustainability by ‘nudging’ individuals towards new lifestyles (Thiele 2013). While such policy interventions are also styled as a response to unsustainable path dependencies (in the form of habits), these are seen as problematic in that they get in the way of the ‘efficiency’ of the government’s strategic agenda (Stern 2006, p. 381), not because they limit openness as such. Without any space for debate at the level of social norms and their transformation (Shove 2010, p. 1277), such strategic and narrowly behavioural interventions only deepen the entrenched neoliberal path (and glass ceiling), eroding rather than enhancing reflexivity.

Although this insight stems from taking seriously the nature of ecosystemic change, strategic interventions are found even within the literature on complex social-ecological systems. Michele-Lee Moore and colleagues seek to trigger specific transformations through deliberate agency by powerful ‘policy entrepreneurs’ (Moore *et al.* 2014, 56). However, such purposive ‘transition management’ based on narrow policy discourses on sustainability (Moore *et al.* 2014, p. 56; Smith and Stirling 2010) likewise risks increasing rather than containing the danger of abrupt state shifts if it reduces inclusiveness and thus diversity of engagement with visions of sustainability.

A cultural account of sustainability, focusing on the deeper meaning-making processes that underlie people’s intrinsic motivations, suggests a different approach. Because sustainability means to *continually* transcend the *inevitable* formation of glass ceilings of political grammar and imagination, which in turn are themselves culturally constructed, only very open and critical transformative processes will advance sustainability in the long run. Sustainability is not a specific cultural project that could be strategically steered. Its two components – openness and an orientation towards *normatively imbued* collective futures – together constitute the exact opposite of elite-driven cultural framings, including incentivisation and transition management strategies. Instead, they demand as inclusive and dynamic a cultural realm as possible, maximising the space for a critical re-thinking of meanings: sustainability as a ‘continuously evolving “imaginary world”’ (Soini and Dessein 2016, p. 168). Within today’s policy discourses around an accepted – ‘sedimented’ – meaning of sustainability, it may seem obvious that certain measures, if imposed, would enhance the sustainability of a society; say, restricting personal travel, meat consumption, or even the number of children. Yet for sustainability as a process of *continually* re-creating the society in response to new realities, they would not achieve this if it came at the cost of compromising the crucial openness of societal engagement with new meanings, in this case due to more invasive and authoritarian forms of government. Breaking a given glass ceiling is tantamount to meaning-making so critical and reflexive as to prompt a fundamental ‘shift in how humans see the world’ (Giddings et al. 2002, p. 195), enabling them to challenge entrenched structures. For this, politically, it is vital to create spaces in which cultural meanings can be first and foremost unmasked and *contested*. Only on the basis of reflexivity in a diverse and contestatory public sphere (see Torgerson 1999; Brulle 2010) might the critical balance within the cultural realm then be tipped towards openness.

Of course, even in the right conditions, sustainability cannot be guaranteed to emerge in this way. This cultural angle suggests a *potential* for sustainability to emerge through new processes of meaning-making; their socio-political foundations are thus necessary, but not in themselves sufficient, conditions for its actual emergence. Yet these processes cannot be bypassed in favour of a mere imposition of supposedly sustainable behaviours. While such an approach might well appear to be successful in the short term, it could not on its own bring about genuine sustainability at the level that matters – the society’s deep-seated, intrinsically driven evolution. Yet when it does touch this cultural level, the resulting sustainability transformation would be all the more powerful. Whereas belief in the impossibility of change (the very premise that ‘there is no alternative’) locks a hegemonic grammar into place, reflexivity and visioning as the opposite practices have a unique power to alter the frameworks, or grammar, of our perceptions and tangible options (Böker 2017a). If these altered semantic meanings then led to a change in normative meanings as well, even a radical societal transformation could be widely supported as intrinsically meaningful, rather than only contingently secured by the right incentive structures, management regime, or top-down enforcement.

**Deliberative democracy as a precondition**

Hence, from the starting point of sustainability as an open-ended process that must, on one level, involve transcending old and constructing new meanings, it is possible to develop an account of sustainability as a *cultural* process – a process of ‘meaning-making’ – that ties it to democracy as a necessary political foundation: meaning-making as the only realm potentially open enough to transform the given grammar a society is locked into; and democracy as the only political space that allows for this to happen sufficiently freely, critically, and with a normative orientation.

Based on an understanding of sustainability as outcome indicators and behavioural changes, new defences have recently appeared of top-down, technocratically driven forms of governance (see, e.g., Shearman and Smith 2007; Maxton and Randers 2016). These might well be successful at spreading a specific new narrative for action on sustainability. Yet, from the cultural angle, this would be tantamount precisely to eroding the inclusive reflexivity needed for the public to challenge entrenched meanings, and thus undermine sustainability in the long run. Given the limited scope for deep reflexivity in closed, technocratic circles, the public is crucial; only inclusive participation and open public debate can bring together the wide range of ‘alternative worldviews’ (Brulle 2010, p. 84) and the ‘fullest information’ (Barry 1999, 204) that might inspire new meaning-making across the society at large. Indeed, it can then be theorised that the more inclusive and thus the more diverse the public discourse is, the greater will be its critical and reflexive cultural capacity, feeding as it does off encounters with alternative viewpoints. With the glass ceiling constantly being fortified by ‘sedimenting’ and strategically driven meanings, this means anything less than democracy would be unacceptably restrictive. Only democracy invites participation in a public dialogue in the first place, ensures that everyone has (at least formally) equal access to shaping the public culture, and makes political and cultural engagement rewarding for individuals by ensuring it has a political impact. These conditions must be seen as vital preconditions for any transformation to be beneficial from a sustainability point of view, and must therefore be protected in a lexically prior sense.

Yet even in formally democratic societies, the crucial diversity, reflexivity, and openness within the public discourse are often constrained (Hammond and Smith 2017). Hannah Arendt argued that social change requires interventions in the form of ‘action’: that type of political speech and activity through which humans unleash entirely ‘new beginnings’ by creating something new in its own right, rather than as a mere half-hearted, instrumentally motivated or self-interested act (Walsh 2011, p. 129). Yet ‘action’ has been pushed out of the political realm, being replaced by a form of ‘automatism’ that not only drives citizens to focus on their own material welfare, but also *normalises* this across mass society (Gordon 2001, pp. 102-4). For deliberative democrats, this has meant that, in modern liberal democracies, political discourse as much as individual meaning-making have become ‘colonised’ by the instrumental rationality of the market economy (Habermas 1992). In these conditions, even participatory democratic engagement is no longer necessarily progressive and emancipatory, but has its own potential to perpetuate existing grammars of unsustainability (Blühdorn 2013, p. 30).

This suggests that, in today’s societies, the glass ceiling barring the way towards sustainability consists not just in the wrong policy frameworks, such as their anthropocentrism (Eckersley 2017, p. 993) or the liberal ‘addiction’ to environment-unfriendly materialism and economic growth (Dryzek 2000, p. 144). More decisively, these are compounded by a systematic reproduction of apathy, depoliticisation and conformism (Gordon 2001, pp. 105-7) that prevent the meanings attached to any such problematic structures from being transformed at all. In order to establish the general conditions for socio-cultural engagement deep and critical enough to challenge something as pervasive as a sedimented political grammar, *democracy itself* must be re-politicised.

The deliberative solution is to define and judge democracy by the quality of public discourse, on the basis that this is vital for counteracting domination in all its forms (Dryzek 2000). This entails questioning the *conditions* – including the discursive limitations a sedimented grammar implies – in which citizens develop and reflect on their views in the first place (Rostbøll 2008). Thus, for deliberative democrats, the very essence of democracy lies in the degree to which political decisions are determined by the ‘communicative rationality’ that unfolds through public deliberation, and that challenges precisely the hegemony of sedimented belief systemssuch as capitalist imperatives (Dryzek 2000). Democratic legitimacy is then ‘thought to result from the free and unconstrained deliberation of all about matters of common concern’ (Benhabib 1996, p. 68), such that political outcomes are legitimate only ‘to the extent they receive reflective assent through participation in authentic deliberation by all those subject to the decision in question’ (Dryzek 2010, p. 23). This standard of legitimacy implies significant changes to existing societies’ political structures, including towards significantly more inclusive debate and decision-making, and an ethos of critical reflexivity that is unsteered, fully open, and able to transcend hegemonic ways of thinking (Rostbøll 2008). In short, deliberative legitimacy demands the breaking of powerful glass ceilings. The theory would suggest that the more deliberative a society is, the less will its political system be biased towards engrained individualism and materialism, and the more voices can be brought to bear in the political debate to enhance the reflexive construction of new meanings.

An important point of critique of deliberative democracy, however, has been the mismatch between its early normative theory and the more recent practical and institutional turn towards its real-world applications. Whereas the early theory focused on communicative rationality as an idealised normative end, later generations of deliberative democracy have taken the real world of politics as their starting point, testing whether deliberative ‘mini-publics’ and other innovations might be able to inject reason, information, reflection, and contestation by lay citizens into otherwise rampant power politics (Elstub 2010). Although successful at yielding other beneficial outcomes, this shift in focus meant a turn away from the theory’s previous foci on legitimacy (Böker 2017b), the large scale (Chambers 2009), and the demandingness of its ideals (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). As a result, despite its growing role in actual politics across the globe (Dryzek 2010), it is not at all obvious whether what is now commonly referred to as deliberative democracy stands much chance in practice to achieve critical reflexivity of the depth and scale required to counteract domination and transcend entrenched meanings.

One source of this critique is the camp of agonistic democracy (see Machin, this volume). Agonistic democrats accuse deliberative democrats of perpetuating the status quo by siding with – and thus precisely ‘sedimenting’ – the liberal project. By bracketing diversity and disagreement to apply an ideal procedure, so their argument goes, deliberation *depoliticises* democracy, when real contestation would demand agonistic confrontation that challenges the hegemonic liberal project (Mouffe 2005). For agonists, then, radical democracy able to overcome the limitations of the existing political grammar must consist in political conflict and, ultimately, the victory of a new, equally powerful counterhegemonic discourse that supersedes the dominant terms of public affairs (Mouffe 1999; Laclau and Mouffe 2013) – including, in the current context, depoliticised, liberal deliberation.

However, what this argument misses is that any substantive definition of democracy or new hegemonic project can itself turn into a ‘consequential construction’ (Maines 2000, p. 580) of a new cultural glass ceiling. A counter-hegemony might displace a particular former hegemony, but it does not lessen the prevalence and power of hegemony as such. As the reality of increasingly constrained liberal democracy shows, in order to perpetually transcend powerful grammars, democracy must be understood as ‘a dynamic and open-ended concept’ (Dryzek 2000, p. 28), or it risks becoming hegemonic itself. Critics of deliberation overlook deliberative democracy’s unique commitment, in awareness of this, to being *self*-reflexive, submitting even its own normative frameworks to the open discourse of deliberators (Bohman 2000, p. 17). Against the narrow institutional focus of much recent deliberative theory, this is the aspect of the theory that matters. It motivates a ‘democratisation of democracy’ that continually pushes even against its own definitional boundaries (Giddens 2000). While both liberal democracy and narrow institutional constructs of deliberation might develop their own hegemonic effects, and the agonistic thrust is directed only at supplanting this liberal hegemony with another, the only protection against hegemonic tendencies *as such* is the in-built openness of self-reflexive deliberative democracy (Knops 2007, p. 125). What achieves this – and what thus matters for *both* democratic legitimacy and the cultural sustainability transformation it can help engender – is not deliberation as some fixed institutional procedure, but critical reflexivity as an intrinsic norm and ethos in society (Böker 2017b). Agonistic critics do, then, have a point in that some of the recent theory that has focused on the former might indeed be ill-suited to engendering radical change; yet deliberative democrats’ simultaneous re-invocation of the latter (Knops 2007; Böker 2017b) likewise shows the crucial element of self-reflexivity is still part of it as well.

This means sustainability does not just instrumentally require democracy, but it inherently *consists* in democracy (of the critical deliberative variant): a critical deliberative public in itself contributes to the sustainability of the society by embodying the open reflexivity and inclusive dialogue at the heart of sustainability as a cultural transformation. A society that is not deliberative in this sense cannot be sustainable, for it would be helpless against powerful grammars’ undermining the crucial cultural space from which meaningful new futures can emerge when ecological constraints demand it. A society that is deliberative, on the other hand, has the *potential* to be sustainable. Yet it could of course still be oriented towards normative goals other than sustainability. Deliberative democracy, then, is a necessary component part of what it means for a society to be sustainable in the cultural transformability sense; it is necessary in not just an instrumental but indeed a constitutive sense, but still not sufficient on its own. Yet once the key conditions for a diverse, inclusive public discourse and rich socio-cultural engagement are realised, any emerging deliberative impulses and the sustainability springing from precisely this reflexivity are then bound to be mutually reinforcing.

**Conclusion**

Sustainability means a normatively desirable response to socio-ecological conditions that are in constant change, the creation of a meaningful, flourishing future for societies even in conditions of unpredictable ecological contingency and threat. As such, it is best captured not by sets of specific, seemingly static outcome indicators, but should be understood as a process of continuous reflexivity and transformation. To such a process, the existence of *any* ‘glass ceilings’ of transformation, as the embodiment of a closed rather than open, and pre-structured rather than reflexive societal evolution, is problematic. While a lack of a deeper sustainability transformation, beyond the glass ceiling of environmental reform, can be attributed to a number of economic, political, and other structural factors, I have sought to shed light on a so far unacknowledged cultural dimension of the problem: societal glass ceilings reproduced by the political grammars of unquestioned imaginative assumptions and hegemonic structures of thought that limit what kind of social reality is conceivable, let alone possible to move towards. As their perpetuation takes place in the realm of cultural meanings, there is an important cultural dimension to both persistent unsustainability and the potential for a deeper sustainability transformation in the future.

Insofar as sustainability means reflexivity deep enough to challenge the grammar of any entrenched status quo, its governance demands not just technical and managerial capacity, but also the right conditions for a critical social engagement with cultural meanings. Without this, not only would rigid semantic meanings impose limits on transformability, but sustainability as a normative, and thus intrinsically supported, vision of a meaningful future could not emerge. This makes the realm of culture a crucial societal arena in which sustainability either emerges or is foreclosed by those benefiting from the unsustainable status quo.

What can tip the balance towards cultural openness and reflexivity is the right discursive context in which semantic and normative meanings are socially negotiated. This demands a democratic basis for sustainability governance. Specifically, as the only form of democracy critical and inclusive enough to challenge all forms of domination, deliberative democracy has a role to play in discursively unmasking and challenging entrenched grammars, and thus overcoming societal glass ceilings. This perspective reveals the problem with liberal environmental states to be their systematic bias not just towards environment-unfriendly practices as such, but towards narrow and exclusive cultural engagement. To overcome this, sustainability governance ought to promote socio-political spaces of inclusive, critical engagement with diverse meanings and new societal visions.

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