

Introduction

Critical and transformative perspectives on global sustainability governance

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The contemporary world is characterised by systemic sustainability challenges that for the first time in human history have the potential to endanger the fate of humanity. Scholars warn that we are crossing critical “planetary boundaries” (Rockström et al. 2009; Steffen et al. 2015), and have introduced novel concepts such as the “Anthropocene” to convey the idea that human beings have become such a major force that they have changed the way the entire earth system operates (Crutzen 2002). The world that is emerging, with more frequent and intense heatwaves, droughts, wildfires, extreme storms, and floods – a planet that environmental activist and author Bill McKibben (2010) called “Eaarth” – is in many ways less hospitable to human beings, more volatile, less predictable, and seemingly angrier. There may still be opportunities to avoid the worst impacts of climate change by limiting warming to 1.5°C – a task that would require, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2018), “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society,” however. The IPCC’s counterpart that examines biodiversity issues – the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services – has warned of an accelerating extinction crisis, with one million species threatened and potentially grave impacts on human well-being (IPBES 2019). These ecological challenges exist in a context of significant and growing global economic and social inequality (Alvaredo et al. 2018) – one estimate, provided by Oxfam, is that the 26 richest people on the planet have the same wealth as the poorest 50% of humanity, some 3.8 billion people (Lawson et al. 2019).

Such challenges have awakened demands for a much more substantial political response to the sustainability crisis than has been evident so far. Young people, inspired by the example of Greta Thunberg, have, through their school strike movement, taken their elders, including political leaders, to task for inaction in the face of climate change. Political activists, supported by a new generation of elected officials, have put a Green New Deal – which seeks to combine a radical acceleration of decarbonisation with the promotion of economic, social, and environmental justice – on the agenda in the United States, and similar ideas have spread to several other countries. An “extinction rebellion” movement has emerged, while calls to declare a climate emergency – in some cases, combined with recognition of a biodiversity emergency – have been taken up by a number of national and sub-national governments. Indigenous people in both the global North and South have become increasingly vocal in

their resistance to extractivist projects and policies, with parallels in the many examples of the “environmentalism of the poor,” in which local people resist the destruction or enclosure of natural resources that they depend on for their livelihoods. Meanwhile, the rapid decline in the cost of renewable energy technologies is quickly changing calculations of what is economically and politically feasible – although some observers caution against over-reliance on technological solutions alone and have greater hope in the growing questioning of a consumerist vision of the good life and the dominant growth-based vision of progress.

The challenges of achieving much stronger sustainability governance in the socio-political sphere are accompanied by the need for scholars to rethink dominant ideas about how to achieve sustainability. Transformative perspectives on sustainability require critical inquiry that goes beyond simple fixes and nudging. Critical inquiry demands that we do not take the current world order as a given and try to find solutions within already established economic, social, and political parameters. Rather, we have to inquire into these parameters in order to better understand how this particular world came about and why, and what its material and ideational structures imply for the potential and characteristics of a sustainability transformation. In other words, global sustainability governance cannot perform the role of steering human societies towards “environmental and social sustainability” without questioning the broader, deeper causes underlying the major sustainability challenges that we are experiencing and without debating who defines and benefits from the proposed solutions.

In this context, we must not forget that sustainability governance is not value-free. Every decision we have to make as individuals and as societies involves choices that rest on or invoke norms and values. At any particular point in time there are multiple alternative courses of action one could consider as a way forward. For example, feeding 10 billion people could be done both by intensifying agriculture and by shifting diets. Likewise, addressing climate change could be done – at least in theory – both by geoengineering technologies and by curbing emissions. And so on. Any alternative course of action entails not only the possibility of solving the problem but also the question of how the problem will be solved and who will be the likely winners or losers from this solution. Accordingly, sustainability research and researchers have the duty to clarify the alternatives, their normative underpinnings, and the related implications. As Cox (1981, 128) famously argued “Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose” and so is sustainability research. This Handbook employing a critical perspective shows that as scholars and as educators we need not only ask the tough questions but also shed light on the alternative ways of identifying the roots of the problems, the pathways proposed to address them, and their underlying ethical assumptions, which are often implicit.

Until now, there is no comprehensive volume that covers global sustainability governance from a critical transformative perspective. Although individual scholars critically reflect upon consumerist values and culture, warn about disempowerment of people, and are disturbed about increasing inequalities and the erosion of democracy, such work has not yet been collectively presented in a single volume on sustainability governance. This Handbook aims to address this gap by providing a state-of-the-art review of core debates and contributions that offer a more normative, critical, and transformative approach to global sustainability governance. Given the interdisciplinary nature of sustainability, furthermore, it draws on a range of perspectives, including political science, sociology, economics, philosophy, and law.

The Handbook contains four main sections. Part I reviews prominent conceptual and analytical lenses critical of mainstream approaches to sustainability governance. Part II provides a review of ethical debates and normative principles related to global sustainability governance. In Part III, key challenges to sustainability governance are reviewed. In Part IV, we turn to transformative approaches to sustainability governance. Finally, the concluding

chapter reflects on the chapters' contributions to these themes and adds a discussion of further questions such as the sustainability of sustainability research and challenges to communicating about sustainability. The following pages provide a more detailed outline of these sections.

Part I: conceptual lenses

The concepts of power and legitimacy are an essential starting point for the analysis of (sustainability) governance. Magdalena Bexell argues that power and legitimacy are inextricably linked. Legitimacy makes power appropriate in the eyes of the governed, but material and ideational power structures shape what is considered legitimate at the same time. In order to study the dynamics between power and legitimacy in a fruitful manner for global sustainability governance, Bexell argues against oversimplified dichotomies between normative and empirical-sociological lenses of inquiry. Instead she proposes a combined normative-sociological perspective consisting of three steps: (a) the empirical identification of how power structures make particular legitimacy beliefs more important than others, (b) the normative interrogation of those legitimacy beliefs, and (c) the normative engagement with substantive and conflicting norms of sustainability, including justice, sufficiency, and development itself. The chapter argues that transformative global sustainability governance research calls for empirically oriented social scientists to reflect on the normative ramifications of their work and for normative oriented political theorists not to neglect the empirical grounds for their argumentation.

Ingolfur Blühdorn and Michael Deflorian provide an “unorthodox interpretation” of environmental governance. Motivated by the puzzling proliferation of new forms of collaborative governance arrangements despite criticisms regarding the latter's effectiveness and democratic legitimacy, they argue that it is precisely these qualities that make them flourish. Environmental governance, they argue, is explicitly designed not to disrupt the established order while simultaneously satisfying the preferences, needs, and dilemmas of contemporary consumer societies. Accordingly, they propose the lens of *performance* to analyse and understand modern forms of environmental governance and contemporary eco-politics more generally. The authors argue that such a lens can help unmask deceptive strategies allegedly pursuing radical transformative action and enable the creation of authentic eco-politics.

A key issue for scholars of sustainability governance is understanding why efforts to promote sustainability have been so limited to date. While many observers point to the everyday concerns (e.g. for jobs, economic and physical security, family, friends, and home) of people as major obstacles to a sustainability transformation, John Meyer argues that such concerns also offer opportunities for social change, but too little has been done to connect sustainability to them. The central challenge, in his view, is resonance: making sustainability and climate action resonate with everyday life. Indeed, he sees opportunities in the fact that many and perhaps most people in affluent consumer societies do not experience their lives as the best of all possible worlds – living, for example with the consequences of environmental injustice, a severe time crunch, or the un-freedom of automobile dependence – which creates possibilities for a politics that simultaneously promotes sustainability and enhances everyday life.

Tobias Gumbert undertakes the challenge of introducing the notions of materiality and non-human agency into environmental sustainability governance. He argues that the Anthropocene raises questions regarding both the radical separation between humans and “nature” as an object of human governance as well as the fixed boundaries of the social sphere and the biosphere. Given the ontological shift signified by the interchangeability between

human and nature, it becomes imperative to move beyond dualisms, for example Nature/Culture, in order to examine and transform sustainability governance. In this context, Gumbert proposes that critical scholars need to engage with the concept of assemblages – which includes non-linearity, complexity, and reflexivity – as an analytical lens. Through the example of the non-human agency of waste, Gumbert makes the relatively abstract concept of assemblages accessible, while also calling for more in-depth empirical case studies to uncover the many connections and agentic qualities of non-humans.

Cristina Yumie Aoki Inoue, Thais Lemos Ribeiro, and Ítalo Sant’ Anna Resende challenge the liberal-institutionalist, state-centric and positivist perspective that dominates the study of global sustainability governance. They argue that such a perspective and the nature/society divide that prevails with it are inadequate for handling the planetary socio-environmental crisis of the Anthropocene. Instead, we need a new political imagination and different analytical lenses in global sustainability governance studies. Inoue et al. propose “worlding” as such an alternative. Worlding, in their view, recognises many ways of being and experimenting with different worlds with important ontological and epistemological implications. On the basis of five different non-Western cosmovisions, the authors demonstrate the relevance of worlding in advancing new ways of producing knowledge, understanding and transforming global sustainability governance approaches.

Part II: ethics, principles, and debates

The idea of justice is fundamental to understandings of sustainability. Yet justice has different interpretations making it unclear what it should entail exactly. In their chapter, Agni Kalfagianni, Andrea Gerlak, Lennart Olsson, and Michelle Scobie discuss how we can systematically compare and evaluate justice claims and/or demands for justice in global sustainability governance research in view of the lack of consensus regarding what justice *is*. They propose that any approach to justice needs to clarify the subjects, principles, and mechanisms of (fostering) justice, and the consequences of just societies. Most fundamentally, they argue that critical sustainability scholars need to embrace future generations and the non-human world as subjects of justice; advance an encompassing understanding of principles of justice; move beyond market-based approaches to address injustice; and be sensitive to the contextual conditions in which justice is operationalised and implemented.

Existing institutions “seriously under-represent the interests of future generations,” notes Peter Lawrence. This is a fundamental problem for sustainability governance, which, after all, is largely about ensuring intergenerational equity. Such issues are growing more acute as the ecological crisis deepens. Strong reasons thus exist to establish institutions to represent future generations, argues Lawrence. He puts forward an argument for how future generations, who cannot authorise anyone to act on their behalf, can nevertheless be legitimately represented in decisions today. He outlines the normative basis for such representation, emphasising intergenerational justice (requiring the protection of human dignity and human rights), and also examines the proposal to establish a UN Commissioner for Future Generations and the issues related to it. Lawrence concludes that new institutions could help in a modest way to highlight the interests of future generations and incorporate those interests into decision-making.

What it means to live well within planetary boundaries is one of the most fundamental questions for transformative approaches to sustainability governance. Antonietta Di Giulio and Rico Defila offer one approach to defining the good life and needs in the context of sustainability, which involves developing a list of universal “protected needs” that all individuals

should have the right to satisfy, along with procedures to adapt these needs to different cultural contexts. Combining theoretical accounts of “needs” with empirical evidence from cross-national studies and a structured dialogue with an interdisciplinary group of scholars, the authors discuss what could serve as a protected list of needs, thus substantiating a good life in the context of sustainability. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the consequences of putting the good life centre stage for sustainability governance.

A different approach to the question of “good living” or “living well” is found in *buen vivir* (BV), a transformation discourse that emerged in the Andean-Amazonian region of Latin America. Julien Vanhulst and Adrián Beling examine this “retro-progressive utopia” that recovers indigenous traditions, connects them to currents of contemporary critical thought, and looks towards emancipatory, socio-ecologically sustainable futures. BV has different variations, but there is a common emphasis on harmony with oneself (identity), with society (equity), and with nature (sustainability). It challenges what it considers the false universality of Eurocentric conceptions of modernity and aims to make space for “pluriversal” approaches, while also seeking alternatives to the Euro-Atlantic development model and to the conventional sustainability governance concepts of “sustainable development,” “ecological modernisation,” and “green growth.” While critical of the limits of statist BV experiments in Bolivia and Ecuador, Vanhulst, and Beling emphasise BV’s transformative potential, calling it a “unique living laboratory for social-ecological transformation” and an opportunity to “test a more promising approach to global sustainability governance [...that is] capable of a future.”

Luigi Pellizzoni examines the notion of responsibility in sustainability governance. He traces the concept’s roots back to ancient Greece and Rome and its ever changing meaning since then. In the contemporary world, responsibility has come to be associated with imputability (the attribution of an action to someone as its actual author) and answerability (the reasons an agent behaved in a certain way and the presence of somebody to whom the agent is deemed accountable). However, the risk and uncertainty that pertain to environmental change complicate responsibility as they make it extremely difficult to determine both a causal chain of events and accountability. In the context of neoliberal politics, this has resulted in pre-emption replacing precaution as the main principle of governing under uncertainty and the market becoming the chief institution allocating responsibility. Yet, Pellizzoni also observes the emergence of new social norms as manifested in alternative forms of community organisation, for example. These may help reconnect action and outcome as long as they make no ambiguous equations between affect and effect, or naïve assumptions about non-dominative orientations resulting from the vanishing threshold between the human and the non-human, the technical and the natural.

While environmental politics has been a particularly secular field, at least on the surface, the search for new approaches and transformations in cultural practices leads some scholars to look to religion. In her chapter addressing the role of religion in sustainability governance and religious actors’ potential contribution to sustainable development, Katharina Glaab argues that “one should take seriously the claim that there is a religious answer to the global ecological crisis.” Religions provide ethical frameworks with the potential to change views on the human-nature relationship and motivate environmentally friendly actions. In addition to their ability to influence political discourses and bring about normative change, religious actors are playing an important role as environmental-political actors, as seen, for example, in their contribution to the fossil-fuel divestment movement. While critics have rejected religion as irrational or having anti-ecological elements, Glaab maintains that religion deserves its place as an increasingly important topic in sustainability politics.

The question of “how much is enough?” – both having enough to live well and not consuming so much that it is ecologically excessive – is increasingly important for sustainability governance. Anders Hayden argues that “sufficiency” deserves to be a core organising principle for societies facing the need to live within planetary limits. He argues that sufficiency is a key element of a balanced ecological strategy – indeed it is a concept present in many chapters in this Handbook – but it has been neglected by dominant “green growth” and ecological modernisation strategies that focus on efficiency and green technologies. The chapter considers the significant obstacles to sufficiency in contemporary societies, reasons why it nevertheless persists in environmental debates (and is indeed increasingly relevant), potential ways to incorporate it into policy, and examples where it has made inroads in the policy sphere. The idea of sufficiency draws attention to the real possibilities of achieving well-being in less materially intensive ways, although Hayden cautions that it needs to be complemented by other approaches given the scale of the challenge in meeting human needs within planetary boundaries.

Part III: key challenges

One of the main challenges facing sustainability governance is North–South inequity. Chukwumerije Okereke demonstrates historically that every significant environmental summit, multilateral agreement, or global environmental institution has been severely challenged by issues related to North–South inequity and justice. He argues that the way problems are framed in present day environmental cooperation, the attribution of responsibility, the solutions offered and the processes of decision-making show very little commitment to addressing inequity. This, in turn, seriously jeopardises the chances of achieving sustainable development. In consequence, more radical interrogations of the basic structure of international society and of patterns of social relations between the North and South are urgently needed, in Okereke’s view. This implies that questions of environmental justice must move to the forefront of sustainability governance and not be treated as an optional add-on.

While the gap between the global North and South greatly complicates sustainability governance, critical scholars also challenge the conventional means to close that gap. The dominant approach to development focused on the growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the subject of the chapter by Kerryn Higgs, who questions the persistent emphasis on “making the cake bigger” in light of its failure to distribute wealth equitably and its collision course with planetary limits. Although the development discourse has evolved from the end of the Second World War to today’s Sustainable Development Goals, there remain significant contradictions between the focus on economic growth and environmental goals. Higgs concludes by highlighting the need for development alternatives that focus on sustainably meeting the needs of the rural masses rather than the current growth model that enriches urban elites and expands the middle class at great environmental cost.

One aspect of the unsustainability of the existing economic model is the tendency to treat all resources as something to be “mined” – that is, permanently used up – even renewable resources that could be used in more sustainable ways. Thomas Princen argues that in modern, industrial consumerist societies, mining and sustaining have been conflated – “it’s all growth, all wealth formation, all progress” – and indeed the entire economy has come to resemble a mining operation based on extracting irreversibly and moving on. He argues that a transition is needed to a regenerative economy that prevents mining practices from being applied to renewable resources, shifts from an emphasis on growth to finding “sufficient wealth in both mining and sustaining,” and in which the limited mining practices that remain are subordinate to and support sustaining practices.

Practices that erode the ecological foundations of contemporary societies are also connected to the processes of the financial economy. Jennifer Clapp and Phoebe Stephens examine the implications for environmental sustainability of financialisation in the neoliberal era – i.e., the growing importance of financial actors, institutions, and motives in guiding economic decisions – which has resulted in a proliferation of new financial instruments linked to natural resources and environmental change. The authors explain how specific financial instruments transform elements of nature (such as land, water, carbon, and weather) into assets that generate returns to investors, and emphasise that such commodification has real-world impacts that can undermine sustainability. However, the distancing between the trading of financial products and impacts on the ground obscures those links. If governance of these processes is to be strengthened, the authors argue, scholars need to play a key role in shining a light on the dynamics at play and in improving our understanding of them.

Sustainability governance would be a considerable challenge even if all major political actors shared core objectives such as significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but there is the additional hurdle of overcoming powerful, organised opposition. Robert Brulle and Melissa Aronczyk examine the phenomenon of environmental counter-movements by looking at the United States, where organised opposition has had considerable “success” in thwarting concerted climate action. The authors trace the history of this movement, which builds on past efforts to resist governmental regulation, promote neoliberalism, increase the influence of American conservatism, and use public relations techniques to advance corporate interests. They show how a sophisticated system of organised opposition to climate action has resulted from long-term efforts to build an “intellectual and ideological infrastructure” capable of turning ideas into policy proposals in the medium term and facilitating political action in the short term. (Those active in movements for sustainability and equity might perhaps think of doing something similar.) The authors argue that more effective strategies are needed to counter the counter-movement; an essential starting point is a deeper understanding of that movement.

Many contributors to this volume see an additional problem even among those who accept climate/environmental science and the need for policy action: an excessive faith in technological solutions. For Samuel Alexander and Thomas Rutherford, techno-optimism is the “belief that science and technology will be able to solve the major social and environmental problems of our times, without fundamentally rethinking the structure or goals of our growth-based economies or the nature of Western-style, affluent lifestyles.” Their critique of techno-optimism draws on evidence of the limits to date of efforts to decouple economic growth from environmental impacts. The authors conclude that the degree of decoupling required is too great to have any confidence that technological solutions can save the dominant growth paradigm. They argue that efforts to improve technology and efficiency must be complemented by an ethic of sufficiency, and that alternative economic models are needed – themes examined in depth in chapters in Parts II and IV.

The need to go beyond technological solutions is also reflected in the chapter by Naomi Krogman, who writes that “[a]t the core of all of our environmental problems is consumption.” She sees a need to transform consumption patterns in more-developed countries, as well as in medium-developed countries. While her chapter focuses on consumer values and consumption, she cautions that the emphasis on material wealth and status that leads to overconsumption is supported and driven by larger structural factors. As such, scholars should not only focus on values and actions at the individual level, but also consider questions of power and structural change. Krogman examines a number of forces in society that help explain why people consume so much despite increased environmentalism, as well as some hopeful trends towards new consumer values that will require collective political action and supportive governance to achieve a greater impact.

The issues that ought to be the object of sustainability governance are a matter of some debate; one of the most contentious topics is population. While acknowledging the gender, race, and class-based controversies that have made managing fertility a taboo topic, Diana Coole argues that scholars concerned with planetary boundaries need to put the population issue back on the sustainability governance agenda. She maintains that stabilising the global population at a sustainable level requires active policy support rather than a *laissez-faire* approach (or for that matter pro-natalist policies in several high-income nations that aim to increase fertility). However, if a new approach to population is to be seen as legitimate, it will be necessary to devise effective and ethical policies compatible with human rights and reproductive choice.

Part IV: transformative approaches

Part IV turns to the question of how to transform sustainability governance (although chapters in other sections also include their own potentially transformative proposals). It begins with Michael Maniates throwing an intellectual Molotov cocktail in the direction of the prominent idea that individual acts of green consumption and lifestyle change will, when combined with similar acts by millions of others, lead to social and ecological transformation. This amounts to “magical thinking,” which is leading “environmentally concerned publics into cul-de-sacs of political irrelevance.” The necessary transformation, he argues, will only come through political mobilisation of the more ecologically minded segment of the population, which, in turn, requires moving beyond the debilitating and ineffective narratives focused on individual consumer action.

The idea of transformation driven by a mobilised segment of the public assumes a set of democratic institutions in which people can exercise their “citizen muscles,” but what type of democracy is needed to address the new challenges of the Anthropocene? Aysem Mert examines this question, arguing that the institutions of the earlier Holocene cannot provide adequate answers for the new era – i.e. democracy in the Anthropocene “cannot be more of the same.” The Anthropocene – and the uncertainties and insecurities it is generating – is both a threat to democratic governance and, Mert argues, an opportunity to re-imagine and re-invigorate democracy through a deconstruction of traditions, a reflexive approach to science and decision-making, and democratic experimentation.

If overconsumption is a core driver of ecological degradation, then how can consumption be organised and governed to produce sustainable outcomes that also allow for high levels of well-being? Doris Fuchs argues that “consumption corridors” provide a promising transformative approach in this respect, allowing the pursuit of a good life for all within planetary boundaries while making consumption and its role with respect to both a core concern. Such corridors encompass the space between minimum consumption levels needed to satisfy one’s protected needs and maximum consumption levels not to be overstepped in order not to hurt others’ chances to do so. The chapter situates its argument in the context of political debates about (limits on) freedom and enquires into pathways towards the development of corridors as well as associated supportive structural changes. Most fundamentally, it suggests that the revisiting and reorganisation of consumption entailed in the idea of consumption corridors provide an opportunity to integrate the pursuit of well-being and justice in a world of limits and guidance in navigating present and future ecological and social crises.

Dirk Philipson’s chapter continues the focus on well-being and links it back to the question of growth by calling for a move beyond GDP – both as a measure of prosperity and a wider economic paradigm rooted in a growth-centred capitalism. He discusses the history of

GDP, its emergence in response to the challenges of the Great Depression, its contribution to the Allied War effort, and growing importance in the post-war era – but argues that this outdated measure (“Grandpa’s Definition of Progress”) is an obstacle to sustainability governance as it fails to measure whether economic output is sustainable, equitable, and delivering greater well-being. He also examines the many “beyond-GDP” alternatives, their promise, and the obstacles they face, concluding that to be effective, they need to do more than offer improvements to the existing economic system – they need to question the very logic of that system.

One key factor holding back more ambitious environmental policy is the widespread belief that economic growth must be prioritised if key social challenges, such as the creation of adequate employment and the maintenance of economic stability, are to be successfully addressed. With such concerns in mind, Lange considers how a post-growth economy could function and generate high levels of social welfare, which, if achievable, would enable stricter environmental regulation. He analyses the macro-level requirements for a sustainable zero-growth economy, as seen from the perspective of neo-classical, Keynesian, and Marxian theories. He concludes that it is not enough to “get the prices right,” as many neoclassical economists would argue; substantial change to economic institutions would be necessary such as moving to employee-owned enterprises to curb the drive for capital accumulation and work-time reduction that keeps pace with the rate of labour productivity growth.

The idea of work-time reduction as a strategy to achieve sustainable livelihoods is examined further by Larsson, Nässén, and Lundberg. They highlight the potential of shorter working hours to limit consumption volumes and – in combination with technical improvements in eco-efficiency – deliver environmental benefits, while generating a higher quality of life through less stressed working lives and more leisure time. In addition to drawing on their comprehensive review of existing studies, they base these conclusions on a survey of municipal employees in Gothenburg, Sweden, who gained the right to choose part-time work – a right that the authors believe could be an important step towards the wider adoption of new, more sustainable work-time norms.

Decarbonisation “as a key goal of global sustainability governance will be transformational in either its successes or its failures,” argues Richard Lane. Failure to decarbonise the world’s economy is projected to bring major disruptions to life on Earth resulting from ocean warming, coral bleaching, and food systems breakdown, among other impacts. But to succeed, decarbonisation needs a different global governance approach than currently pursued. Today, Lane argues, decarbonisation governance fails because it is deeply incoherent as highlighted by the problem of absolute decoupling of economic output from greenhouse gas emissions and the reliance on Negative Emissions Technologies. These incoherencies both result from, and are maintained by, a series of exclusionary processes: the exclusion of (certain) people; the exclusion of nature and particularly climate change itself; and the exclusion of systemic change. Lane posits that decarbonisation can and should be reconstructed as a transformative locus of climate governance that is inclusive and coherent, but this requires a commitment to emancipatory politics.

Karen Liftin problematises the local as a desirable level of transformative politics. She warns against an oversimplified understanding of localism as *the* solution to current environmental and social challenges. Indeed, localism entails not only ecological and solidaristic voices but also libertarian and populist agendas. Investigating the promise of localism in practice, Liftin contends that the greatest power of localism is its ability to inspire agency, collective action, and innovation in the face of potentially overwhelming complexity. However, given the difficulties in disentangling ourselves from the global, localist approaches

should move beyond – and not only against – globalism to reach their full potential. This is captured, Litfin argues, in the notion of organic globalism, a world of locally based but globally networked citizens' initiatives.

Towards critical sustainability governance

The intensification of ecological crises that is evident today represents a very significant threat; however, in the spirit of Gramsci's pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will, one can also see opportunities. At a time when stronger sustainability governance is urgently needed, there are opportunities to re-evaluate our understandings of concepts and issues including democracy, justice, legitimacy, the humanity-nature relationship, and the drivers of ecological degradation and necessary socio-political responses to it – and most fundamentally to re-imagine social and ecological futures, with greater emphasis on equity and a new vision of how to live well within planetary limits. Critical scholars of sustainability governance have a key role to play in highlighting the role of power, inequity, and exploitation, and in pointing towards real transformative possibilities, which we hope and believe the contributions to this Handbook will make clear.

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