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## **Communalism, Garantism, Social Ecology** **The strategic function of social sustainability in the 21st century**

There are good reasons to look at the global situation with a certain degree of optimism from the perspective of social ecology. For example, the United Nations' so-called Agenda 2030 with the Sustainable Development Goals from 2015 has systematically linked ecological and socio-political goals at a global level for the first time and installed a professional goal monitoring system that should lead to an ambitious policy of social sustainability in the member states. In the European Union, a "European Green Deal" has been forged in a broad alliance.

However, there are also good reasons for socio-ecological skepticism and pessimism. The Covid-19 pandemic has set back global social policy goals, global poverty has increased and inequality has risen. The wars in Syria, Libya, Ukraine, Sudan and Gaza are also leading to global militarization and refugee migration. Conspiracy theories and uncertainty about the future are in turn promoting right-wing populism worldwide, from Trump in the USA to Modi in India, right-wing nationalism under Putin and the far right in Germany, France and Italy. These developments denounce climate and environmental protection.

In this field of tension, scientific and political initiatives for social ecology must develop a strategic position that strengthens communalism and municipalism on the one hand, and ecological and human rights processes at national and global level on the other. Such a dialectical strategy can be found in the concept of social sustainability.<sup>1</sup> The point of this concept lies in the dialectic of the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous: the promotion of local socio-ecological self-determination and communalism should be reflected in the institutions of the welfare regime in a sustainable manner and in terms of both social and international law. The dialectic of the welfare state as an institutionalized class compromise is extended to the field of ecology. This has been happening for several decades, which is the only reason why the Sustainable Development Goals were possible at all.

From the perspective of committed activism, grassroots anarchism and direct-democratic globalism seem completely incompatible. Post-colonial and queer movements in particular

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<sup>1</sup> see: Opielka 2023 - an English translation will be published by Edward Elgar in 2025

tend to deconstruct all narratives of progress. The paper argues radically dialectically against this left-wing cultural pessimism as a mirror image of the right-wing cultural pessimism that underpins right-wing populism. Deconstruction must always be linked to reconstruction, the future is only partly a happening, the social future is made into a happening. The history of social ecology also reflects the history of this dialectic.

A thoroughly reconstructive proposal for a social-ecological future is offered by the program of "communalism," which refers to the theorist and activist Murray Bookchin, the founder of the ISE (Institute for Social Ecology) in 1974 in Vermont. In 2002, the Norwegian Eirik Eigliad published the essay "Communalism as Alternative" for a new journal ("Communalism: International Journal for a Rational Society"), whose editorial board included Bookchin and Eigliad. In 2014, Eigliad published the essay in book form (Eigliad 2014) and it seems helpful to take up and criticize the central line of argument. Eigliad rightly argues that in the present, at the beginning of the 21st century, the political lines of conflict appear confusing. The result is widespread confusion, especially among activists in the field of social ecology. This confusion supports the process of progressive commodification of capitalism, the subjugation of ever more fields of nature and society to the commodity form. The solution of "communalism" favored by Eigliad, citing Bookchin, relies on a radically decentralized strategy of self-empowerment of citizens in communities that network themselves. It is true that the denigration of politics in the tradition of anarchism is opposed. Nevertheless, at the heart of communalism is skepticism of the state, essentially the political and normative rejection of state intervention. As much as I share Eigliad and Bookchin's criticism of most world conditions, the blanket rejection of political interventions above the communal level seems absurd and undialectical to me, which prevents a serious debate about the opportunities and limits of federalism. The invocation of the citizen and the community spirit also suppresses a reflexive debate about the seduction of citizens and the abuse of community spirit by extremist positions, both in left-wing populism (e.g. Venezuela) and in the globally successful right-wing populism. Citizens are not blank, on the contrary, they are "scripted actors", as the sociological neo-institutionalism of John W. Meyer demonstrated (Meyer 2005, 2010). A social-ecological critique of capitalism must therefore identify strategies of decommodification. This is precisely what this paper attempts to do.

This paper (based on Opielka 2023 and 2024) contains a systematic analysis of the entanglement of ideational and institutional dimensions of the transformation of social policy through the ecological question. The analysis is attempted in four steps. In the first step, the contours of the tension between social and environmental policy are outlined. The second step of the analysis presents four conceptions of social sustainability as a mediation of this tension

on the basis of the theory of welfare regimes, which centers on the relationship between ideas and institutions. In the third step, some requirements for sustainability regimes are formulated from the perspective of welfare regime theory. In a fourth step, the paper concludes with an outlook for sustainability-orientated social policy research.

## 1. The tension between social and environmental policy

The 20th century was characterized by the modernization of capitalism through social policy and social change towards the modern, now global welfare state. Despite the knowledge of the globalization of socio-economic problems, social policy research does not problematize the fact that the welfare state is still essentially nationally structured due to the fiscal authority of nation states, despite its global expansion and an at least partially effective regulatory global social policy (ILO, WHO, social security agreements, etc.). However, should an ecological modernization of capitalism appear necessary in the 21st century in addition to social modernization, then a primacy of the national is difficult to justify, if only because ecological problems, from climate protection to biodiversity, transcend national borders. At the same time, due to the foreseeable distributive preconditions and effects, an ecological modernization program is absolutely dependent on the steering experience and competence of national welfare states, especially as nation states reach extremely different levels worldwide in terms of resource use.

At the level of global society, represented by the United Nations, this realization led to the "Agenda 2030" with the "Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)" adopted by the UN General Assembly in autumn 2015. It is an expression of this first systematic interlinking of social and environmental policy. At national level, a large number of socio-ecological projects have been underway for some time, for example in the socio-ecological research funding priority of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research's FONA program.<sup>2</sup> Looking at this from the perspective of the great modernization of capitalism, it is nevertheless still surprising that the connection between social policy and environmental or climate policy must be regarded as neglected. A project carried out on behalf of the DIFIS (German Institute for Interdisciplinary Social Policy Research) on the relationship between the two policy fields in current German politics (Bach/Opielka 2023) showed the difficulty of identifying those in the institutions and organizations who are competently interested in the respective complementary policy field. Social and environmental policy are screwed.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.fona.de/en/fona-strategy/index\\_en.php](https://www.fona.de/en/fona-strategy/index_en.php)

This compartmentalization has two effects: On the one hand, social and climate policy are seen as competitors. The second effect is highly relevant in terms of sociology and social policy theory: Modernization, in general the concept of social progress as a gain in autonomy for individuals and groups, is conceived as outdated in a broad de facto alliance ranging from political authoritarianism to digital cyborgism, a society of “singularities” and “dynamic stabilization” that threatens the emancipatory dimension of modernity (Reckwitz/Rosa 2021). The pillarization of political fields corresponds to a life in “filter bubbles”, people remain among themselves and know little about other fields of relevance.

These are some of the obstacles to social sustainability. It is therefore not surprising that fierce conflicts repeatedly erupt over the sustainability of social issues (Opielka 2023). It seems overdue and helpful to take social policy as a reference point for social sustainability, as Max Weber did more than a century earlier for the first major modernization of capitalism.

Sociology can make a central contribution to this reformulation of the “eco-social question” (Opielka 1985, Beckert 2024). As a scientific discipline, it was not created to legitimize the value basis of capitalism, but to analyze it. To do this, it needs a concept of society that takes it into account as a whole, from both the actor and the system perspective. Sociologists are increasingly investigating the connection between the welfare state and the climate crisis (Schoyen et al. 2022). Social policy research can follow on directly from this. “Social sustainability” serves as a semantic focus for a concept of shaping the future of social policy. The further expansion of the welfare state and its dependence on growth are connoted with ecological costs, and conversely, a policy of ecological sustainability only seems possible at the expense of social equality (Hirschfeld et al. 2023). This tension is analyzed below and possible solutions are discussed.

## **2. Four concepts of social sustainability**

For the policy focus on social sustainability, which is struggling for relevance, it appears to make analytical sense to define it through an integrative, transdisciplinary social science perspective that is compatible with political control and governance. This connectivity is offered by the concept of the “welfare regime” used in comparative welfare state research, which became known primarily through the work of Gøsta Esping-Andersen (Esping-Andersen 1990, Arts/Gelissen 2002, Opielka 2008). Like every social science theory, the welfare regime theory is also controversial. However, it has proven to be helpful for empirical research to this day.

Esping-Andersen can draw on a discussion in the political science theory of international relations. Four characteristics of international regimes are distinguished: principles (common basic assumptions), norms (general standards of behavior), rules (specific rules of conduct) and procedures (concrete, jointly agreed procedures). Esping-Andersen used similar considerations for welfare state analysis, with his concept of regime applying not to supranational but to domestic institutional networks. The central criterion for determining welfare regimes is the degree of decommodification, the institutionalization of market-independent livelihood security.

More recently, the theory of welfare regimes has also been examined for its applicability in environmental and sustainability policy (Koch/Mont 2016, Zimmermann/Graziano 2020). However, a comparable “eco-regime” theory that can be applied to social policy analysis is not yet available. In the broad field of sustainability sciences that has emerged in recent years, no typologies or systematics have yet become established. It is possible that the criterion of decommodification could also be applied here.

The following distinction between four concepts of social sustainability is based on a sociological theory, Talcott Parsons' AGIL theory (Opielka 2006):

1. A *narrow* understanding of social sustainability as “social redistribution”: Here, “the social” is conceived as one of “three pillars” of sustainability, as class-political conflict reduction and redistribution, antagonistic to economic sustainability (interpreted in a more economically liberal way) and as an accompaniment to ecological sustainability. This perspective tends to assume social democratic or socialist politics or such a regime and thus the genesis of the third “social” pillar as a trade union-left, primarily political program against the dominance of the “economic” (capital) pillar. The discursive understanding of “social” thus corresponds to the frequent use of “social” today in the sense of vertical distributive justice. Social sustainability in the *social democratic-socialist* understanding complements ecological sustainability insofar as ecological conflict situations also lead to social inequality. Social policy should also compensate for ecological upheavals.
2. An *internal* understanding of social sustainability as the sustainability of the social: This concept initially has little to do with ecology and the concept of sustainability commonly used today. It refers primarily to the social itself, to the preservation and reproduction of a society's communal core systems. This understanding comes close to a *conservative* political or regime principle, as represented by the ordoliberal Freiburg School of economics, for example. It is about a sustainable culture of wealth, for example through the promotion of family businesses, the establishment of foundations or “good

governance”, the long-term stability of institutions. The focus of governance is on community and morality, and nature conservation becomes important as the protection of the homeland. This concept builds a bridge to responsibility towards nature and the environment via the common goods, the so-called “commons”. Air, biodiversity, water and natural beauty are threatened by egoism and short-term thinking, the view of the commons in a concrete smaller society up to the global society includes the ecology of the social, from nature to the spiritual world heritage. In these rather conservative discourses, the concept of “social sustainability” is used in an attempt to avoid a transformation of institutions or redistribution processes and instead to protect nature internally, i.e. inherent to institutions. The conservative approach does not see a direct connection between socio-political interventions and nature, which is why the (engineering) technical solution to sustainability problems dominates in this regime concept.

3. A *skeptical* understanding of social sustainability as the sustainability of economic functionalities. Here, the focus is - close to the internal, conservative understanding, but with an emphasis on market control - on intergenerational justice, for example in the distribution of the financial burden of pension insurance between young and old, in terms of fiscal policy on limiting government debt (“black zero”) and also on preventing a growing demand for public investment in the promotion of sustainability by taking on new (government) debt. In this type of *liberal* policy or regime, social sustainability is conceived skeptically, often with aversion and negatively; it is hardly to be found as a positive concept in these discourses. A radicalized variant of the liberal welfare regime concept are libertarian arguments that want to dispense with any state intervention in favour of market control, and thus with both social policy and environmental policy.
4. Finally, there is also a *broad* understanding of social sustainability, in which the “social” is understood as the “societal”: Social sustainability is conceptualized here as a social transformation project. In this arena, discussions about the post-growth society, “green growth” and “degrowth” are held without being precisely defined. Social sustainability is developed in the *garantist* policy or regime type as an umbrella concept for the sustainability debate. The term “garantism” requires some explanation: the classic political legitimizations of liberal/social democratic/conservative - i.e. centre/left/right - have been challenged in recent decades by a global agenda of basic social rights that cannot be subordinated to this triad without further ado. There are strong arguments that democracies are also developing an evolutionary dynamic towards fundamental social rights through the expansion of social policy, supported by appropriate political structures such as direct democracy. The “garantism” regime type takes this dynamic into account.

For example, the increasingly civil rights-based foundation of Switzerland's social policy has led to its classification in social policy research as “soft garantism”. The primarily human rights-based foundation of the garantist regime type (Opielka 2008) marks a strong understanding of social sustainability, the antithesis of the skeptical, liberal understanding. The tableau of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and their vote for a “holistic” policy change on the part of the UN represent a broad understanding of social sustainability.

### 3. Welfare regime and sustainability regime

In Figure 1, the four concepts of social sustainability are included in the systematic presentation of welfare regimes. All four concepts of social sustainability contain future-oriented aspects. As politically normative as they are constructed, they are at the same time analytical conceptions for examining the steering performance of social systems. This will be discussed by way of example for the four types of welfare regime.

The **narrow** understanding focuses on the socio-economic conflict situation that Thomas Piketty interpreted as a process of global dominance of returns on capital over workers' incomes. It is staged in the discussions about energy prices or (lignite) coal mining, according to which climate protection measures have a socially unequal impact and threaten to exacerbate existing disadvantages.

The *internal* understanding, on the other hand, focuses on community design options, mental changes (behavior, consumption) and technical innovations; changes to socio-political institutions and regulations in the direction of climate protection and sustainability are wrong for this politically more conservative faction. In its “communitarian”, communitarian-empathic dimension, the regime-theoretical conservative, internal understanding also has a left-wing or left-liberal form and history (Opielka 2006).

The *skeptical* (liberal) understanding also wants to avoid socio-ecological institutional changes and essentially relies on technological solutions to the sustainability problem. This position is open to market-based regulations such as CO2 pricing.

Finally, the *broad* (garantist) understanding of social sustainability could become a guiding principle of the sustainability discourse as a whole. By emphasizing the social, societal and institutional aspects of a transformation to a more sustainable society without being content with this (it also postulates changes in attitudes and behavior), it becomes clear that a

primarily technological or economic strategy does not do justice to the systemic nature of the socio-ecological problem.

	Types of welfare regime			
	<i>liberal</i>	<i>social democratic</i>	<i>conservative</i>	<i>garantist</i>
Control/Governance: Market State Family/Community Human rights	<b>central</b> marginal marginal medium-high	marginal <b>central</b> marginal medium	marginal subsidiary <b>central</b> marginal	medium subsidiary medium <b>central</b>
Dominant form of welfare state solidarity	individualistic	Contract work-centered	communitarian-statist	Citizen status, universalist
Full employment guarantee	Weak	strong	medium	medium
Dominant form of welfare state control	Market	State	Morality	Ethics
Concepts of social sustainability	sceptical	narrow	internal	far
Empirical Examples in Social Policy	United States	Sweden	Germany, Italy	Switzerland ("soft G.")

Source: Opielka 2013, p. 47

Figure 1: Types of welfare regime and conceptions of social sustainability

A broad understanding of social sustainability aims at a comprehensive reorganization of politics, as was successfully achieved in the 20th century with the welfare state and the establishment of various forms of a “welfare regime” worldwide. It remains to be seen whether the sustainability movement, like the labor movement before it, will succeed in demanding and promoting new institutions that systematically develop the social equalization impulse of the welfare state into a kind of “eco-welfare regime”. Bruno Latour bridged the gap between the sustainability and labor movements with the concept of an “ecological class” (Latour/Schultz 2022, see Opielka 2023, pp. 145ff.).

Welfare regime theory in particular makes it clear that most welfare states form mixtures, as exemplified by the socialist-social democratic healthcare policy in the UK (National Health Service) in an otherwise predominantly liberal welfare regime.



Presumably, the transformative sustainability sciences at the beginning of the 21st century fulfill a similar function to the social sciences at the beginning of the 20th century. It was not only sociology at that time that saw itself as a medium of social reform and an answer to the social question as a class issue. The result was the welfare state. A good century later, the eco-social question may be answered with a global “eco-welfare regime”.

It seems problematic that the three traditional regime concepts - liberal, social democratic, conservative - only find very particular answers to intergenerational justice problems. Liberals think in terms of utility calculations, social democrats in terms of class conflicts, conservatives in terms of community particularisms. This means that intergenerational justice thinking can only be distilled from each regime approach to a limited extent. Only the garantist approach - on which the UN's Sustainable Development Goals are based - appears to be substantially universalistic.

If their original disciplines of social policy research and sustainability research are already considered by many to be too normative and insufficiently analytical, the determination of the relationship between the welfare regime and the sustainability regime is confronted with the accusation of double normative overdetermination. For the sociology of sustainability, the opposition of normativity and factuality has never been relevant, but rather their interpenetration has been typical. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in particular demonstrate this in a special way, insofar as they have a steering effect as goals, as normatives, which is challenging given the complexity of the social and ecological objectives and their interactions. Whether the SDGs have governance potential and what intentions guide political and other actors who are committed to sustainability or social sustainability is not evident without research. Sociology has identified sustainability as a research topic, climate change is recognized as a social and no longer primarily a scientific problem. However, the mainstreaming of social sustainability as a field of research is already accompanied by the traditional ideological controversies of the social sciences, in particular the culturally sceptical doubts about modernity and modernization. In this field of discourse, for example, there is talk of “sustainable unsustainability” and democracy-driven demands for participation are denounced as “untenable” (Blühdorn 2024). The ecologically reformulated socio-political promise of progress therefore requires good arguments.

#### **4. Future**

In the post-pandemic, crisis phase, the huge burden on public budgets due to corona-related deficits is massively restricting the scope for an inclusive social policy. This means that social

policy geared towards the redistribution of growth gains has been largely deprived of its scope. At the same time, the globalized and financially focused economy is maximizing the income and, above all, the assets of the very wealthy. Universalist belt-tightening will therefore only be possible through massive populist mobilization with collateral effects on precarious groups. Social sustainability thus proves to be a “wicked problem”, a complex problem that requires new arenas for problem definition and solution. The plea for a mixed universalism, which can be called “garantism”, places the focus of social policy on participation and identifies modern digital and intelligent paths to this end.

Social policy research seems well advised to strengthen comparative and evaluative projects that compare the performance of universalist and more particularistic social systems in a policy-relevant and indicator-based manner. The popularity and relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals and their implementation could strengthen the social policy research community and fulfill the call to understand “social policy as societal policy” on a socio-ecological level.

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