ResearchGate

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340117938

Sustainability in the Anthropocene: Between Extinction and Populism

Article *in* Sustainability · March 2020

DOI: 10.3390/su12062538

CITATIONS
0

READS
6

1 author:

Manuel Arias-Maldonado
University of Malaga
56 PUBLICATIONS **211** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

Special Issue on the Anthropocene -Social Science (Scopus Q2) View project

All content following this page was uploaded by Manuel Arias-Maldonado on 24 March 2020.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file.

sustainability

MDPI

Article

Sustainability in the Anthropocene: Between Extinction and Populism

Manuel Arias-Maldonado

Área Ciencia Política, Facultad Derecho UMA, University of Málaga, Campus Teatinos s/n. 29071 Málaga, Spain; marias@uma.es

Received: 12 February 2020; Accepted: 4 March 2020; Published: 24 March 2020

Abstract: The pursuit of environmental sustainability has been affected by two significant developments in the last years. On the one hand, the Anthropocene hypothesis suggests that the human impact on the environment has increased to such a degree, that natural systems are now disrupted at a planetary level. The most dangerous manifestation of the Anthropocene is climate change, where there is need for greater urgency in the face of insufficient climate action. There are a number of scientists who currently warn of the possibility that failing to reduce the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere may render the Earth uninhabitable in the first place. A first goal of this paper is thus to ponder how the sustainability paradigm may be affected in the face of this threat and whether, in fact, sustainability may be displaced by "habitability". On the other hand, some climate policies are eliciting the reaction of a populist movement—from Trumpism to the *gilets jaunes* in France—that opposes the rise of environmentally-related taxes and denies climate change or questions the severity of its effects. Both as a concept and as a policy goal, sustainability thus finds itself under double pressure: as it must focus on keeping the planet inhabitable, while the political opposition to measures directed towards decarbonization also increases. In what follows, the paper suggests that sustainability should be understood as a technocratic project to keep the planet safe for humanity rather than imposing a new way of life for all its inhabitants. This is not to imply that moral or ideological debate is to be curtailed, but rather to differentiate between achieving environmental sustainability and seeking the reshaping of socionatural relations.

Keywords: climate change; populism; democracy; governance; technocracy; urgency

1. Introduction

Ideological frames constrain sustainability goals as well as their implementation through governance schemes. Yet such frames are dynamic and respond to conceptual and political novelties. In this regard, two significant challenges have arisen in the last years that should be taken into account as far as the search for sustainability is concerned. The first is the Anthropocene hypothesis that points to the huge impact that aggregated human activity over time exerts on natural systems at a planetary level. Climate change is arguably the most dangerous manifestation of the Anthropocene and the weakness of climate policy so far makes it increasingly likely that a runaway climate change occurs, thus giving credence to the "hothouse Earth" scenario that would ultimately render the Earth uninhabitable. A first goal of this paper is thus to ponder how the sustainability paradigm may be affected in the face of this threat and whether, in fact, sustainability may be displaced by "habitability". On the other hand, some climate policies are eliciting the reaction of populist movements—from Trumpism to the *gilets jaunes* in France—that oppose the rise of environmentally-related taxes and deny climate change or question the severity of its effects.

A broad concept whose implementation has always been contested both at the theoretical and the political level, sustainability is now under further pressure as it faces conflicting challenges—that of the

urgency to sustain environmental conditions for the Earth's "habitability" and that of public *resistance* to social and behavioral changes presented as necessary to achieving sustainability. By examining such tensions, this paper helps to understand how governance efforts are increasingly confronted with social, economic, and political contexts characterized by populist politics and the "securitization" of the environmental agenda. The latter is reflected in the incipient shift from the sustainability paradigm to that of "habitability", which reduces the sustainable development imaginary—as it gives priority to preventing collapse over a transformative agenda committed to social justice and participatory democracy.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 offers an explanation for the paradoxical situation in which sustainability finds itself, namely one in which growing ecological awareness is not matched by decisive environmental action. In this context, the impact of the Anthropocene on the sustainability paradigm and the corresponding emphasis on habitability is explored. As the transition to the Anthropocene coincides with the rise of populism, Section 3 provides a description of two different kinds of populist reactions to climate change and other global environmental challenges. On the one hand, the populist right that denies global warming or at the very least contests the need to deal seriously with it; on the other, left-wing environmental movements that exhibit populist features as they claim that an exceptional situation requires radical measures. How might the resulting tension be eased, so that the implementation of sustainability is not compromised by opposing political movements or reluctant social constituencies? Section 4 suggests that, as it is likely that the more ambitious, morally-driven versions of sustainability will not easily generate enough support to achieve timely action to guarantee "habitability", it is necessary to adopt a pragmatic approach to sustainability. The latter is to avoid emphasis on societal change and moral transformation, seeking to minimize ideological framing and focusing instead on technical actions that support "habitability".

2. Sustainability in the Anthropocene

The current situation, as far as sustainability is concerned, is paradoxical. It can be argued that ecological awareness has reached a new peak, as there never were so many people in so many places showing concern for the state of the global environment. In this regard, the cultural impact of environmentalism after fifty years of active engagement is undeniable. However, there is also the widespread feeling that sustainability remains out of sight. Thus, the belief that we live in "an age of unsustainability" [1]. This conundrum can be explained in two different, complementary ways.

The first explanation for the paradoxical state of sustainability is that sustainable policies have not been bold enough. From this viewpoint, the popularity of the idea of sustainability is matched by persistent shortfall in practice, as if a glass ceiling hindered further transformation [2,3]. An alternative interpretation is that this shortfall is deliberate: sustainable policies are cosmetic and not intended to make substantial changes in the structure of liberal-capitalistic societies. Such "politics of simulation" actually prevents social radical change instead of pushing it forward [4]. According to this view, in fact, sustainability is by now neutralized as a driver of structural transformation, as it has been successfully co-opted by hegemonic interests. For some commentators, this spells no less than "the end of sustainability" [5]. Instead of a harbinger of change, sustainability would now be a way of keeping business as usual.

This gloomy appraisal depends on the notion that sustainability can only be achieved through radical change—a substantive reform of liberal societies would not be enough. Yet this is contestable, unless we clearly define what "radical change" means. Does decarbonization amount to "social radical change" or would it just be a new way of producing energy that by itself does not fundamentally change the organization of capitalistic economies and the distribution of wealth? A theoretical temptation to be avoided, then, is that of conflating *one* version of sustainability (in this case, one committed to overcoming liberal-capitalism) and sustainability as such.

A second explanation concerns the new understanding of socionatural relations provided by the Anthropocene. The latter term designates the massive anthropogenic disruption of natural systems at a

planetary level—a disruption so pervasive that some geologists advocate the end of the Holocene and the official recognition of a new geological epoch [6]. Natural global systems are now being affected in a significant way—the scientific realization that such systems do exist and can be understood being significant in itself. The science may not be consolidated yet [7]. However, the Anthropocene has already been adopted by scientists and scholars from several disciplines as a new framework for understanding such relations [8].

What does the Anthropocene entail for sustainability? As climate change, ocean acidification, loss of biodiversity, and other challenges associated to the Anthropocene remain untackled, the usefulness of the sustainability paradigm is called into question. The disruption of planetary systems differs from traditional environmental problems: if they are not properly dealt with, the planet might become hostile to human beings and ultimately remain inhospitable to humans. In the Anthropocene, sustainability is therefore increasingly associated to a sense of urgency that speaks of extremes, emergencies, exceptions [9]. The shift to habitability expresses a narrower understanding of environmental sustainability, in which issues of justice and democracy are relegated or given less of a priority. By stressing urgency, environmental movements can unintentionally reinforce this paradigm shift. Yet putting the emphasis on sustainability's failure to deliver structural change, as Blühdorn does [10], may weaken the imaginary of sustainability without replacing it with a more effective or comprehensive concept.

An alternative suggested in the last decade is that of "resilience", the features of which seem to fit well with the foreseeable behavior of an anthropogenically disrupted planet. The term designates the ability of a system to endure external shocks without losing its qualities—coming back to a stable condition after being unbalanced or achieving a new equilibrium level [11]. According to Adger, resilience provides "a superior framework for analyzing sustainability in the context of irreversibility, surprise and non-marginal change" [12]. However, it remains unclear how this translates into a given social organization. Does it require a steady-state economy? If it does, is it realistic to expect that kind of economic *ethos* in dynamic societies, let alone in emerging countries willing to provide their populations with greater material wealth? A sustainable society might well be also a resilient one, or try to be as much as possible, but the concept of sustainability possesses a wider range than that of resilience and thus it is bound to remain as the main paradigm for the time being. After all, there are no reasons to think that a new conceptual approach will by itself precipitate the kind of radical change that so far has proven out of reach. Moreover, the narrative of sustainability might be too valuable to be surrendered, as it enjoys public recognition after decades in circulation [1].

Still, the Anthropocene does have a significant impact on the way in which sustainability is conceived—and it is arguably starting to affect how it is governed and enacted. To begin with, mounting planetary pressure makes it simpler to defend the need to secure sustainability. Insofar as climate change, ocean acidification, the loss of biodiversity, and other global environmental problems threaten the habitability of the Earth for human beings, there seems to be no need for complicated arguments on behalf of sustainability. Yet while urgency is emphasized, the interrogation about the "good Anthropocene" has been posed: as we are forced to adapt to changing planetary conditions, should we not *choose* the kind of society we want to live in? [13]. Thus, the conversation about *whether* sustainability must be actively pursued is gradually displaced by the debate on *how* and *how fast* it should be implemented.

However, the sense of urgency that permeates public perceptions of climate change can lead to new tensions in the complicated relation between sustainability and democracy. As Robert Goodin [14] argued long ago, democratic procedures do not guarantee sustainable outcomes; conversely, there is no reason why a non-democratic society should necessarily be unsustainable. If the challenges of the Anthropocene are presented as existential risks that imperil human long-term survival, the temptation to do away with democratic procedures and guarantees will increase. Back in the 1970's, eco-authoritarianism flourished in the wake of the oil crisis—the argument was that liberty might be incompatible with survival and it might be necessary to replace representative government

with the rule of ecological experts [15]. Yet most environmental thinkers embraced democracy as the path to sustainability in the following years, for reasons both principled and instrumental, thus easing the tensions between these viewpoints. Is climate anxiety re-activating these tensions?

Current forms of eco-authoritarianism are emerging that look at China as an ecologically-aware autocracy that is capable of delivering structural change without complying with democratic procedures that lend veto power to a number of public and private actors [16]. New eco-authoritarians are less aggressive than their predecessors: they do not claim that governments should act as coercive central planners, but rather that they should be given full discretion to pass environmental laws and to intervene in the personal and economic activities of citizens [17]. Whether liberal cosmopolitanism, national populism, or enlightened eco-authoritarianism will prevail as modes of governing—or neglecting—the Anthropocene, remains to be seen.

3. A New Climate: Populism and Sustainability

How does the public react to the urgency of sustainability? During the last few years, matters of sustainability and unsustainability have gained centrality in the democratic public sphere. Climate denialism on the part of the Trump presidency, which has led to the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, has been accompanied by a heated debate on the Amazonia's fires and by the unexpected rise of France's "yellow vests" movement, the rise of which was triggered by an increase in diesel fuel taxation. There is thus a deal of *resistance* to sustainability, at least to the part of it that is associated with mitigation policies. At the same time, though, movements such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion have given a strong impulse to the climate cause, making a celebrity of Swedish young activist Greta Thunberg and stimulating a new wave of environmental concern. This has become apparent in the growth of green parties across Europe, as the Greens have become the fourth-largest bloc in the European Parliament after the May 2019 elections, as well as in the electoral manifestos of the contenders for the Democratic Party's nomination for the US 2020 election—all of which adhere to some version of the so-called Green New Deal originally proposed by congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez. In the background, citizens' acceptance of climate science is growing in the polls [18].

In this section, I will explore right-wing populism and climate activism. As much as they are located at opposite sides of the ideological divide, it is worth noting that right-wing populists are not necessarily oblivious to environmental issues, whereas climate activists exhibit a number of populist features. Implications for sustainability and governance, which will be sketched out before being more carefully considered, are at the end of the paper.

3.1. Populist Resistance against Sustainability

The rise of populism in this century can be interpreted as detrimental to sustainability, as leaders such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro explicitly deny the urgencies of climate change and speak up on behalf of ecologically harmful industries. More generally, right-wing populism tends to adopt a denialist position as far as climate change is concerned. In the case of the *gilets jaunes*, the lack of a consistent policy agenda did not prevent them from making a case against cosmopolitan elites that included a rejection of green taxation—perceived as a way of putting the burden of climate mitigation on the shoulders of those who already feel "left behind". It might thus be the case that climate denialism operates as the expression of a perceived unfairness rather than as an ideological belief. According to Goodhart's [19] distinction, *anywheres* act as sustainability advocates while *somewheres* believe they are being lectured by distant elites. In turn, this is consistent with evidence suggesting that the politicization of climate change reinforces political polarization [20] and may even turn climate change into a new form of identity politics [21].

The key feature of populism is the moral distinction between the people and the elite: the good people are abused by a self-interested elite [22]. In this regard, the very fact that liberal elites support environmental policies and the fight against climate change make these goals suspicious in the eyes of right-wing populists. The populist rejection of climate science feeds into the conservative

debunking of the latter as "junk science" [23]. Scientists are thus seen as part of the morally corrupt elite, together with professional politicians and journalists. Often, climate scientists are portrayed as hypocrites who decry capitalism while enjoying it, gladly living the lifestyles that they criticize in others [24]. Interestingly, the "anti-science" rhetoric of populist movements has been associated with the post-modern critique of truth: both see facts as socio-political constructs whose "truthfulness" cannot be objectively decided [25]. In practice, the populist movement has replicated the old left critique of mainstream journalism as an instrument for the dominant ideology, seeking to destabilize norms of truth and accuracy [26].

The practical applications of this maneuver have in turn been explored by McIntyre [27], showing how the campaigns against evolutionary theory and climate change have taken advantage of postmodernist arguments about the social contamination of science. So-called "right-wing postmodernism" uses doubts about objectivity and truth to assert that all truth claims are politicized and thus can be reduced to ideological statements. This makes it harder for structural changes to be enacted, as those who oppose them for ideological reasons can question the "objective truthfulness" of the expertise supporting the decision. On the other hand, a good deal of so-called "skeptical" science has been found to be linked to conservative think-tanks, who have been "organizing denial" for some time now [28]. The resulting skepticism towards environmental science is a major concern for the governance of sustainability, as resistance can be mobilized irrespective of how strong the "objective" evidence for implementing a given policy may be.

However, the implications of right-wing populism for sustainability cannot be discussed without understanding the reasons why their members oppose the climate agenda in the first place. In this regard, the literature is not conclusive and reflects wider doubts about the motivations that lie behind the rise of populism in Western societies. Is populism a consequence of economic deprivation, be it real or just perceived? Or is it driven by ideological factors? According to Lockwood [23], the populist hostility to climate policy can be given a "structuralist" or an "ideological" explanation: the former draws on accounts of the roots of populism in economic and political marginalization, the latter focuses on how climate change and policy occupy a symbolic place in the antagonism between "the people" and "the elite". His own conclusion is that there is not enough evidence in favor of the structuralist explanation, as the correlation between economic damage and support for right-wing populism is limited. The ideological account, on its part, seems better grounded: socially conservative and nationalist values produce hostility towards the climate agenda because the latter is defended by a cosmopolitan elite corrupted by special interests. But a conclusion follows: if ideology is paramount, we cannot expect that a public policy oriented towards greater socioeconomic equality will reduce the hostility towards the climate agenda.

Odd as it may sound, a distinction between climate policies and sustainability can be useful at this point. It is odd, because sustainability cannot be achieved without climate policies. However, there are reasons to think that the wider frame—sustainability—is not the problem: nobody would reject *prima facie*, the notion that societies must be environmentally sustainable. The problem lies in the normative implications that can be derived from it, as well as in the rhetoric that is often employed to gather support in favor of particular environmental policies. In the case of climate change, the obstacle is even greater: populists oppose the risk's very existence, or else consider it a natural fluctuation against which human beings cannot do much. Let us think of the *gilets jaunes* protest against the rise in diesel fuel taxation: if the same goal, namely decarbonization, could be achieved without them paying more taxes or having to change their lifestyle, they would surely approve. But climate change is increasingly framed as a problem caused by capitalism, which can only be solved through massive public action and a great deal of intervention into the private lives of citizens. This, in turn, deepens polarization.

Further evidence of this can be found in the fact that right-wing populist discourse often shows concern for the local and national environment, so that the former should not be seen as opposed to all kinds of environmental sustainability. As Machin and Wagener [29] have pointed out, the populist discourse presents landscapes, forests, coasts, or particular species as objects of local or national concern

as they are endangered by globalization, immigrants, or environmentalists themselves. Therefore, environmental demands do feature in the populist discourse—no matter how vague or how much they enter into contradiction with other populist arguments. Moreover, this vagueness may be intended to make these claims resonate with diverse social constituents. Something akin to a "green populism" may come out of this, but, more importantly, it shows that right wing-populism is not necessarily opposed to sustainability. On the other hand, this resistance is likely to weaken once global warming starts affecting certain interests—like the value of coastal properties in Florida or the ability of Spanish or Italian wineries to stay in business. Admittedly, the kind of natural conservationism usually championed by right-wing national populists does not fit with the inclusive values associated to the standard account of sustainable development. Yet this is not to suggest that populism is bound to embrace the latter, but rather that they can go from rejecting the talk of sustainability altogether to accepting the claim that *some* kind of socionatural stability is required in the face of growing planetary pressure.

Perhaps the term "sustainability" is ideologically contaminated in the eyes of social conservatives and/or right-wing populists too. But if the concept is framed as neutrally as possible, there are no reasons to think that populist supporters will reject it. By "neutral", I mean a framing of sustainability that underlines the need to deal with unsustainability without predetermining how that should be done. Right-wing national populists might then oppose international solidarity and favor instead national securitization, but leaving normative considerations aside that would not make them less supportive of a socionatural relation that can be maintained into the future. We will come back to this argument in the last section.

3.2. Populist Support for Sustainability

Right-wing populism does not exhaust the potential of a populist political style. In Europe, parties such as Podemos in Spain or the Left Front in France have campaigned on left-wing populist platforms. In the US, candidates such as Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren have been labeled "populist" as well, a term that has positive connotations in the American political culture. In left-wing populism, the content of both "the people" and "the elite" changes: the former does not exclude immigrants or similarly marginalized collectivities, while the latter is essentially represented by economic elites. Other features of populism remain in place: the defense of a more direct form of democracy that makes the sovereign people the source of all decisions, a charismatic leadership that serves as the true voice of the people and is charged with the task of neutralizing special interests, and an emphasis on national sovereignty as a protection against global markets.

The interesting question in our context is whether there exists a green populism—or whether it may come to exist. Is that what the climate protest is? If so, what implications does it have for sustainability and governance?

Now, Moffitt [30] has suggested that populism is less an ideology or a discourse than a "political style" that can be adopted by any political actor. He rightly emphasizes the increasing "mediatization" of society and suggests that populist tactics are especially well-suited for the new political environment, as populist leaders communicate directly with their followers and carefully stage their protest in order to highlight the affective elements of it. Moreover, populist movements typically advance in the wake of a crisis which they "spectacularize"—the feeling that we are undergoing a state of exception that requires radical political action is thus generated. This is precisely what the "Climate Mobilization" movement does, as it uses an apocalyptic discourse that lends emotional support to the notion that an emergency response is required. The idea that human beings are going extinct due to global warming thus seeks to create a state of exception, which is a typical populist strategy. This is a first indication of the possibility of a green populism.

It is debatable whether the apocalyptic frame can work. Advocates believe that such gloom is necessary for a green transition to take place, whereas critics warn that invoking collapse demobilizes the public. Be that as it may, it becomes clear that "apocalyptic discourse is a major mediating frame through which publics have come to engage with the issue of climate change, and by proxy with wider

green politics" [31]. This last remark points to the fact that climate change is currently operating as a "master frame" that encapsulates traditional environmental problems in the eyes of the public [32]. The Anthropocene is actually a better framework for understanding socionatural relations as they stand, insofar as it provides a wider context for understanding climate change and other global environmental problems—mostly by presuming the transformative power of the human species and showing how natural systems across the planet have already been disturbed by the aggregated actions of human beings. Yet the concept has not captured the public imagination and that is why issues such as species extinction or resource depletion are presented through the lens of climate change. This, as suggested above, can be problematic for the pursuit and governance of sustainability—it might lead to the ideological contestation of sustainability goals that otherwise would remain unnoticed.

The current climate protest movement, then, does exhibit some populist features. There is the dramatic spectacularizing of a crisis, the claim that we are going through an emergency that demands the proclamation of a state of exception and thus the implementation of radical structural change, as well as a sense of urgency that demands that we stop talking and begin acting. It is unclear whether this might request doing away with democratic procedures and liberal counterweights, but the appeal to the "will of the people" usually carries the risk of replacing representative with plebiscitarian democracy. Therefore, the eco-authoritarian argument that "humanity will have to trade its liberty to live as it wishes in favor of a system where survival is paramount" [33] might be captured by green populists. The core populist argument is actually being articulated by climate activists: a good people is being robbed of its future by a corrupted system more interested in profiting from capitalistic practices than in saving the planet. This could lead to authoritarian sovereign action in the face of a climate emergency on the part of a "climate Leviathan" defined as "a regulatory authority armed with democratic legitimacy, binding technical authority on scientific issues, and a panopticon-like capacity to monitor the vital granular elements of our emerging world" [34].

A different interpretation, in which the populist dimension of climate mobilization is seen as a way of exerting democratic pressure against unaccountable global elites, is also possible. On this reading, populism appears as the only political movement that could conceivably generate "the sort of social and political momentum that seems necessary if real change in the way we live is to occur" [35]. Past populist movements that have championed progressive causes are highlighted in order to lend legitimacy to a potential "green populism". From this viewpoint, a democratic populism that is legitimately rooted in the construction of an inclusive "people" seeks to introduce dissent to areas of economic policy-making previously controlled by experts [36]. Moreover, the success of the "Green New Deal" is seen as a proof that "technocratic and democratic visions can be welded together, around a sense of urgency and the deep unsustainability of the status quo" [36]. The essential ambiguity of political phenomena makes it hard to decide which of these two interpretations is correct.

As for the effect that a green populism might have on the governance of sustainability, a first problem concerns the abandonment of the concept of sustainability and its replacement with a language that focuses on habitability and decarbonization. Now, this is the source of a potential conflict: despite the expectation that the implementation of the Paris Agreement would play a strong role in enabling the accomplishment of global sustainable development goals for human beings [37], early research suggests that decarbonization can actually hinder the realization of such goals, as mitigation efforts slow down poverty reduction in developing countries in a measure that is not offset by climate transfers [38]. By itself, this does not mean that the pursuit of sustainability is compromised—a growing public awareness might give an impulse to it. Moreover, it could be the case that technological innovation will dissipate the conflict between decarbonization and poverty reduction. Yet it might also become a permanent feature of climate policy. In that case, it remains to be seen whether the growing polarization between left-wing populists advocating climate action and right-wing populists that reject climate science will be further complicated by Global South complaints about the impact of decarbonization on poverty reduction.

4. Ways Out: Sustainability, Technocracy, Democracy

If the urgent need for sustainable policies in the Anthropocene meets public resistance, which seems to be stronger whenever those policies are presented as leading to radical transformation of current social structures or as demanding deep moral and behavioral changes from individuals, the risk of a standstill is only apparent. This section outlines a way out of this situation by emphasizing the need to separate strong views of sustainability from a minimal version of it, which should be urgently implemented.

Now, it has been argued that the problems of the Anthropocene exacerbate existing vulnerabilities in democratic theory and practice in a moment when representative democracies are exposed to anti-establishment protest that questions their legitimacy [39]. As we have seen, populism poses a challenge for liberal democracies as it locates the democratic will of the people as the main source of political legitimacy, thus contesting the mechanisms through which the latter filter popular sovereignty. While sustainability requires popular consent, a polity that reinforces the popular will may weaken the voice of expert knowledge, while also questioning the need to implement transformative policies oriented towards sustainability. If the problems of the Anthropocene are not tackled, democratic legitimacy may suffer as a result—but the same will happen if they attempt to address them aggressively without a clear popular mandate [39]. The dilemma is thus apparent.

As a result, perhaps governance in the Anthropocene will have to be more democratic in some respects (integrating more voices in the political process) and less in others (securing the role of experts). The aim of inclusion is to enhance reflexivity by way of incorporating insights from communities affected by environmental change and signals from the non-human world [40]. Yet an enlarged participation does not automatically mean more sustainability—the role of participation must be carefully designed. On their part, experts are needed in environmental governance due to the technical complexity of socioecological interactions. Therefore, the epistemic dimension of liberal democracies might need to be reinforced in order to prevent the populist erosion of scientific knowledge or, as we have seen, the misrepresentation of existing evidence for strategic reasons. A possibility is that of knowledge co-production, which can contribute to societal transitions by shifting institutional arrangements that govern relationships between knowledge and power, as well as state and citizens [41]. This approach must be cautiously implemented in order to avoid undesirable outcomes [42], as the tension between expert knowledge and some version of the popular will seems hard to avoid.

My claim is that sustainability should be conceived as neutrally as possible, as a technocratically inflected project that pursues the stabilization of socionatural relations and the avoidance of planetary collapse without making strong moral claims about how humans should relate to the natural world. As such, it is to be carried out by states in cooperation with private actors and civil society organizations. It should be distinguished from sustainable development as well as from particular versions of the general principle of sustainability.

The implementation of sustainability would thus be restricted from the outset, as it does not pursue a complete transformation of liberal societies for which there is just not enough popular support—it just tries to make good use of existing scientific evidence in order to prevent unsustainability. An array of institutions and practices that make up for a governance system where the state acquires a prominent role is to carry out this "minimum sustainability" whose legitimacy derives from self-restraint, i.e., from its refusal to pursue any "maximum sustainability". This is not to say that strong moral values, for instance those related to the protection of animals, cannot be defended and eventually translated into public policies. They can, and they should. But securing habitability cannot depend on the elimination of value differences. It might be argued that sustainability embraces values wider than habitability. Yet it would be more accurate to say that particular versions of the general principle of sustainability embrace those supplementary values. Sustainability, as such, is an indeterminate concept, the defense of which entails deciding *what* ought to be sustained, for *whom*, for *how long*, and for *what reason* [43]. Its values must be specified, so that a general guiding principle (that pursues

some kind of socionatural stability) adopts the form of a particular version of it (prioritizing social justice, say, or else nature conservation).

To put it differently: preventing the worst from happening is what *at the very least* must be done, while aiming *for the best* is an altogether different matter. What the "best" means is however highly contentious and a question to be answered through public conversation and ideological contention. A good number of normative questions, ranging from landscape preservation to the human relationship with animals, the redefinition of prosperity or the merits of air travel, are thus to be answered this way: through political debate, social practice, and political advocacy. If enough consensus is reached, they will be translated into policy. These questions, as well as others that cannot be answered without a combination of scientific expertise and moral judgement, make up the debate on the "good Anthropocene", i.e., the process by which particular meanings are given to sustainability's signifiers: what to sustain, by whom, for how long, and how. In this context, there are "sustainability advocates" [44] in all kinds of places, from governments to firms, as much as there are constituencies that oppose change or come up against *certain* changes. But when changes are introduced as technocratic fixes rather than as ideologically saturated big schemes, they are more likely to be accepted. This is partly the idea behind the "stealth democracy" proposed by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse [45], who suggest that people do not care about most policies—let alone the details of them—and are content to turn over decision-making to someone else. Democracy would thus be a two-way street: ideological debate and social mobilization on one side, policy implementation on the other.

For this purpose, the design of governance is key. Defined as a set of precautionary policies intended to make sure that human societies enjoy—to borrow Röckstrom's [46] notion—a "safe operating space" by way of not entering into an irreversible path of unsustainability, sustainability in the Anthropocene is to be implemented by a network of agencies and actors that cooperate with each other at different levels. The state is to assume an enhanced role in setting goals and coordinating efforts as well as stimulating the cooperation between public and private actors and civil society organizations. An emphasis on technocratic rationality should help to de-activate ideological conflict around a number of areas of policy-making. Disagreement is bound to exist, though, even among sustainability advocates. As long as possible, they should be negotiated among participants in institutionalized settings in order to avoid an ideological spillover. To prevent this, governance must be inclusive, engaging those constituencies most affected by environmental policy. Yet the kind of change that is pursued in the proposed framework is a limited one—it attempts to adapt the current societal system to new environmental conditions, not to radically transform existing institutions. As far as governance is concerned, neither the Anthropocene nor climate change should be seen as instruments for fighting capitalism or liberal democracy—this would be tantamount to pursuing strong versions of sustainability before enough popular consent has been amassed. To put it differently, the "good Anthropocene" must be sustainable, but this is all we know about it in the absence of public deliberation about the desired shape of socionatural relations.

At the national level, the Dutch transition management is a case in point, as it seeks to widen participation and takes a long-term perspective, trying to identify successful pathways towards sustainability [47]. In this arrangement, transition arenas serve as places where participants share their visions, but this is done in an institutionalized setting that can operate without necessarily attracting public attention. Predictably, the Dutch model has been criticized for being an elitist and technocratic approach, as none of the platforms are democratically chosen and the public is not really involved [48]. These shortcomings can, however, be seen as advantages, as they prevent the decision process from being jeopardized by party competition and media framing. Replicating this institutional setting at the international level could prove difficult and there is yet no agreement about whether a polycentric framework [2] is preferable to a centralized approach built around multilateral institutions. The UN process shows how the latter can be blocked by vested interests. Yet the kind of structural transformation that is required to make the transition to sustainability might not be acquired without

the willing participation of state and economic actors. There is no reason to think that a different governance regime will make vested interests disappear.

What about state legitimacy? In the context of populism, setting sustainability goals can be tricky—as the protest of the French "yellow vests" attests. Rather than lecturing people about how they are to live their lives, sustainability must be presented as a matter of finding the socioecological balance that allows people to live their lives in the first place, i.e., as a set of policies that pursue climate stabilization and other environmental goals which the concept of "planetary boundaries" aptly summarizes [49]. To some extent, this is already happening: most environmental policies are implemented without much noise. It makes sense, as it is hard to think of someone who might be against biodiversity—the problem lies in the human activities that unintentionally deplete biodiversity. Finding the right incentives and controls for both economic actors and individuals is thus essential for the design of good environmental policies [50].

Furthermore, a smooth implementation of climate policies might be compromised by the very scale and degree of the required transformation—some changes will not go unnoticed. Yet a technocratic approach that emphasizes the need to decarbonize human activity without changing current lifestyles or subjecting them to moral criticism is a better way out of the climate crisis than relying on a sudden, massive, guilt-ridden transfiguration of living humans across the world. While it seems natural to assume that a fully informed public will change its behavior, educating people about a problem is rarely enough and can even backfire—nobody is willing to know that their way of living is problematic [51]. If that happens due to some enormous cultural leap, it will be welcome. But these two projects should not be conflated: climate stabilization through decarbonization is one thing, moral transformation is another. Hopefully, they will meet one day. Admittedly, this is not exactly a non-ideological or value-free approach, as it protects current social systems and thus makes use of liberal-democratic institutions, market practices, and technological innovation. Yet they are used in order to build up a reasonable consensus around the most urgent sustainable policies, without preventing the public debate on wider socioecological matters.

5. Conclusions

This paper has dealt with the problems that governance practices related to the promotion of sustainable development are facing in the current political context. On the one hand, there is the pressure exerted by global environmental problems, which are increasingly understood as related to an unprecedented degree of human impact on planetary systems—a novelty captured by the Anthropocene hypothesis. For this reason, there is a tendency to turn sustainability into habitability, namely making sure that the Earth does not turn into an inhospitable place for human beings. To some extent, this is unavoidable, since sustainability is a general principle that can be specified in different ways—sustainable development would be one of them, associated as it is to participatory democracy and social justice. On the other hand, sustainability meets with public resistance on the part of right-wing populist movements that contest environmental science and the need to radically transform current social systems. At the opposite end of the spectrum, there are left-wing populist movements that demand precisely just that. The ensuing ideologization of environmental issues, climate change above them all, threatens to hinder the implementation of sustainable policies as well as the normal functioning of governance schemes. To prevent this, I have argued that a distinction should be made between a "minimum sustainability", that is carried out in a technocratic fashion and a larger conversation about the "good Anthropocene" in which all kind of political actors and ideologies should be included. The proposed differentiation may help to overcome the populist resistance against sustainable policies, emphasizing the open and pluralistic quality of the sustainability principle and the shared need to inhabit a hospitable planet.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this paper for their comments, which have helped to improve it.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Dauvergne, P. The Sustainability Story: Exposing Truths, Half-Truths, and Illusions. In *New Earth Politics: Essays from the Anthropocene*; Nicholson, S., Jinnah, S., Eds.; MIT Press: Cambridge, UK, 2019; pp. 387–404.
2. Dryzek, J.; Pickering, J. *The Politics of the Anthropocene*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2019.
3. Hausknost, D.; Hammond, M. Beyond the environmental state? The political prospects of a sustainability transformation. *Environ. Politics* **2020**, *29*, 1–16. [CrossRef]
4. Blühdorn, I. Sustaining the Unsustainable: Symbolic Politics and the Politics of Simulation. *Environ. Politics* **2007**, *16*, 251–275. [CrossRef]
5. Benson, M.; Craig, R. The end of sustainability. *Soc. Nat. Resour.* **2014**, *27*, 777–782. [CrossRef]
6. Ellis, S.E. *Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2018.
7. Castree, N. The 'Anthropocene' in Global Change Science: Expertise, the Earth, and the future of Humanity. In *Anthropocene Encounters. New Directions in Green Political Thinking*; Biermann, F., Lövbrand, E., Eds.; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2019; pp. 25–49.
8. Di Chiro, G. Environmental Justice and the Anthropocene meme. In *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*; Gabrielson, T., Hall, C., Meyer, J.M., Schlosberg, D., Eds.; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2016; pp. 362–381.
9. Lynch, A.; Veland, S. *Urgency in the Anthropocene*; The MIT Press: Cambridge, UK, 2018.
10. Blühdorn, I. Sustainability -Post-Sustainability -Unsustainability. In *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*; Gabrielson, T., Hall, C., Meyer, J.M., Schlosberg, D., Eds.; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2019; p. 260.
11. Gunderson, L.; Holling, C. (Eds.) *Panarchy: Understanding Transformations in Systems of Humans and Nature*; Island Press: Washington, DC, USA, 2002.
12. Adger, N. Ecological and social resilience. In *Handbook of Sustainable Development*; Atkinson, G., Simon, D., Eric, N., Matthew, A., Eds.; Edward Elgar: Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA, USA, 2017; p. 79.
13. Arias-Maldonado, M. Towards a Good Anthropocene. In *Rethinking the Environment for the Anthropocene. Political Theory and Socionatural Relations in the New Geological Age*; Arias-Maldonado, M., Trachtenberg, Z., Eds.; Routledge: London, UK, 2019; pp. 137–149.
14. Goodin, R. *Green Political Theory*; Polity: London, UK, 1992; p. 68.
15. See Ophuls, W. *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity*; W.H. Freeman and Company: San Francisco, CA, USA, 1977.
16. Beeson, M. The Coming of Environmental Authoritarianism. *Environ. Politics* **2010**, *19*, 276–294. [CrossRef]
17. Shahar, D. Rejecting Eco-Authoritarianism, Again. *Environ. Values* **2015**, *24*, 345–366. [CrossRef]
18. Fagan, M.; Huang, C. *A Look at how People around the World View Climate Change*; Pew Research Center: Washington, DC, USA, 2019; Available online: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/18/a-look-at-how-people-around-the-world-view-climate-change/ (accessed on 23 November 2019).
19. Goodhart, D. *The Road to Somewhere. The New Tribes Shaping British Politics*; Penguin: London, UK, 2017.
20. McCright, A.; Dunlap, R. The politicization of climate change and polarization in the american public's views of global warming. *Sociol. Q.* **2011**, *52*, 155–194. [CrossRef]
21. Unsworth, K.; Fielding, K. It's political: How the salience of one's political identity changes climate change beliefs and policy support. *Glob. Environ. Chang.* **2014**, *27*, 131–137. [CrossRef]
22. Müller, J.-W. *Was ist Populismus. Ein Essay*; Suhrkamp: Berlín, Germany, 2016.
23. Lockwood, M. Right-wing populism and the climate change agenda: Exploring the linkages. *Environ. Politics* **2018**, *27*, 712–732. [CrossRef]
24. James, C. Mass Death Dies Hard. In *GWPF Essay 5*; Global Warming Policy Foundation: London, UK, 2016.
25. D'Ancona, M. *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back*; Ebury Press: London, UK, 2017.
26. McNair, B. *Fake News: Falsehood, Fabrication and Fantasy in Journalism*; Routledge: London, UK, 2018; p. 29.
27. McIntyre, L. *Post-Truth*; The MIT Press: Cambridge, UK, 2018.

28. Jacques, P.; Dunlap, R.; Freeman, M. The organisation of denial: Conservative think tanks and environmental skepticism. *Environ. Politics* **2008**, *17*, 349–385. [CrossRef]
29. Machin, A.; Wagener, O. The Nature of Green Populism. *Green Eur. J.* **2019**. Available online: https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/the-nature-of-green-populism/ (accessed on 19 November 2019).
30. Moffit, B. *The Global Rise of Populism. Performance, Political Style, and Representation*; Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, USA, 2016.
31. McNeish, W. From revelation to revolution: Apocalypticism in green politics. *Environ. Politics* **2017**, *26*, 1035–1054. [CrossRef]
32. Snow, D.; Benford, R. Master frames and cycles of protest. In *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*; Morris, A.D., Mueller, C.M., Eds.; Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, USA, 1992; pp. 133–155.
33. Shearman, D.; Smith, J. *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy*; Praeger: Westport, CT, USA, 2007; p. 4.
34. Mann, G.; Wainwright, J. *Climate Leviathan. A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*; Verso: London, UK, 2018; p. 38.
35. Beeson, M. *Environmental Populism. The Politics of Survival in the Anthropocene*; Springer: Heidelberg, Germany, 2019; p. xiii.
36. Davies, W. Green Populism? *Action and Mortality in the Anthropocene, Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity Essay Series.* Available online: https://www.cusp.ac.uk/themes/m/m1-12/ (accessed on 10 November 2019).
37. Bhore, S.J. Paris Agreement on Climate Change: A Booster to Enable Sustainable Global Development and Beyond. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **2016**, *13*, 1134. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
38. Campagnolo, L.; Marinella, D. Can the Paris deal boost SDGs achievement? An assessment of climate mitigation co-benefits or side-effects on poverty and inequality. *World Dev.* **2017**, *122*, 96–109. [CrossRef]
39. Di Paola, M.; Jamieson, D. *Climate Change and the Challenges to Democracy*; University of Miami Law Review: Miami, FL, USA, 2018; Available online: h9ps://repository.law.miami.edu/umlr/vol72/iss2/5 (accessed on 15 September 2019).
40. Eckersley, R. Deliberative democracy, ecological representation and risk: Towards a democracy of the affected. In *Democratic Innovation. Deliberation, Representation y Association*; Saward, M., Ed.; Routledge: London, UK, 2000; pp. 117–132.
41. Wyborn, C.; Datta, A.; Montana, J.; Ryan, M.; Leith, P.; Chaffin, B.; Miller, C.; van Kerkhoff, L. Co-Producing Sustainability: Reordering the Governance of Science, Policy, and Practice. *Annu. Rev. Environ. Resour.* **2019**, *44*, 319–346. [CrossRef]
42. Lemos, M.C.; Arnott, J.C.; Ardoin, N.M.; Baja, K.; Bednarek, A.T.; Dewulf, A.; Fieseler, C.; Goodrich, K.A.; Jagannathan, K.; Klenk, N.; et al. To co-produce or not to co-produce. *Nat. Sustain.* **2018**, *1*, 722–724. [CrossRef]
43. Redclift, M. Sustainable Development: Needs, Values, and Rights. *Environ. Values* **1993**, *2*, 3–20. [CrossRef]
44. Fischer, A.; Spekkink, W.; Polzin, C.; Diza-Ayude, A.; Brizi, A.; Macsinga, I. Social representations of governance for change towards sustainability: Perspectives of sustainability advocates. *Environ. Politics* **2018**, *27*, 621–643. [CrossRef]
45. Hibbing, J.; Teiss-Morse, E. *Stealth Democracy. Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2002.
46. Röckstrom, J.; Steffen, W.; Noone, K.; Persson, A.; Stuart Chapin, F.; Lambin, E.F.; Lenton, T.M.; Scheffer, M.; Folke, C.; Schellnhuber, H.J.; et al. A Safe Operating Space for Humanity. *Nature* **2009**, *461*, 472–475. [CrossRef]
47. Kemp, R. The Dutch energy transition approach. *Int. Econ. Econ. Policy* **2010**, *7*, 291–316. [CrossRef]
48. Hendriks, C. On inclusion and network governance: The democratic disconnect of Dutch energy transitions. *Public Adm.* **2008**, *86*, 1009–1031. [CrossRef]
49. Biermann, F. *Earth System Governance: World Politics in the Anthropocene*; The MIT Press: Cambridge, UK, 2014.

50. Sterner, T.; Barbier, E.B.; Bateman, I.; van den Bijgaart, I.; Crépin, A.S.; Edenhofer, O.; Fischer, C.; Habla, W.; Hassler, J.; Johansson-Stenman, O.; et al. Policy design for the Anthropocene. *Nat. Sustain.* **2019**, *2*, 14–21. [CrossRef]
51. DeSombre, E. Individual Behavior and Global Environmental Problems. *Glob. Environ. Politics* **2018**, *18*, 5–12. [CrossRef]

© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

View publication stats