

The Role of Sustainability as Ideology in shaping Collaborative Governance within the European Union

Thomas Hoerber, Gabriel Weber & Ignazio Cabras

ABSTRACT

This paper explores and examines issues and challenges related to sustainability, analysing the concept as a possible new ideology at a local level and worldwide. Using information gathered from questionnaires and in-depth interviews with 27 experts, information about sustainability and its role in becoming an ideology with the power of forging and shaping the future of the EU. Findings suggest that sustainability resembles an ideology according to recent Laclauian and Zizekian definitions, although widely diluted to a weak approach exhibited by 'green economy' policy initiatives. With the on-going environmental and climate crisis, more recent initiatives of EU public management initiatives such as the European Green Deal seem to follow a more rigorous ideological sustainability approach. Findings from this study provide further insight on how sustainability can inform and guide the EU wider agenda, and point toward the raise of a new ideology based on sustainability itself.

Keywords - Public Management, Zisek, European Green Deal, Degrowth, Ecological Economics

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainability became popular after the Brundtland Report (1987), which defined it as a “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (ibid, p. 9). Sustainability, frequently used interchangeably with the term 'sustainable development', starting acquiring importance in the early 1990s, particularly after the United Nation Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (UNCED, 1992). At that time, the fall of the Berlin Wall meant the end of communism and socialist regimes in many countries worldwide, and an increasing ecological crisis and the rise of social issues such as poverty and migration revealed the downsides of globalisation, capitalism and liberalism. This is when sustainability emerged as a multifaceted concept appealing to millions of individuals and groups from many different religious, ethnic, class and social backgrounds.

Copyright: © 2020 Hoerber, Weber and Cabras. Copyright for this article is retained by the authors, with first publication rights granted to the International Public Management Review (IPMR). All journal content, except where otherwise noted, is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. By virtue of their appearance in this open-access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings.

Corresponding Author: thomas.hoerber@essca.fr

The raise of sustainability brought many people to change their careers to work and operate in sustainability related fields, and/or to change their lifestyle and consumer behaviours towards more sustainable habits. In the past decades, the European Union (EU hereafter) made a strong commitment towards sustainability, also due to campaigning carried out by grassroots organisations across EU member states. However, the EU commitment to sustainability finds his roots in the energy shortages, which have been common in the Western industrialised world. For instance, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC - 1951) and the Euratom (1957), precursor of the EU, were created to deal with and alleviate energy shortages, although a generally accepted logic of a pan-European energy policy was never fully implemented in the early post-war period. This issue culminated with the oil crisis of 1973, when ECSC member states reverted to national energy prerogatives (Hoerber, 2013). Since then, most EU member states were and still are net importers of energy.

Building on the thesis of a growing European environmental conscience (Hoerber, 2013), we argue that an EU environmental conscience exists and that it is developing into a pan-European ideology. We define this new ideology as ‘*sustainabilism*’, arguing that it evidently contributes to the progress of the European integration process and even to the definition and legitimisation of a European identity. This ideology emerges from the joint efforts of member states of addressing and solving environmental issues, in a new horizontal policy involving all relevant EU policy areas and all levels of authority in the Member States. For instance, sustainability encompasses economic and social aspects, which justify the policy remit of the EU, as demonstrated by the increasing efforts in promoting energy consumption from renewable sources and the support given to social enterprises operating in the energy sector (Directive 2009/28/EC). These initiatives show a nexus of policies aimed at achieving sustainable development, an objective strongly supported by the wider public across EU member states. However, despite the substantial number of EU political initiatives on sustainability, we cannot take for granted that the paradigm debates in parliaments, government agency, and supranational organisations are mirrored in exactly the same way in the perceptions of private business, NGO’s, environmental justice organizations, and scholars looking at sustainability from an policy perspective.

In this paper, we contend that the sustained support and implementation to environmentally-focused EU policies will lead to the development of sustainability as a European ideology. We aim to address and answer to the following research questions: *What is the role of sustainability as state-driven, firm-driven, and bottom-up-driven ‘ideology’ in the EU? How has the EU focus on sustainability increased its legitimacy and power in dealing with the current ecological crisis? And how this overall effort can be addressed, defined and theorised as ‘sustainabilism’?*

The paper includes seven chapters including this brief introduction. Section 2 defines ideology, focusing on sustainability as an ideology. In section 3 the qualitative methodology for this paper is explained, with data analysis results presented and discussed in section 4. Section 5 concludes.

WHAT IS AN IDEOLOGY?

Historically, ideologies such as communism, capitalism and fascism all seem to have been discredited by past event, for instance World War II for fascism, or the end of the Cold War for Communism. More recently, the Financial Crisis of 2008/9 dealt a serious blow to the credibility of free market and capitalism as a whole. Ideals and values on what our societies are based are mutable and illusory - this is our belief as we try to underpin this feeling with academic substance in the in this paper. The resulting research question is therefore whether such changes are a threat, or whether they can also be considered to have positive potential. Again, with this paper we aim at elaborating and proposing a new ideology by drawing on the concept of sustainability.

The term ideology indicates a causal chain of ideas, or the study of ideas, creating a group of logical thoughts (Destutt de Tracy, 1796). An ideology is defined as "something unreal" by Arendt (1979), a sort of abstract construct that makes history understandable and the future predictable in the light of an idea that, once it acquires an ideology status, becomes self-sustaining:

“An ideology is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea. Its subject matter is history, to which the ‘idea’ is applied; the result of this application is not a body of statements about something that is, but the unfolding of a process which is in constant change. The ideology treats the course of events as though it followed the same ‘law’ as the logical exposition of its ‘idea’. Ideologies pretend to know the mysteries of the whole historical process-the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, and the uncertainties of the future-because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas.” (Arendt, 1979: 469).

Marx (1867) saw ideology as a tool of establishing and maintaining the superiority of the ruling class - the Bourgeoisie class in his case, who created their world by establishing their ideas as the dominant ones. For the Bourgeoisie class, maintaining control depended just as much on their power and money as on the acceptance of their ideas being captured in the liberal ideology.

These definitions all stress on the ‘contagiousness’ of ideas, which are developed and defended by thinkers able to attract masses through their appeal to present and address not yet well-defined problems. In the process of operationalizing abstract ideas, ideologies are often refined until they generate a convincing platform for the development of a mass movement. However, ideologies often remain intentionally vague about their key aspects and principles, as their definition depends on how they are used in a specific context.

In this paper, we will use a working definition of the term ideology, based on four firm points, to address and analyse sustainability. First, an ideology embraces the insider and criticize the outside by defining the latter as the other; second, moderate ideologies remain open to integrate part of the outside and therefore remain (to a greater extent) inclusive; third, extreme ideologies terrorise a substantial portion of the inside and threaten the outside; fourth and last, that leads us to the definition of extreme ideologies such as Totalitarianism (see Hayek, 1944). For the purpose of defining sustainability as an ideology,

however, the first and the second point of this working definition remain incomplete, as they mainly repeat the definition of sustainable development provided by Brundtland (1987) and devised upon social, environmental and economic sustainability.

DEFINING SUSTAINABILITY AS AN IDEOLOGY

According to Freeden (2003) ideologies are no utopias, nor solution; what is crucial is not to take any fact, or any truth, or norm, or any framework at its face value, for all may be constructed. So, in that sense, sustainability is a make-believe that can structure our very being, our social contacts and our daily life. As such, accepting social, environmental and economic sustainability defines the inside of *sustainabilism* as an ideology and distinguishes it from the other.

That remains still relatively vague and the analysis proposed in this paper aim to identify the missing components. Althusser (1971: 153; 155) elaborates two conceptual frameworks to explain ideology: (i) ‘the “representation” of the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence’, and (ii) ‘Ideology has a material existence’ The first conceptual framework, known as imagination, ties in with Marxist claims that ideologies have the function of camouflaging the unequal arrangements on which class societies are based; while the second conceptual framework, known as interpellation, suggests that ideology does not occur in the form of "ideas" or deliberate "representations" in the "brains" of individuals.

Frequently, an ideology embodies the actions and behaviours of organisations and institutions operating within societies (Althusser, 1971). However, an ideology can also be interpreted as a social process of address, or interpellations. This means that most levels and elements of social formation are reproduced by ideology, and mainly the reproduction “is secured by the legal-political and ideological superstructure” (Althusser, 1971: 148). In light of these considerations, and with regard to addressing the EU as supranational organisation, we claim that the facilitating role played by the EU is to normalize and internalize the dominant logic of sustainability in the minds and bodies of citizens. In such a context, sustainability becomes an important ideological state apparatus.

Beyond Althusser’s interpellation and imagination, Žižek (1989; 1994) and Laclau (1996, 2000, 2005) pinpoint the role of a ‘lack’ in ideology: it is a vacuum that comprises desire and fundamentally provides the ontological foundations of human life. The essential function of ideology is to shape that vacuum. For ideologies to have political significance, critics state, subjects would need to have a degree of trust in policy makers, values, and public institutions, which today’s liberal-cosmopolitan subjects lack (Žižek, 1989). The political utilisation of a ‘lack’, vacuum or deficiency is a formidable political incentive for response and action, as only few would desire to live in a country lacking in sustainability, security, attractiveness or some other deficit (Gunder, 2010). The lacking meaningless subjectivity can be considered as the cause of ideological consequences for which a theory of the imagination unaccompanied cannot reason. We claim that the EU consciously or unconsciously wants to address and rectify the Žižek’s and Laclau’s ‘lacks’ associated with global environmental change, increasing inequality, fading economic competitiveness, and diminishing safety (see Laclau, 1996, 2000, 2005). These deficiencies provide fertile ground for ideological articulations and an emotive and powerful

political tool for the development and implementation of sustainability policies (Stavarakakis, 2007).

METHODOLOGY

Several scholars have investigated the several schools of thought related to sustainability (e.g. Illge and Schwarze, 2009). While these studies give valuable insights about the existence of different opinions (ideologies) on sustainability, they do not shed light on why there are different opinions, and how the different opinions or ideologies attract others. The paradigm debates described in the literature are actually mirrored in exactly the same way in the perceptions and opinions of policy makers, private business, NGO's, environmental justice organizations, and scholars looking at sustainability from a policy perspective.

Based on these considerations, we investigate how views from experts and practitioners in the sustainability research field from those provided by different schools of thought. In particular, we investigate how experts and practitioners about the policy of the EU in terms of sustainability, and the reasoning behind sustainability being a (European) ideology, and finally what they expect to be future topics of sustainability research. Our study uses a qualitative Delphi-study approach based on a survey-questionnaire and interviews to shed light on these questions. For the purpose of this paper, we approached twenty-seven sustainability experts from industry, higher education, consultancy and journalism. Table 1 provides an overview of the selected experts, their attributes and backgrounds.

The questionnaire comprised semi-structured open-ended questions such as: "to which ideologies is sustainability linked". A first set of questions dealt with general evaluations of ideologies; linkages between ideologies and sustainability. A second set of questions concerned sustainability more specifically and in particular beliefs, goals, motives, and worldviews of people that support sustainability as well as imaginaries of sustainability. A third set of questions had to do with sustainable societies, sustainable behaviour and specifically with the role of sustainability in the EU. A fourth set of questions was directed to sustainable forms of development of economies (e.g. growth, degrowth, circular, sharing, green) and resource access (e.g. private, public, or common). A final set of questions elucidated the relationship between sustainability and environmental justice and ethics as well as whether interviewees believed that sustainability is an ideology.

Transcripts from all interviews were subsequently analysed to identify and codify crucial matters and isolate cross-cutting topics (Krippendorff, 2004; Patton, 1990). As a final step, we used a Delphi-study approach to compare interviewees' outcomes with the results of the analysis of the first interview round. The Delphi-Study served to triangulate results from the first interview round, and included information gathered from a workshop addressing sustainability in contemporary Europe [Angers, France; 2018] and from another one workshop addressing the creation sustainability in Europe via means of energy and environmental policies [Roskilde, Denmark; 2019].

Table 1: Overview and criteria of consulted experts

Background	Current Country	Country of Origin	Education	Gender	Generation
1.Academic, Business School	France	Tunisian/Bulgarian	PhD	Male	Generation X
2.Entrepreneur, SME	Spain	Catalan/Spanish	PhD	Male	Generation X
3.Academic, Law school	UK	British	PhD	Female	Baby Boomers
4.Official, Environmental Agency	Sweden	German/Danish	Master	Male	Generation Y
5.Journalist, Russian Television	Germany	Spain	Master	Female	Generation Y
6.Official, NGO	Australia	Brazilian	Master	Female	Generation Y
7.Academic, Ecological Economics,	Ireland	Brazilian	PhD	Female	Generation Y
8.Agricultural Engineer	Spain	Spanish	Bachelor	Female	Generation Z
9.Academic, European Integration	UK	British	PhD	Female	Generation X
10.Academic, Politics, University	Germany	German	PhD	Female	Generation Y
11. Managing Director, SME	Spain	Catalan/Spanish	PhD	Male	Generation X
12. Senior Consultant, SME	Spain	Catalan/Spanish	Master	Female	Generation Y
13. Academic, Business Ethics	Netherlands	Basque/Spanish	PhD	Female	Generation Y
14. Academic, Ecological Economics	USA	Catalan/Spanish	PhD	Male	Generation Y
15. Lawyer, Practitioner	Germany	Spanish	Bachelor	Female	Generation Z
16. Academic, Economic History	France	French	PhD	Male	Generation Y

17. Academic, Politics, UK	UK	Romanian/British	PhD	Male	Generation X
18. Academic, Political Economy	France	German	PhD	Male	Generation X
19. Academic, Sustainability	UK	British	PhD	Female	Generation X
20. Academic, Business Ethics	France	Venezuelan	PhD	Male	Generation X
21. Academic, Economics	France	Chinese/French	PhD	Male	Generation X
22. Academic, Geopolitics	France	Russian/French	PhD	Male	Generation X
23. Managing Director, SME	Germany	German	PhD	Male	Generation X
24. Senior Manager, MNE	Germany	German/French	Bachelor	Female	Generation Z
25. Academic, Law	France	Italian	PhD	Female	Generation Y
26. Manager Sales, MNE	France	French	Bachelor	Male	Generation Z
27. Manager, SME	Germany	German	Bachelor	Male	Generation Z

RESULTS

Sustainability as Leftist Collectivist Ideology

Outcomes from the preliminary questionnaires and the follow-up interviews indicate that sustainability is predominantly linked with ideologies as socialism and ecology. The close connection with leftist ideologies appears to include aspects of collectivism, a cultural value, which emphasise cohesiveness among individuals and prioritise the group over the individual. Collectivistic individuals and groups are more likely to perceive sustainability as an important societal goal (Parboteeah et al., 2012). When asked for ideologies related

Thomas Hoerber is Professor of European Studies at ESSCA School of Management, Angers, France. E-mail: thomas.hoerber@essca.fr

Gabriel Weber is Associate Professor of international studies and sustainable development at ESSCA, Bordeaux. E-mail: gabriel.weber@essca.fr

Ignazio Cabras is the Head of the Accounting and Financial Management, Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University. Email: Ignazio.Cabras@Northumbria.ac.uk

to sustainability, experts confirmed the relation between collectivism, left wing political spectrum and sustainability:

“Sustainability is related to left wing ideologies because of the prevalence of collective interests over individual interests.” (Academic, Geopolitics, French-Romanian, March 2018)

“Leftist ideologies in general, but more specifically environmentalism, political ecology, etc. Those ideologies think more of the collective than the individuals, and this is a key aspect of sustainability.” (Academic, Ecological Economics, USA, February 2018)

“Beliefs and motives of sustainability are a leftist, collectivist outlook in comparison with mainstream individualized values of society. “(Academic, European Integration, UK, February 2018)

While sustainability is a rather left-wing concept, it still fits into wider conservative agendas. Conservative and nationalist elites have used sustainability embedding into local plans and agendas, raising concerns among conservative supporters who see these attempts as a threat to their livelihoods (Whittemore, 2012). Conservative political philosophy increasingly supports pro-conservation, pro-environment policies. Hence sustainability is proposed by the left but also by other ends of the political spectrum and as such almost hegemonic as the results of the questionnaire suggest:

“Conservative, nationalistic movements are linked to sustainability, because of the romanticist idea of conservation of the nature and culture of the land” (Academic, Business Ethics, Netherlands, March 2018).

*“Sustainability is almost hegemonic. Hardly anyone would think of sustainability as a negative.”
(Academic, Politics, University, Germany, February 2017).*

Sustainability in Different Economic Thoughts

Sustainability appears to be linked with ideologies of the welfare state as a distinctive combination of democracy, welfare, and capitalism (Marshall, 1950). The idea of the ‘welfare state’ has been commonly invoked to describe a state, which continues to preside over a market-mediated and private property-based economic system, while accepting significant responsibility for delivering social services to its population (Meadowcroft, 2005). To some extent this can be understood as an issue of appropriate scale, of restricting environmental impacts within the assimilative capacities of natural systems (Daly, 1991). But there are also issues of collective social choice: not all social and collective goods are compatible, and in an ecological state, political mechanisms are used to choose some patterns of goods over others (Jacobs 1999). The relation between sustainability and the welfare state is seen contradictory due to capitalism being the central pillar of the latter. Neoclassical market mechanisms do not seem to lead to more sustainability or to more sustainable investment as our interviewees explain.

“I do not share the opinion that the market will automatically lead business actors to invest in sustainable technologies.” (Lawyer, Academic, Italian, March 2018)

“The notion of sustainability implies human welfare and a “distraction” from the paradigm of maximising shareholder value above all. “(Academic, Business Ethics, Netherlands, March 2018).

The perception that sustainability seems also to be linked to green or ecologist ideologies, both perceived as new articulations of pre-existing ideological elements e.g. ecology and sustainability (Stavrakakis, 2007). Interesting, in such context, is the concept of ‘green economy’, which often implies the development of ‘greener’ industries without necessarily replacing traditionally polluting industries, as it is currently the case in energy production in Germany (Weber and Cabras, 2017; Weber et al., 2019).

Neoclassical economists such as Solow (1974: 366f), and New-Keynesian economists such as Stiglitz (1980: 61f), argue that ‘weak sustainability’ i.e. the notion that human capital (recourses such as infrastructure, labour, or knowledge) can substitute natural capital is a true possibility. As it is physically impossible to transform energy into matter, it is similarly impossible to substitute energy resources by human capital. This criticism of neoclassical economics was later named as ‘strong sustainability’ (Turner, 1993: 13-15). Despite this rather strong reasoning and consensus in industrial ecology and ecological economics on “strong sustainability”, in several other disciplines as well as in company practice “weak sustainability” is almost hegemonic as interviewees explain:

“Sustainability is inherently at the core of the green ideology” (Academic, Political Economy, France, Germany, February 2018)

“Especially in its weak version (‘green economy’ ‘low-carbon economy’) sustainability is almost hegemonic. “(Academic, Politics, University, Germany, February 2017).

“There is an environmental bias in sustainability as people often support the environmental part of it” (Manager, Job Seeking, France, April 2018).

Marxist and Zizekian Dimensions of Ideology and the ‘Role of Lack’

For many interviewees, sustainability is closely linked to Marxist concepts of eco-socialism, or green socialism. Socialist ecology is an ideology merging aspects of socialism with that of green politics, ecology and alter-globalization or anti-globalization. Eco-socialists generally believe that the expansion of the capitalist system is the cause of social exclusion, poverty, war and environmental degradation through globalization and imperialism, under the supervision of repressive states and transnational structures. Eco-socialists advocate dismantling capitalism, focusing on common ownership of the means of production by freely associated producers, and restoring the commons. The Marxist economics and superstructure model of society denotes the relations of production and modes of production, and superstructure denotes the dominant ideology in religious, legal, political systems. As such, our Delphi-Study confirms the relation between sustainability and Marxism:

“Marxism: the idea of a post-capitalist economy and society share the same vision of sustainable human development.” (Academic, Ecological Economics, Brasil Ireland, October 2017)

“Related ideologies (depending on end of the political range within the field): Marxism, Ecological Modernisation, and Deep Ecology” (Official, Environmental Agency, Sweden, March 2017)

In the Marxist economic foundation of production establishes the governmental superstructure of a state. Antonio Gramsci (2009) uses cultural hegemony to explain why the working-class have a false ideological conception of what are their best interests. Lacan (2006), Laclau (2000) and Žižek (2006) claim that the modern society is characterized by a “lack” which we need to fill with ideologies in order to understand the world around us. Ideologies as fantasy-construction are a support for our ‘reality’ itself that structures our effective, real social being and relation Žižek (2006). Marx and Engels (1970: 64) argue that the class, which has the means of material production at its disposal, similarly has control over the means of “mental production”. However, our Delphi-study contests the notion that sustainability is a concept proposed by the dominant class. While sustainability is certainly supported by elites, business, researchers, and politicians grassroots groups also propose it bottom-up as our interviewees explain:

“The idea of sustainability came up in business experts, researcher, and politicians, when realizing that resources are not endless. Therefore I would say the idea came from the dominant class” (Ideas Manager, MNE, German-French, April 2018)

“Sustainability is not a set of ideas proposed by the dominant class of society. It originates in many different places – among the powerless grassroots, the powerful elites and other sources in between.” (Academic, Sustainability, Britain, February 2018)

In addition, our interviewees tended to associated sustainability to many *-isms* such as religious ideologies (e.g. Judaism) and pacifism. Religion usually describes the belief in a superhuman controlling power involving a God or gods; it entails a system of faith and worship as well as, ideology. Pacifism (often also religiously rooted such as Christian pacifism), associated with the rejection to war, militarism, or violence also seems to be linked to sustainability by many of those approached in our study.

In places where sustainability provides convincing identity markers for people who use the term to reflect particular visions of where society is headed and what values it ought to maximize, it is realizing the function of plainly religious narratives - a basic acquaintance to human culture (Johnston, 2013). Frequently, a shared ideology or religion is a functional way for like-minded people to find each other and to work together to achieve a shared aim. The establishment of religions throughout history and societies was crucial for the progress of humanity (Wright, 2017), and the sacred texts in many religions – e.g. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - provide several guidelines and frameworks in view of pursuing environmental sustainability, as explained by our interviewees:

“There are some linkages to Christianity/Islam, where humanity is thought of as the steward of the world and the environment” (Academic, Political Economy, France, Germany, February 2018)

“Sustainability relates to circular economy, slow food movement, and Ecofeminism, because of a different perspective of the way of life (slow and less extra-work). It relates to degrowth, ecological economics, ecosystem services valuation. Environmental and social justice reduces inequalities over the world (poverty, health, and so on)” (Academic, Business Ethics, Netherlands, March 2018).

Sustainability in the EU and the role of the EU for Sustainability

The EU uses the idea of sustainability to structure and direct society. Politically, however, the EU is moving at a really slow pace, its decision-making processes are affected by 27 member states which pursue diverse interests at times. Despite the fact that sustainability is a global issue, the actors inside the EU often think and act in narrow national terms. Moreover, the EU itself frequently acts and regulates in conflict of its own policies while pursuing sustainability. This reflects Zizek’s (1989) critique of cynical reason in contemporary ideology. Many policy-makers inside the EU are aware about citizens’ disenfranchisement in terms of the ecological state of European ecosystems, but they assume that people will accept the current status quo and only few are willing to accept radical actions with regard to environmental protection. For instance, in November 2017, the EU extended the license of Monsanto’s Glyphosate, a weed killer linked with cancer, with 18 member states voting in favour and nine against. Moreover, while the EU seeks greater energy independence through renewable energy production, its energy import dependence has actually set to increase from 47.2% of total EU energy consumption in 2000 to a forecast of 57.8% in 2030 (Cecchi et al, 2009:33). Our interviewees acknowledge the leading role of the EU in terms of sustainability, but are also critical about its ambivalence on the theme:

“As a political actor it has a key role, because it can make laws and policies towards achieving sustainability, but it is still moving really slowly. And also it has the problem of being a supranational institution so, despite the fact that sustainability is a global issue the actors inside the EU are thinking mainly in a narrow national terms” (Journalist, Russian Television, Spain/ Germany, March 2017)

“The EU has adopted environmental policies with more stringency targets and wider scope. This gives signals to others and tells them that it is possible to do without compromising other economic objectives they might have. The EU plays a great role in terms of being an example and future global cooperation.” (Academic, Ecological Economics, Brasil Ireland, October 2017)

“Although Europe is not the most environmental sustainable place on Earth, environmental consciousness is probably the highest. The EU likes to present itself as the champion of sustainable development, but this narrative isn’t credible given the EU’s dependency on energy imports is unsustainable.” (Academic, Political Economy, France, Germany, February 2018)

“The EU should be supporting sustainability, but sometimes does not. Examples: Glyphosate, weapons’ export laws, diesel scandal, etc. the reasons are manifold, mostly caused by lobbyists and conflicts of interest of politicians.” (President, SME, Germany, January 2018)

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has investigated how ideas around sustainability have become dominant in the EU. By using Marxian, Gramscian and Zizekian perspectives, our paper has demonstrated how sustainability can serve as an ideology according to recent definitions of ideology.

Our findings confirm sustainability as closely linked to other theoretical approaches, such as (eco)-Marxism, deep ecology, ecological modernization and more recently the green economy discourse (Weber and Cabras, 2017). They corroborate those provided by Swyngedouw who indicates that hardly anyone would think of sustainability as a negative imaginary (2010: 190), showing how dominant beliefs accommodate the wider society and its popular thinking as described by Gramsci in his work (2009). We find sustainability not really imposed by a dominant class, but rather in the form of hegemony, adopted by society without coercion and many believe in a ‘win-win perspective’ promised by ‘eco-modernizers’, and ‘green economists’. By this dominance of green economy, sustainability resembles the Marxist notion of ideology in the sense that ideas of the dominant class are the dominant ideas (Freeden, 2003: 5–6). In addition, our analysis confirms the Zizekian notion of ‘lack’ with regard to perceiving sustainability: many people are aware about a dominant weak perspective of sustainability and related actions, but still they do nothing against it even though their inaction is itself a risk for mankind.

Whilst it is not surprising to find disagreement over the utility of sustainability thinking, however we did find a significant degree of cynicism amongst the experts interviewed in our research study. Indeed, a degree of cynicism seems to be required in order to understand and describe the different dimensions of the EU sustainability policies. Our findings confirm the presence of a ‘multi-speed framework’ in the EU (Schäuble & Lamers, 1994) where overlapping groups of member states integrate in different policy areas (e.g Münchenau, 2017). In such context, sustainability incorporates a set of generally recognised normative values which are themselves embodied in representative party structures of developed states and articulated through social movements and projects.

More importantly in terms of sustainability, many EU officials carry on working towards, fighting for and implementing a sustainability agenda: by doing so, its linked ideology manages to recreate itself in a ‘post-ideological’ age (Zizek, 1989). This ‘post-ideological’ age corroborate the definition provided by Clark (1998, 2018), who indicates the presence of a New Political Culture (NPC) characterised by a form of practically-oriented politics guided more by issues than by traditional distinctions between left-right, liberal and conservative positions. The behaviour of the EU in terms of sustainability can be explained as well by NPC in the sense that its sustainability policy seems to be more driven by issues than by an overall coherent policy.

Despite its official commitments, the behaviour of the EU is contradictory in terms of promoting a concept, sustainability, and equally acting against it. Evidence is provided by several policies such as supporting mixed waste incinerators as renewable energy; increased gas imports from countries such as Russia, Algeria, and supporting/ financing nuclear energy projects instead of entirely focussing on clean and renewable energy (Weber et al. 2018). The ruling class has promoted its versions of weak sustainability and this idea has made it into the daily life of many Europeans, and most citizens have cynically accepted this notion knowing about its impossibility. As the issue of sustainability is inherently political, it seems that an overall new ideology in which different ideological streams and political initiatives (e.g. eco-marxism, deep ecology, ecological modernization, green economy) could help to harmonize and complement each other.

With an ever increasing environmental and climate crisis, more recent policy formation in the EU seem to point towards more rigorous ideological sustainability initiatives, such as the European Green Deal - a set of policy initiatives by the European Commission with the overarching aim of making Europe climate neutral in 2050. However, with the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic spreading rapidly across Europe and the emphasis on the European Green Deal diminishing, it appears that the current main focus of the EU's current policymaking process should be the immediate, shorter-term crisis rather than climate change (Elkerbout et al., 2020). When public management initiatives related to sustainability weaken, it is for activists, researchers, grassroots organizations and others to promote more radical and coherent concepts of sustainability. Therefore, moving toward 'sustainability' – thus sustainability as an ideological concept - may enable these groups of stakeholders to establish and maintain a common position.

REFERENCES

- Arendt, H. 1976. *The origins of totalitarianism*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Althusser, L. 1971. *Ideology and the State. Lenin and philosophy and other essays*, 2.
- Brundtland, G. 1987. *Our Common Future*.
- Checchi A. Behrens A. Egenhofer C. 2009, *Long-Term Energy Security Risks for Europe: A Sector-Specific Approach*, CEPS Working Documents, No. 309/ January 2009
- Clark, T. N. (1998). *Assessing the new political culture by comparing cities around the world*.
The New Political Culture, 93-194.
- Clark, T. N. (2018). *The new political culture*. Routledge.
- Destutt, A. 1796. *Mémoire de la faculté de pensée*.
- Elkerbout, M., Egenhofer, C., Núñez Ferrer, J., Cătuți, M., Kustova, I., & Rizos, V. (2020). *The European Green Deal after Corona: Implications for EU climate policy*. Brussels: CEPS.
- Gramsci, A. 2009. *Hegemony, intellectuals and the state. Cultural theory and popular culture: A reader*, 2, 210-16.
- Gunder, M. (2010). *Planning as the ideology of (neoliberal) space. Planning theory*, 9(4), 298-314.

- Hayek, F. A. (2014). *The road to serfdom: Text and documents: The definitive edition*. Routledge.
- Hoerber T. 2013. *The Origins of Energy and Environmental Policy in Europe: The Beginnings of a European Environmental Conscience*, Routledge, London
- Illge, L., & Schwarze, R. 2009. A matter of opinion—How ecological and neoclassical environmental economists and think about sustainability and economics. *Ecological Economics*, 68(3), 594-604.
- Krippendorff, K. 2004. Reliability in content analysis, *Hum. Commun. Res.*, 30(3), 411-433.
- Laclau, E. (1996). The death and resurrection of the theory of ideology. *Journal of political ideologies*, 1(3), 201-220.
- Laclau, E. (2000). *Identity and hegemony: The role of universality in the constitution of political logics*. na.
- Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason*. Verso.
- Parboteeah, K. P., Addae, H. M., & Cullen, J. B. (2012). Propensity to support sustainability initiatives: A cross-national model. *Journal of business ethics*, 105(3), 403-413.
- Patton, M.Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*, SAGE Publications, inc.
- Marx, K. 1867. *Das Kapital: The process of capital production*.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1970) *The German Ideology*, London, Lawrence and Wishart.
- Morley, D. (1980) *The 'Nationwide' audience: structure and decoding*, London, British
- Münchau, W. 2017. A multi-speed formula will shape Europe's future. 12 March. Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/f01f1266-058e-11e7-ace0-1ce02ef0def9> [Accessed 15 May 2017].
- Schäuble, W., & Lamers, K. 1994. Überlegungen zur europäischen Politik. CDU/CSU in Bundestag, www.cdusu.de, [online]. 1-11 Available from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160318173446/https://www.cdusu.de/upload/schaeublelamers94.pdf> [Accessed 17 May 2017]
- Swyngedouw, E. (2010). Impossible sustainability and the post-political condition. In *Making strategies in spatial planning* (pp. 185-205). Springer, Dordrecht.
- Stavrakakis, Y. 2007. *Lacanian Left*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Weber, G., & Cabras, I. (2017). The transition of Germany's energy production, green economy, low-carbon economy, socio-environmental conflicts, and equitable society. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 167, 1222-1231.
- Weber, G., Calaf-Forn, M., Puig-Ventosa, I., Cabras, I., & D'Alisa, G. (2018). The role of environmental organisations on urban transformation: The case of waste management in Esporles (Mallorca). *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 195, 1546-1557.
- Weber, G., Cabras, I., & Frahm, L. G. (2019). De-privatisation and remunicipalisation of urban services through the pendulum swing: Evidence from Germany. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 236, 117555.

- Žižek, S. (1989). *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso.
- Žižek, S. (Ed.). (1994). *Mapping ideology*. Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2006). *How to Read Lacan*. London: Granta Books.
- Žižek, S. (2010). A permanent economic emergency. *New Left Review*, 64(1), 85-95.

About IPMR

IPMR The International Public Management Review (IPMR) is the electronic journal of the International Public Management Network (IPMN). All work published in IPMR is double blind reviewed according to standard academic journal procedures.

The purpose of the International Public Management Review is to publish manuscripts reporting original, creative research in the field of public management. Theoretical, empirical and applied work including case studies of individual nations and governments, and comparative studies are given equal weight for publication consideration.

IPMN The mission of the International Public Management Network is to provide a forum for sharing ideas, concepts and results of research and practice in the field of public management, and to stimulate critical thinking about alternative approaches to problem solving and decision making in the public sector.

IPMN includes over 1300 members representing about one hundred different countries, both practitioners and scholars, working in all aspects of public management. IPMN is a voluntary non-profit network and membership is free.

ISSN 1662-1387

