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Sustainability, Liberal Democracy, Liberalism

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Introduction

In this chapter I want to investigate to what extent sustainability can be realized in the context of western liberal democracy and how far liberal political theory can constitute a basis for solving the environmental issue. In the second section I briefly analyse the historical development of the sustainability concept. In the third section, the question is explored of which factors in a liberal democratic state prevent the realization of a sustainable society. In the fourth section, four dominant ideological approaches to sustainability are outlined. The value and necessity of a fundamental ideological debate on sustainability is examined in the fifth section. The sixth section deals with the question of how the basic assumptions of liberal political theory are compatible with a fundamental, 'hard' notion of sustainability. Section seven explores whether liberalism can be (re)interpreted in ways that respect values of sustainability and long-term environmental goals. Finally, the main conclusion is drawn.1

Sustainability: a brief history

Originally the concept of sustainability was associated with the idea of a 'steady-state economy'. In his Principles of Political Economy (1848), John Stuart Mill (1806–73) argues for a stationary economic state in order to protect the environment and to save the natural resources for future generations (Mill, 1848, book IV, chapter 6). A similar approach can be found among ecological utopian thinkers such as William Morris, Aldous Huxley, Bernard Skinner, Murray Bookchin and Ernest Callenbach (de Geus, 1999), in the famous 'Blueprint for survival'
published in the *Ecologist* (1972), and in the work of the American economist Herman Daly, such as *Toward a Steady State Economy* (1973). In all these examples sustainability was intended as a foundational notion that aimed at a both economically and ecologically stable situation, a ‘normative’ concept in the sense that in this line of reasoning the aim of nature conservation, the preservation of scarce natural resources and intra- and intergenerational justice were seen as valuable and given priority over growth of production and consumption (Achterberg, 1994, pp. 19-27).

With the publication of the Brundtland report *Our Common Future* (1987) sustainability has been deprived of its foundational character. From then on, sustainability has been defined as ‘sustainable development’: ‘Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable – to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED, 1987, p. 43). The basic idea underlying this concept is that economic development can be combined with an improved management of town and country, nature and biodiversity and can lead to a gradual decrease of environmentally hazardous emissions (WCED, 1987, pp. 1-23).

Ever since that time, ‘sustainability’ has become a prime example of an open political concept, an abstract formula with which every imaginable party can agree, because the term sounds well and appeals to the ear. Nowadays, sustainability expresses a politically correct intention: it constitutes an adequate cloak under which the most varied political compromises can be achieved, but no longer induces radical and stringent environmental measures. Because of this change, sustainability has become one of the most ‘polluted’ concepts of the last two decades. At this point in time, it seems vital to restrict the meaning and give concrete form to the concept again, to make it viable once more as a starting point for action and to ascertain that it can be used as a useful guide to policy-making.

**Inherent weaknesses of liberal democracy**

In western liberal democratic states there has been an increasing realization by national governments and citizens that solutions must be found to the ongoing process of environmental degradation. Paradoxically enough, this growing concern for the environment has produced neither a fundamental change in individual conduct nor a set of radical governmental policies to provide for real environmental protection and sustainability. It seems that, despite the growing awareness, the solution of environmental problems is still far ahead. In this section I shall concentrate on the question of which factors in a liberal democratic state contribute to this trend and prevent the implementation of a sustainable society. What are the principal reasons that in a liberal democracy no radical environmental measures are taken and no adequate policies in this field are executed?

1. **Within the liberal democratic system, several mechanisms operate that prevent successful environmental protection.** For example, this system does not typically take a front-line stand. Political parties will not take a position that deviates too much from the preferences of their voters, in order not to be punished during the elections: ‘Political parties are just a reflection of society. The bigger they are, the less they think it appropriate to take a line that differs from the view of the majority...’ Politics will only behave in a more environmental fashion from the moment that the average citizen will do so and not in the reverse order. When most citizens do not behave in an environmentally friendly way at all, then politicians, under penalty of electoral defeat, will adopt a reticent and careful attitude in the case of environment protection policies. Liberal democracy is ‘reactive’, not ‘proactive’, environmentally.

2. **In general, the liberal democratic system leads to a systematic undervaluation of ecological interests.** In its institutions only contemporary citizens and their actual interests are represented. Contemporary citizens and politicians are generally focused on the promotion of their own interests (consumption growth, re-election) and generally suffer from a ‘defective telescopic faculty’, in the sense that the influence of future interests is diminished in today’s decision-making (Opschoor, 1989, p. 98).

Under these circumstances the interests of future generations and voiceless nature are jeopardized in the actual political decision-making process. In the words of Robyn Eckersley, the liberal democratic state is ‘systematically biased against the interests of “non citizens”, or what might be called “the new environmental constituency”, that is all those who may be seriously affected by environmental decisions made within the polity, but who cannot vote or otherwise participate in the political deliberations and decisions of the polity (I have in mind here non-citizens, non-human species and future generations)’ (Eckersley, 1996, p. 214).

3. **Liberal democracy has always been primarily directed at solving problems relating to the distribution of material welfare.** The success of this system has essentially been that by means of political bargaining
processes, it has succeeded in achieving compromises about the distribution of growing economic wealth. The system has shown its effectiveness in weighing one set of interests against another and finding solutions for the often complicated question of dividing the economic cake. The system has been far less efficacious in dealing with fundamental policy changes that might drastically influence the behaviour of citizens (for example by reducing mobility, realizing a decrease in environmental consumption, the introduction of much higher prices for environmentally unfriendly behaviour and products) (Galbraith, 1992, pp. 20–1).

4. A last shortcoming of liberal democracy lies in the intricate interwovenness of state and economy. A fundamental dilemma is that on the one hand the flexibility, productivity and efficiency of a free market economy are hard to deny, but that on the other hand a market economy poses at least two problems.

(a) A market economy tends to lead to profit accumulation and economic growth, the rolling-off of environmental costs and the production of non-sustainable goods, and by all this generates unnecessary pollution and waste.

(b) Part of the ideology of a free market economy is, at least, the idea of limited state intervention: the state is expected to be reluctant to intervene in the self-regulating economic order and accurately takes the interests of trade and industry into account.

A liberal democratic state that would intervene more radically in the economy – e.g. imposing far-reaching ecological demands – and thus make life difficult for the entrepreneurs will get into an awkward position. The introduction of stringent environmental measures will induce enterprises to leave the country (or they will threaten to do so). Also the competitiveness of enterprises might be diminished, they might be forced to dismiss employees and would pay less taxes, causing financial problems to government itself. Ultimately, the general support in society for the measures taken will decrease.

The free market economy with its ‘built in’ tendency to produce pollution and waste and liberal democracy with its ‘enterprise friendly’ attitude can be compared to Siamese twins who are very hard to separate. This might explain why environmental policies generally lag behind the actual developments in society, as in the case of air pollution, the death of forests (Waldsterben) and the degradation of nature in general.

For these reasons at least, the lack of success of liberal democracy in effectively combating environmental problems is explicable. The general tendency in politics to make use of a relatively soft, flexible and reserved meaning of the sustainability concept can be explained in this way too. Yet, this does not mean that there has been no debate in society on sustainability whatsoever. The question then arises as to what alternative meanings to the concept have been suggested in liberal democratic politics in Western Europe.

Dominant approaches to sustainability in liberal democracies: the Dutch example

In the decade following the publication of Our Common Future, all main Dutch political parties accepted the concept of sustainable development as a guideline for economic and environmental policy. However, a closer analysis shows that the specific content given to the concept by the political parties involved varies considerably according to the importance which is attached to facts, uncertainties and risks in relation to the environment and society. It has become more and more obvious that a completely different set of normative and political choices underlie their views of sustainable development (see also WRR, 1994, p. 8).

Indeed, four dominant options of sustainable development have become evident, which are clearly different with regard to (1) the robustness of the definition of sustainability (‘hard’ versus ‘soft’); (2) the general perception of existing and future environmental risks (high versus low); (3) the expectations regarding the development of technological solutions for environmental problems (highly probable versus not probable at all); and (4) the answer to the question whether a strategy of ‘general consumer austerity’ is inevitable or preferable in order to achieve an ecologically sound society.

Sustainability as a ‘steady state’

A first interpretation of sustainability can be found among the two green parties GroenLinks and De Groenen and, amazingly enough, also among the smaller right-wing Christian puritan parties GPV and RPF. In this interpretation sustainability is considered to be closely linked to the idea of a steady-state economy. Their ‘ideal society’ incorporates both an economic and an ecological state of equilibrium. These parties do not think in terms of growth, increase and expansion, but in terms
of equilibrium, stability and balance. They argue that a large share of environmental pollution and damage to nature is caused by society's unlimited tendencies toward growth in production and consumption. They argue that society should break away from these growth tendencies, and they advocate a society that is not based on the ideal of continuous economic development. The focus of these parties on a so-called steady state is reflected in their principles, in particular in the principle of a so-called 'stationary' state, as well as in their views on policy, where the 'stable-state concept' is the decisive criterion upon which social decision-making needs to be based.

These parties' preference for a steady-state society clearly indicates that they estimate the risks of ongoing economic development as high and are pessimistic about the future availability of natural resources. They opt for a risk-evading strategy and are reticent about the possibilities of the so-called 'technological fix', that is to say technological solutions to environmental problems. In this vision a high material standard of living must be replaced by a 'high quality' of life, involving a decrease in consumption levels. Western countries will have to decrease their level of welfare for environmental reasons, but also to enable Third World countries to reach an acceptable standard of living.5

**Sustainability as 'ecological modernization'**

In the second line of thought - which in the Netherlands can be found among the social democratic party PvdA and the progressive liberal party D66 - sustainability is equated with the term 'ecological modernization'. The general premise of this concept is that sustainable development can be combined with economic growth, a strengthening of competitiveness, better management of urban planning, nature and biodiversity, and a decrease in absolute terms of environmentally hazardous emissions. In this view a general argument is made for 'intelligent growth' of the economy, provided that the overall pressure on the environment diminishes (VROM, 1996, pp. 5–14). Environmental policy in this approach is actually seen as 'a necessary, welcome impulse for change, for technical, economic or cultural renewal. The challenge of sustainable development is considered a decisive cause of innovation and improvement in the economic structure' (van Driel, 1993, p. 12).

The social democrats and progressive liberals in the Netherlands estimate the environmental risks of a continuous economic development considerably lower than the green parties. They assume that prolonged exploitation can reveal new stocks of natural resources and that, if needed, the exploitation of alternative raw resources is feasible. Their expectations with regard to the contribution of new technologies to the realization of environmental goals are relatively high. They expect that the integration of environment and economy will be accomplished by technological revolutions. In this line of reasoning an overall decrease of the level of consumption is not considered necessary. The main goal is to induce citizens to develop inherently environmentally friendly behaviour, without the necessity of consistent austerity or of radical changes in lifestyles.

**Sustainability as 'stewardship'**

In a third view - which primarily is to be found among the Christian democratic party CDA - sustainability is viewed from the general perspective of stewardship. The point of departure is that mankind is obliged 'to cultivate and conserve the land as a good steward'. A harmonious relationship between humankind and nature and the acceptance of responsibility in order to maintain the natural environment for future generations are characteristic ideas: mankind is held responsible for its share in the conservation of the 'wholeness of Creation'.

In this Christian democratic stewardship approach, the environmental risks of economic growth are not seen as insurmountable and there exists an overall optimism about the future availability of natural resources. The presumption is that, in the end, technological solutions for most environmental problems will be found. A need for more austere consumption patterns or lifestyles is not expressed. The emphasis - at least in the Netherlands - is not on a radicalization of environmental goals, but on achieving the existing goals of the National Environmental Policy Plans. According to this view, gradual ecological and economic changes will produce sufficient results and provide for an 'acceptable management' of the natural world.6

**Sustainability as 'durable economic growth'**

In the fourth line of thought - which in the Netherlands is found first of all among the conservative liberal party VVD - sustainability is associated with the facilitation of economic development. It concentrates on renewing economic processes, lasting opportunities for growth, innovative techniques and improvement of energy efficiency. In this view it is argued that it is 'natural' for mankind to strive for continuous growth of production and consumption. The general line of reasoning is that economic growth is a necessary condition for the development
of environmental care and ecological renewal. Economic growth is considered as vital for a sustainable development of the world.\(^7\)

In this approach the ecological risks of economic development for the environment are seen as remarkably low. Its advocates share a comparatively high optimism about the available natural resources: nature and the environment possess a considerable resilience. A high number of environmental problems are seen as inevitable, as the price citizens have to pay for a flourishing economy and the availability of ample spending opportunities, which are valuable in themselves. The government must abstain from far-reaching environmental measures (e.g. the introduction of a lower maximum speed or relatively high ecotaxes), because of the danger of restricting the freedom of citizens and enterprises. Imposing changes in behaviour from above must be guarded against to prevent an infringement of individual liberties. High confidence is placed in the potential of new technologies and ‘creative’ solutions to limit the pressure on the environment. A ‘sustainable growth’ of prosperity is viewed as the best guarantee against the degradation of nature, environmental pollution and potential resource scarcity.

Value and necessity of an ideological debate about sustainability

The sketch of the contemporary ideological landscape concerning environmental issues given above may indicate that the realization of sustainability – in the Netherlands considered to be one of the central pillars of governmental policy – causes new and sharp dividing lines in politics and will produce a re-ideologization and politicization of the debate. Apparently sustainability is a concept to which all political parties consent in the political bargaining process. However, behind this thin layer of apparent unanimity there exist immense differences in the underlying assumptions and points of view (concerning the perception of ecological risks, technological opportunities to solve the environmental crisis, general ideas on intra- and intergenerational justice, the necessity of austerity), the proposed strategies (a reactive or proactive role of the government, only giving non-binding advice to people or imposing restraints on citizens’ behaviour, the introduction of soft or hard economical and ecological side-constraints), up to the definite goals (differing from a fundamental and hard ‘steady-state’ to a very pragmatic, flexible, ‘durable growth’ sustainability).

Even though every political party seems to have embraced sustainability in public, the solution to environmental problems is not within sight, as one might expect at first instance. The most one can say is that finally the difficult and complex ideological struggle about the guiding, dominant and generally accepted meaning of the concept has started. I would like to argue that it is high time for such a deep-rooted ideological debate on sustainability, in which the profound contradictions in normative assumptions and positions become evident and the spectrum of possible meanings is restricted. For three obvious reasons it can be defended that it is sensible to move towards an unambiguous, robust and consistent definition of sustainability.

1. Up to this moment, the open, elastic meaning of the term sustainability has clearly led to widespread non-commitment in the official environmental discussions. The consequence has been that governments were able to postpone and avoid difficult choices in this field. Another consequence has been that most liberal democratic states were able to rely on the principle of ‘piecemeal engineering’, of modest reforms and changes in order to solve the most acute problems, while the very essence of the environmental issue (its large-scale character, the scientific uncertainty about long-term health damage and the irreversibility of consequences) give reason to suggest that alternative models of ecological change are inevitable (WRR, 1992, chapter 1, and de Deus, 1993, chapter 9).

2. In the current debate, the original relation between sustainability and intra- and intergenerational justice is completely lost. The emphasis in the social debate has increasingly been put on combining economic growth with a decrease in environmental pressure. Nowadays the main focus is on renewable economic processes, innovative techniques and higher energy efficiency, while the element of justice among present generations (the rich North versus the poor South) and justice between present and future generations is increasingly neglected.\(^8\)

3. A delimitation of the sustainability concept also seems necessary to save the credibility of the term and the policies that are based on it. Citizens as well as scientists and policy-makers understand very well that all the (political) parties involved interpret sustainability the way it suits them best at a given moment, without burdening them with serious obligations. An unambiguous, clear interpretation of the concept will be necessary to convince the citizens that sustainability...
can lead to a consistent, effective and durable course of government and not to some kind of see-saw policy.

The shortcomings of liberalism in relation to sustainability

It cannot be denied that mainstream liberal political theory has, until recently, shown relatively little interest in questions of sustainability. It is also striking that most liberal political parties (e.g. in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and other Western European countries) have a rather dubious record with regard to issues of sustainability: they tend to profess sustainable development in words only. Is this merely coincidental, or can this be accounted for by the underlying principles of traditional liberal theory? My idea is that there are indeed some general reasons that can explain the poverty of liberalism in this context. I am not going to give a complete enumeration of reasons, but I will try to indicate some directions in which the answer to the above-mentioned phenomena can be found. In which ways are the basic assumptions of liberal political theory compatible with a fundamental, 'hard' notion of sustainability?

The Lockean heritage: individualism, the domination of nature and nature as a rich resource

Individualism

Of course, liberal political theory is highly diverse and it is hard to give one clear-cut definition of it. However, looking at the mainstream liberal philosophical points of view, one notices that in this political theory the purposes of the individual are put first. Liberalism presumes human beings who are relatively self-centred, focus on their own interests, follow their own will and want to realize their own life-plans. As a matter of fact, the basis of modern liberal political theory can be found in John Locke's 'individualism' as described by C. B. Macpherson in his The Theory of Possessive Individualism:

Locke's individualism does not consist entirely in his maintaining that individuals are by nature free and equal and can only be rightfully subjected to the jurisdiction of others by their own consent. To leave it at that is to miss its main significance. Fundamentally it consists in making the individual the natural proprietor of his own person and capacities, owing nothing to society for them.

(Macpherson, 1975, p. 253)

As the reader will know, Locke considered private appropriation natural and judged (after the invention of 'non-decayable' money) the propensity to accumulate beyond the limits of consumption to be fully acceptable. The implication is that in a liberal society the citizens mainly assert their individuality by means of accumulating property, buying consumer goods and following their desires, without accepting limits to their freedom. According to this Lockean credo, liberalism is principally a defence of the individual's right to inequality in possessions, expanding property and human desires, rather than a defence of the purposes of society as a whole to – for instance – a clean environment and nature conservation.

The domination of nature legitimated

In line with the argument above, one of the basic assumptions of Lockean liberal theory has been that humankind has the right to dominate over nature: people are allowed to dominate nature and approach it as a means, an instrument completely at their service. John Locke writes in his Two Treatises of Government:

God, when he gave the World in common to all Mankind, commanded Man also to labour, and the penury of his Condition required it of him. God and his Reason commanded him to subdue the earth, i.e. improve it for the benefit of Life, and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his labour. He that in Obedience to this Command of God, subdued, tilled and sowed any part of it, thereby annexed to it something that was his Property, which another had no Title to, nor could without Injury take from him.

(Locke, 1965, p. 332)

The right to property is a central element in Locke's theory and nature is explicitly only there to be 'subdued' and made productive (see also Eckersley, 1992, p. 23). This forms a clear contrast to green thinkers such as William Morris, Peter Kropotkin, Ernst Callenbach and Murray Bookchin, who hold that in a sustainable society, nature will needs to occupy a key position, and people will need to treat the natural environment with respect. In this view nature was not created to be the possession of humans, but exists for the sake of itself and deserves to be treated with affection. Until humans have developed an attitude of respect, equality and concern for nature, these green thinkers feel that a sustainable society is a distant prospect (de Geus, 1999, chapter 12).
Nature as a richly flowing spring

The idea that nature can be compared to a spring that flows abundantly can also in the first instance be found in Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*. The Earth in his view provides the rich material humankind may make use of. He speaks of 'the Plenty God had given to him' (Locke, 1965, p. 330). Since all humans have a property in their own persons, the labour of their bodies and the work of their hands are theirs as well. By mixing labour with nature, humans remove this plenty from its natural state: by mixing their labour with it, they make it their property (Locke, 1965, chapter V).

In this vision nature is a perpetually productive generator of foods, from which humankind may take as it pleases. Locke views the commons as an incessant source of riches and goods. The underlying assumption is that the earth presents us with new harvests and catches, new trees and plants in endless variations. There will always be enough food and natural resources to fulfil human needs. This rather optimistic idea is still reflected in modern mainstream liberal political thought, but is evidently at odds with the idea that sustainability implies empirical, physical side-constraints to human development and implies limits to the use that humankind can make of nature.

Happiness and the good life

In Lockean liberal political theory there is an implicit conception of happiness and the good life. Analyising Locke's *Second Treatise*, one can find that happiness and the good life are primarily defined in terms of material gratification and property rights. Such happiness appears to depend strongly on achieving the highest possible level of consumption. The aim of the good life seems to be reduced to material progress and a broadening of property and consumer options. Status and well-being are primarily measured by the amount of property rights and consumer goods that people have. The consequence is that society rushes in the direction of a continual expansion of needs and a ceaseless satisfaction of consumer desires.

A high level of consumption and a materialistic lifestyle, however, have far-reaching consequences: the deterioration of nature together with adverse effects on the human environment. The problem is that in modern western society consumption has become excessive and is now an ecological 'vice' (in part because it is separated from its ecological context). For this reason philosophers of sustainability strongly question the relationship between the good life and material gratification.

Generally speaking, the idea of happiness and the good life, which for the proponents of 'hard' sustainability forms the foundation of an ecologically balanced society, consists of pursuing creative and intellectual activities: having meaningful relationships; experiencing satisfaction and pleasure in nature; and enjoying a healthy, peaceful and well-lived life with plenty of free time.

The preference for limited state intervention

In the *Second Treatise* John Locke argues that state power must always be limited to the public good of society. It is a power that has no other end but the preservation of the lives, liberties and estates of the citizens, and it must be restricted to that specific end (Locke, 1965, p. 403). This fundamental axiom has resulted in mainstream liberal theory in an obvious reluctance to allow government intervention with the aim of environmental protection in all kinds of processes in society and the economy. Among leading liberal philosophers there is a strong fear that the 'ghost' of state interference could result in a decrease in economic development and might in the longer run produce a world-wide economic recession. The liberal emphasis on limited government and restricted state intervention is incompatible with the analyses of theorists of sustainability such as Herman Daly who argue that a central role for the state and increased interference and regulation by the state organization are necessary to accomplish an ecologically sound society.

An ill-considered conception of ‘freedom’ and ‘individual rights’

Again I shall refer to John Locke, but this time we can hardly blame him for his theoretical position. His definition of freedom is clear and evident:

*Freedom of Men* under government is, to have a standing Rule to live by, common to everyone of that society, and made by the Legislative Power erected in it; A liberty to follow my own Will in all things, where the Rule prescribes not; and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, Arbitrary Will of another Man. (Locke, 1965, p. 324)

A recurring problem in western liberal thought is that it is suggested that every infringement of the freedom of choice in fact puts an end to the 'freedom' of the individual in the state. However, when for reasons of 'sustainability' the state reduces the maximum speed of motor vehicles on highways to 90 or 100 kilometres per hour - a policy measure
that the Dutch cabinet under the pressure of liberal parties and pressure groups is not able to implement – this does not imply the end of the citizens’ ‘freedom’ or ‘individual rights’, nor is it the case when the state introduces returnable deposit systems on bottles, refrigerators, cars, etc. Liberal theorists and political parties tend to overlook the fact that – also according to their founding father John Locke – the essence of individual liberty in western liberal democracy does not lie in an unlimited freedom of choice or consumption, but in having a right to participate in politics and to enjoy a protected position with regard to the state.

Freedom of the citizen is first constituted by having social and economic rights in addition to the civil liberties of participation, assembly, conscience, etc. (positive freedom). Further, the liberty of the citizen takes shape by the enjoyment of a secured position. Being a member of a free political community, the citizen obtains protection from the state. The state will guarantee the citizen a sphere of privacy, a restriction of its domain of authority. Through this, the individual is protected against abuse of state authority. From a legally secure position citizens can actively call on their constitutional rights in relation to the state. In this conception the state is strictly bound by its own laws and the private sphere of the citizen is respected (negative freedom) (Berlin, 1971, chapter 3). This combination of positive and negative freedom which makes up the very heart of the liberal constitutional state does not in principle have to be affected when the state adopts actively interventionist and regulatory behaviour in order to realize a sustainable society. This is a conclusion liberal theorists generally refuse to accept, which in turn makes them call the legitimacy of the concept of sustainability into question in which some kind of restriction of the freedom of choice is usually seen as an inevitability.

The typically liberal consensus on a growth economy

Finally, within western liberal thought there seems to be a basic consensus on the idea that economic development is of primary importance and that ideas on selective growth or ‘shrink’ of the economy are heretical. As was mentioned earlier, the general line of reasoning is – to quote from a recent speech of Dr Hans Wijers, the former Dutch liberal economy minister:

Economic growth is absolutely vital in order to assure renewal. Growth, also in education, knowledge, technology, sustainable energy, infrastructure. Economic growth is a necessary condition for sustainable development. Economic shrink is infeasible from an administrative point of view and offers no solution whatsoever for the environment.\[1\]

The choice of western liberal democracies to opt for a yearly economic growth of about 3 per cent is fully taken for granted and is not to be discussed in parliament or the media. The main issue of the present debate in liberal democratic states is to combine economic growth with effective environmental policies. Within the general framework of western liberal thought there seems to be no room for the formulation of different, possibly more fundamental, questions. In any case it is obvious that within modern liberalism the question whether one should not (also) look for solutions in ‘reducing growth’ or ‘selective shrink’ is not put forward.

Mill’s inheritance

If it is accepted that the basic assumptions of mainstream – Lockean liberal theories are incompatible with a fundamental, ‘hard’ notion of sustainability, there are good reasons to look for alternative liberal approaches. My idea would be not to ask ‘how the concept of sustainability is to be interpreted in ways that respect liberal democratic values and institutions’, but instead: ‘How can liberalism be (re-)interpreted in ways that respect values of sustainability and long-term environmental goals?’

The key to an answer to this question can be found in the work of the earlier-mentioned liberal thinker John Stuart Mill, whose influence on mainstream liberal economic and political thinking has been waning in recent years. Whereas in Lockean liberalism the leading principles are individualism, the preservation of property rights, the right to dominate over nature and the right to economic growth and development, in Mill’s liberalism the leading principles are individuality, the protection of liberty of thought, expression and action, the moral obligation to live in harmony with nature and a general right to human improvement and progress.

In the third chapter of On Liberty, Mill argues that, rather than self-centredness and individualism, the free development of ‘individuality’ is one of the essential preconditions of well-being (Mill, 1976, p. 120). In contrast to Locke, John Stuart Mill does not concentrate on the preservation of the right to material possessions, but on a much wider doctrine of liberty in which freedom is defined in terms of ‘pursuing
our own good in our way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts to obtain it' (Mill, 1976, p. 72).

In his Principles of Political Economy, contrary to Locke, Mill warns sharply against man's domination of nature. He explains that there is not much satisfaction in contemplating a world where nothing is left to the spontaneous activity of nature:

> With every foot of land brought into cultivation, which is capable of growing food for human beings: every flowery waste or natural pasture ploughed up, all quadrupeds or birds which are not domesticated for man's use exterminated as his rivals for food, every hedgerow or superfluous tree rooted out, and scarcely a place left where a wild shrub or flower could grow without being eradicated as a weed in the name of improved agriculture. (Mill, 1911, book IV, chapter 6)

Whereas Locke in his Second Treatise argues for an increase of wealth and for boundless economic growth, Mill in book IV of the Principles of Political Economy holds that at the end of economic development lies the 'stationary state'. A stationary economic development is not only considered justifiable by Mill, but is even heartily recommended:

> It is scarcely necessary to remark that a stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement. There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living and much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds cease to be engrossed by the art of getting on. Even the industrial arts might be as earnestly and as successfully cultivated, with this sole difference, that instead of serving no purpose but the increase of wealth, industrial improvements would produce their legitimate effect, that of abridging labour. (Mill, 1911, book IV, chapter 6)

According to Mill, a stationary, 'sustainable' economic condition can very easily lead to an improvement in the quality of life and offer room for spiritual, moral and social progress. Self-development and improvement in 'the Art of Living' will be thoroughly feasible in a steady-state economy. Perhaps that is ultimately the most important lesson that 'Lockean' liberal political thought can learn from the much greener 'Millian' liberalism.

### Conclusion

The problem outlined at the beginning was to what extent sustainability can be realized in the context of western liberal democracy and how far liberal political theory can constitute a basis for solving the environmental issue. It has become clear that for various reasons liberal democracies are not very well equipped to defend ecological interests and tend to further a relatively 'soft, flexible and reserved' meaning of sustainability.

Taking the Dutch case as an example, it was shown that although sustainability may at first glance look like an unambiguous concept — there actually exist in political practice immense differences with regard to the underlying theoretical assumptions and points of view, the proposed strategies and the final goals. I suggested that the time has come to start a fundamental ideological debate on sustainability, in which these deep contradictions in normative assumptions and positions are unearthed, to prevent sustainability from becoming a totally empty and meaningless notion.

I have argued that because of the Lockean individualist, nature-dominating and growth-minded heritage, mainstream liberal theory was found to be incongruent with a fundamental, 'hard' conception of sustainability. On this basis I have to conclude that it is not a coincidence that in general liberal political theory has shown relatively little interest in questions of sustainability, a phenomenon that can be accounted for by the underlying principles and assumptions of traditional Lockean liberal theory.

My central argument has been that it would be worthwhile to reinterpret liberalism in ways that essentially respect values of sustainability and long-term environmental goals. In my opinion the type of liberalism represented by John Stuart Mill deserves far more attention among liberal political philosophers and intermediary associations, such as employer's organizations and political parties. Mill's interpretation of, for example, individuality and his specific doctrine of individual freedom are much more defensible from an ecological point of view. Also his fundamental critique on the dominance of mankind over nature and the consequences for the environment of boundless economic growth indicate the possibility of an alternative 'liberal' approach in which liberal politics and sustainability can be linked in a convincing way. If liberalism wants to take the preservation and conservation of a viable environment seriously, it will have to rid itself of its Lockean inheritance and rediscover Mill: it is not yet too late.
Notes

1. My thanks are due to Marcel Wissenburg who read the first draft of this chapter and who also made corrections for the English. John Barry and Brian Doherty gave valuable comments on a later version.

2. This is a quote from Dick Tommel, a former member of parliament for the progressive liberal party D66, in the Dutch environmental magazine Milieudienst, no. 8 (Amsterdam, 1990), p. 8.

3. Compare Thomas Hobbes in his Leviathan: 'For all men are by nature provided of notable multiplying glasses, (that is their Passions and Self-love) through which, every little payment appeareth a great grievance; but are destitute of those prospective glasses, (namely Morall and Civill Science), to see a faire off the miseries that hang over them, and cannot without such payments be avoied' (Hobbes, 1974, p. 239).

4. My source of inspiration for this approach was the publication by the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR). Duurzame Risico's; Een Blijvende Gegeven (The Hague: Sud, 1994), chapters 1-4. This analysis is based on a close reading of the 1998 Dutch election programmes: see Lipschits (1998).


6. CDA political programme, Section 4.3 on 'stewardship' — see Lipschits (1998), pp. 284-5.

7. VVD political programme, the section on 'Economy and welfare' — see Lipschits (1998), pp. 441-8.


9. Economic problems for liberalism are viewed as 'problems of scarcity' for which economic and technological solutions are required, rather than being seen as 'excess demand' which requires explicit political and normative regulation.


11. These words were expressed by Hans Wijers when he officially opened the Dutch social debate on sustainability in Rotterdam, May 1996. See G. Pama, ‘Paars zie niets in krimpoeconomie', in NRC Handelsblad (Rotterdam, 30 May 1996), p. 23.

3

Ecological Sustainability: a Private Case of Social Justice?

Gayil Talshir

Introduction

Ecological concerns and social demands are often clustered together as New Politics issues (Müller-Rommel and Poguntke, 1995). The explanatory model on which this account is founded is derived from the alleged emergence of the new middle classes in advanced industrial societies due to changes in the socio-economic structure. The second postwar generation, the argument goes, has experienced material affluence and is highly educated, a change which carries with it a corresponding set of values — postmaterial values (Inglehart, 1977, 1990). This sociological model is said to rest upon Maslow's psychological account of the pyramid of needs, according to which it is only when the basic levels of existence — safety, food and other material needs — are satisfied, that a person becomes concerned with higher needs, such as self-fulfilment and aesthetic needs. Thus, the prosperous, highly educated new middle classes of the 1970s in advanced industrial democracies are said to adhere to postmaterial values which perpetuate new demands such as political participation and ecological concerns. Curiously, ecological concerns are characterized as aesthetic needs. This can hardly be the case, for ecological problems deal precisely with the most existential needs of all — life, health, sustainability and ways of life. However, if we dissociate the sociological model from its psychological foundation, or rather reconstruct the model so that the new middle classes are the social strata that has the available time and other-mindedness to deal with the public basic needs as their own material interests are satisfied, we are still left with an explanation which fails to dismantle the set of postmaterial values and to account for the interrelationships among the different New Politics issues.