Has sustainability science turned left?

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Abstract

As the urgent need for societies to steer towards sustainability is becoming increasingly apparent, sustainability science as a research community is facing difficult challenges successfully navigating the intensifying and often harsh political debates. An important line of conflict is (still) between the political left and right, although other conflicts are gaining increasing attention. As private corporations are stepping up their conservation agendas and non-governmental organizations are increasingly embracing market mechanisms to achieve healthier ecosystems, the scholarly community of sustainability science appears to be turning more to the political left. To navigate these entangled scientific and political landscapes, accomplishing constructive debates emphasizing the value of nurturing a broad spectra of viewpoints should be given higher priority in all forums where issues of sustainability are discussed.

Keywords Political conflicts · Political debates · Polarization · Science/policy interface · Sustainability science · Transformation

Introduction

The ambitious United Nation's Agenda 2030 stipulates 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), including ending poverty and hunger, protecting the planet from environmental degradation, and ensuring everyone opportunities for prosperous lives in peaceful societies (UN 2015). Significant progress has been made in reducing extreme poverty (e.g., approximately 50% in the last two decades) and increasing global health (e.g., significant decreases in child mortality) (UN 2020). The paces of these improvements are, however, not enough to meet the targets of the Agenda. Furthermore, recent predictions of climate change are more serious than previous predictions (Sherwood et al. 2020), and biodiversity is continuing to decline at a rate that exceeds the background level by at least two orders of magnitudes (Lamkin and Miller 2016). Although progress is being made, the fulfillment of all SDGs is going to require a great deal more effort.

Addressing this significant challenge is at the core within the scientific area of sustainability science. Sustainability science is a multi/interdisciplinary research area, spanning the natural, social, and technological sciences to study interactions between nature and societies and how these interactions affect our abilities to meet the needs of present and future generations by turning such knowledge into societal action (Kates 2011). Thus, sustainability science stresses the need for rapidly changing our current course, often stressing the need to “transform” societies to become more sustainable. This advocacy for large-scale societal change makes sustainability science different from many other traditional scientific disciplines as it makes the science more normative and assumes that part of its mission is active societal engagement. Therefore, what is the role and responsibility of sustainability researchers in advocating for transformative change at a time when the historical demarcation separating science from politics has becomes fuzzier than ever before¹ or might not even be relevant? From this perspective, I will explain how I think sustainability researchers can navigate these tensions.

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¹ Demarcations separating science from politics have always been fuzzy, in particular in endeavors aiming to convert scientific results into policy and practice. Hence, what I refer to here is *how* fuzzy, and not if these demarcations are or have been fuzzy or not.

Not if but how

Far more difficult than expressing a desire and a need for change is considering exactly *how* societies should move towards sustainability. What exactly such transformation could and should entail are clearly not only scientific questions, as they involve norms, values, and political as well as individual preferences. Furthermore, if and to what extent societies need to fundamentally change current social, political, and economic paradigms and if these needed changes are possible to accomplish within the realm of current paradigms remain contested questions. At the core of these questions are issues such as justice (e.g., how should the burden and the gains from needed changes be shared?). In the context of environmental change, *environmental* justice is of particular importance—i.e., ensuring an agreeable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. Although social, economic, and ecological sustainability are not inevitably pitched against each other, reconciling economic prosperity and environmental sustainability are often (but certainly not always) at odds, at least in shorter time frames. Addressing this question involves the difficult task of splitting the past, present, and future bills between the ones who have caused much of the damage to the environment and the ones who are suffering the most from this damage. The lack of progress in the UN-led climate talks (Conference of the Parties, COP) is at least partly due to tensions between the global north and south when it comes to paying for the damage done by climate change (see e.g., (Cléménçon 2016)). This possible stalemate inevitably leads to questions of power such as who has the authority to make decisions, who is given the opportunity to be heard, and if and how power imbalances are compensated for in decision-making processes.

Furthermore, the complicated issues of assigning costs and benefits and balancing skewed distributions of power and influence require evaluating the most effective methods to accomplish desired changes. An important dividing line is if either (1) various forms of government interventions and regulations, or (2) economic incentives and market mechanisms, would most effectively lead to the desired changes. This dimension largely corresponds to the political left and right. An example of a right-leaning policy is the European Union Emission Trading Systems (EU ETS), which aims to reduce CO₂ emission using market-based solutions. An example of a left leaning policy is the recent mandatory emission reduction target of 95 g CO₂/km for the fleet-wide average of cars manufactured within the EU starting in 2021 (EU 2019).

Successfully navigating this highly politicized landscape while maintaining legitimacy as scientists is clearly very difficult. The evolving and changing nature of the left–right dimension in relation to environmental issues of

sustainability does not make it easier. For example, although environmental issues in the USA were not associated with either side in the late 1960s, it did not take long before the left and the right started to diverge in their degrees of environmental concerns (Nawrotzki 2012), a development that has increased in recent years as revealed by the Pew Research Centre Surveys, which shows that people more inclined towards the right are, at the population level, relatively less concerned with environmental problems. However, if and to what extent the political right or left is more or less concerned with the environment varies across different contexts. For example, in lower income countries the pattern could be the opposite (ibid.). Furthermore, the recent surge of the populist far-right movement in Europe has not or only weakly changed public opinions in these matters as economic development and unemployment rates are much stronger predictors of public concerns about climate change (Duijndam and van Beukering 2021).

Furthermore, private corporations are overall increasing their engagement with issues of sustainability. For example, environmental issues are currently high on the agenda of the World Economic Forum and the right-leaning journal *The Economist* has in recent years written extensively on the need for corporations to deal with climate change. In addition, large environmental non-governmental organizations increasingly engage in partnerships with corporations in embracing market-based mechanisms to encourage more ecofriendly consumption and production (Bitzer and Glasbergen 2015). Thus, although the environment has often been previously neglected, the political right is certainly not unequivocally and everywhere resisting concerns of environmental issues of sustainability, and often the political right shares a sense of urgency regarding these sustainability issues although advocating different means than what the political left would typically support (see Kahn 2016).

Given these developments, I think sustainability researchers can do better at balancing the concerns of the left and the right. That is, I think the sustainability science community at least rhetorically currently leans too much towards the political left, although individuals and groups of sustainability science scholars are likely found in all possible political camps.² Although here I focus on the long standing left–right dimension in politics, I acknowledge that this dimension is far from fully capturing other important lines of conflict and disagreement more or less entangled with the traditional left–right dimension in current political debates.

² Please observe that I refer to the community of sustainability science scholars at large. Hence, I fully acknowledge that individual researchers and groups are and should continue to display a diversity of viewpoints and both theoretical and normative framings.

Leaning left?

On what basis do I assert that sustainability science is leaning to the left? Some examples follow. The number of publications found using the search term “environmental justice” has increased nearly ninefold over the last two decades and 30% of this increase has occurred during the last 5 years (Google Scholar June 25, 2020). Similarly, power and equity, topics that have previously often been neglected (Morrison et al. 2019), have drawn significant interest from sustainability researchers. Neither justice nor power are topics that are disregarded by the political right, but these topics are more associated with the current agendas of the political left. Other aspects of sustainability are typically given priority by the right such as sustainability efforts more tied to markets and incentives rather than justice and power imbalances.

In addition, sustainability science literature regularly refers to neoliberalism with a negative connotation; in fact, this is done so regularly that it often goes unnoticed. Nonetheless, these unreflective critiques give an impression of one-sidedness. Questioning market mechanisms, such as the abovementioned emission trading system, or capitalism in general terms is often the norm in workshops and conferences that target issues of sustainability. Someone voicing these perspectives is typically met with strong affirmation and support, whereas the opposite applies to someone embracing competitive market-based solutions to sustainability issues (I think many economists can testify to this). I acknowledge that capitalism is a multifaceted concept entailing issues such as competitive markets, accumulation of wealth, and property rights. Thus, simply referring to capitalism might appear as inappropriately imprecise. However, part of my concern is that capitalism is often, but certainly not always, being criticized without any greater clarity or precision.

Moreover, openly questioning the long-term feasibility of supporting a human population of 8 billion or more is often perceived as “oppressive” or “colonial” (e.g., Ahmad 2019). One argument underlying this critique is that debating population size distracts from focusing attention on the issue of unequal distribution of limited resources and the subsequent inequality in terms of how much environmental damage individuals in different contexts contribute (see Maslin 2019 and subsequent online comments). Although I agree these are valid concerns, I argue that sustainability scholars need to be able to discuss important issues of sustainability without being labelled as oppressive or (intentionally or not) as subscribing to a colonial agenda.

Of course, there are examples of sustainability scholarly work that lean more to the right. For example, traditional mainstream economic perspectives that elaborate on possible sustainability measures could crudely be categorized

as leaning more to the right (e.g., see (McCauley 2006) for some early critic of the concept of ecosystem services). Engaging private profit-maximizing corporations in instigating voluntarily change for sustainability (Österblom et al. 2020) might also be perceived as leaning more to the right.

If you agree that sustainability science as a scholarly community is leaning too much to the left, the next step is to question whether this is really a problem. I believe so, partly because I do not think we can move towards sustainability unless we manage to engage as many key political camps as possible.³ By being perceived as ideologically aligned with a rival political camp (true or not), sustainability science could become an enemy simply by association. If this is a possibility, then the next step is to investigate how to avoid this conundrum.

What can we do?

First, I do not think we need to fundamentally change what we do nor how we focus our studies. And obviously no one should change their beliefs and values unless persuaded to do so by earnest rationale debate. However, I think we need to adjust our attitudes and behaviors a bit. In particular, I think we need to be open to as many perspectives as possible when investigating issues of transformation and sustainability, and we need to develop a more critical attitude towards issuing blanket statements about what is “good” and “bad”. Yes, this often includes paying more scholarly attention to thoughts, values, and perspectives nurtured in, for example, neoliberal economics, conservatism, and even to issues commonly dismissed as “populistic”. For example, invite representatives from these camps to be keynote speakers at conferences or co-authors on papers, listen to what they have to say, and if you disagree, criticize in a friendly and constructive manner. The act of de-platforming (i.e., denying certain others access to venues where they can express their opinions) is not well aligned with the scientific ideals of openness and constructive criticism, so rooting out any such tendencies is important if we want to stimulate an open and critical but constructive debate. This involves being clearer on separating the person from the argument. You might very well dislike the person (often for good reasons), but this does not necessarily mean that everything the person is saying is inherently wrong or not worth considering.

³ This does not imply that we should try to appeal to all possible camps, which is neither possible nor desirable. Rather, what I refer to here is trying to maintain neutrality in framing and positioning; thereby increasing the likelihood that findings and suggestions will not be dismissed at face value but instead could stimulate different camps to at least agree on issues of concern albeit they might not agree on how to best address them.

Maintaining an open and critical and at times uncomfortable debate is, in my view, the best way to persistently counteract polarization and the establishment of echo chambers. Moreover, this openness will improve our chances of finding novel and creative solutions to pressing societal and environmental problems. That is, the better we understand opposing reasoning and values, the more likely we are to accomplish meaningful cooperation in spite of disagreements (Lewicki et al. 2003; Koebele 2019).

If questioning, e.g., neoliberalism and capitalism, I advise spending less time finding the cracks or shortcomings in these paradigms (which are not necessarily particularly hard to find, as with most paradigm) and more time on finding the cracks in the alternative (obviously this applies irrespective of what specific paradigm, left or right or something else, is being scrutinized). And spend less time on elaborating the desired end state and more time on how to arrive at the desired end state. The latter is, as stated earlier, far more challenging since it involves balancing different objectives and being clear on the *how*. Often, when elaborating on what we ought to do, it becomes clear that causes and effects are typically linked through complex causal relationships, a complexity that makes it hard to say what specific actions will lead to what specific outcomes. If there is only one thing to learn from the past, it could be that rapid transformations can easily take unintended, unexpected, and undesirable turns. Thus, when embracing the existence of complex causalities in trying to find ways that could take us closer to a desired state, pragmatism might supersede dogmatism, and pragmatism generally provides a better ground for fruitful collaboration.

When conducting research, always question how your “political lens” affects your research design and the interpretation of your findings. Being totally value-neutral is, as stated above, impossible and not even preferable, but that does not mean we cannot strive for objectivity. This self-reflexive approach to conducting research requires a constant critique of one’s own thinking—i.e., being your own fiercest opponent.

We need to ask ourselves to what extent we should be activists. How do we reconcile these roles—traditional scientist and activist for change—while maintaining long-term credibility and legitimacy as scholars? This is a long standing discussion in some forums but rarely addressed in others. Furthermore, the severity of the current state of affairs and the pressing need to act sooner rather than later presents a huge opportunity for anyone with an agenda to quickly gain leverage. As a result, there is a risk that sustainability science could be used as a “platform for leverage” to further agenda that are mostly politically driven and based less on conducting scientific inquiries as a method to explore fundamental and applied questions of sustainability.

What I think is at stake if we as a scholarly community fail in this balancing act of science versus politics, left versus right, and scientific rigor and incremental knowledge-building versus urgency to act might be an opportunity to reconcile decades long disagreements between the political left and right in terms of the perceived importance and urgency of the whole sustainability agenda. This not only would diminish opportunities for attaining sustainability, but also would contribute to harmful polarization and a narrowing of perspectives, ultimately risking ignoring new and novel solutions to issues of sustainability. If we end up too much on one side in any political battle that is not unequivocally determining whether we would ever reach sustainability, we could find the scholarly sustainability community losing credibility, ultimately to the detriment of society’s ability to transform to sustainability. If, however, we embrace openness and critical debates where essentially no one nor any specific paradigm is excluded or severely downplayed, the risk for being perceived as hijacked by rival camps would be reduced.

Here I think academic institutions could make some critical contributions. Being extremely clear on the indisputable value of “brave spaces” (e.g., venues where disagreements are not seen as problematic although they can potentially be uncomfortable) while not diminishing the need for “safe spaces” (e.g., venues where everyone feels they have the right to speak and be listened to) is one such contribution. Another one is to develop a more nuanced and critical attitude towards social media. Social media has, for good and bad, revolutionized the way we communicate. Although it has made it possible for millions of people to speak up, it is also a forum for massive disinformation and bullying campaigns (Aral 2020). Thus, if fear of social media is allowed to steer universities’ decision-making in the complicated and politically charged issues of sustainability, the ability of these institutions to contribute to a lively debate involving a broad spectrum of viewpoints is diminished.

Conclusion

Again, sustainability science cannot and should not be considered as strictly neutral, but I argue that there is a gradient ranging from being entirely objective (which might just be a theoretically idealized state) to being fully engaged in a political discourse where issues of sustainability have become deeply entangled with many other issues related to values, beliefs, and political preferences. Embracing openness and critical debates is one way to navigate this tension. Ideally, if we succeed in maintaining truly open debates, the guiding question for this perspective—whether we as a scholarly community are leaning too much to the left or right—would be considered irrelevant.

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