

Editorial

Social Quality, Environmental Challenges, and Indicators

The first three articles of this issue are dedicated to aspects of the current debate about and the praxis of environmental questions, and thus of the ecosystems. The fourth article concerns the application of social quality indicators in China. The gaining hypothesis is that a disconnection of the social quality approach of daily circumstances in Japan, Russia, China, Europe, the Americas, Africa, or India from environmental processes results into anachronisms. Without a global consciousness of the unequal consequences of these environmental processes, people in rich countries may be tempted to positively judge the nature of the social quality of their localities or country “as such.” Unknown remains that, seen from a global perspective, macro-determined reasons for the positive outcomes in rich countries may go at the expense of ecosystems. They may cause, also because of the exportation of substantial elements of problematic (and partly environmental) aspects of the dominant production and reproduction relationships, serious forms of exploitation. Under the same conditions (*ceteris paribus*), this attack on ecosystems, as well as this exportation and exploitation cause increasingly declining social quality of daily circumstances in poor countries and regions. This will also result into an increase of “climate refugees.” Because of advancing technologically driven transformations—especially regarding communications systems—the interdependencies of countries between the West and the East, as well as between the North and the South, accelerate. Autarkic situations are becoming, or have already been for a long time, a myth.

Because of these increasing interdependencies, new politics of “my country or my region or my locality first” are to be expected from people who are unable or refuse to reflect on the consequences of securing their own welfare conditions for herewith related new inequalities elsewhere. The convincing debate about the differences of the ecological footprint per capita within rich countries and within poor countries, as well as between rich and poor countries, explains and underpins this argument. According Jedediah Britton-Purdy (2019) from Columbia University, this has recently been expressed by the resolution of members of the US Democratic Party about the Green New Deal, presented to the House of Representatives. It expresses the necessity of environmentally oriented economic politics for combating all forms of pollution. The resolution also concerns “problems of economic inequality, poverty and even corporate concentration . . . [and argues that] environmental policy is [essentially] economic policy. Keeping the two separate isn’t a feat of intellectual discipline. It’s an



anachronism.” The intertwining of environmental challenges and many forms of societal inequalities has stimulated the International Social Science Council (ISSC 2016) to dedicate its 2016 report to many forms of societal-based inequalities. The reasoning was that the “unchecked inequality could jeopardize the sustainability of economies, societies and communities,” undermining efforts to achieve the Sustainability Development Goals of the United Nations by 2030. These goals aim to connect societal with environmental processes in such a way that humankind will reach an overall societal and environmentally sustainable balance. With this in mind, the question seems to be relevant as to which points of departure have been chosen in the first three articles of this issue for investigating and addressing aspects of this connection.

In the first article, about greening British businesses, Curtis Ziniel and Tony Bradley focus on the distinction between a (1) post-material and a (2) postindustrial point of departure for paving new ways regarding this connection. The first has seen as a largely apolitical environmental movement act to advocate new market-based solutions to green issues. It concerns businesses seeking to green their sectors, for example, by decarbonizing production and distribution systems. Some of them are closely tied to anti-capitalist movements. The second connects green issues to the idea of a “postindustrial” future: a movement that overlaps with ecological anarchism. A sub-movement advocates, for example, a “back to the land” philosophy that specifically lays the blame for environmental degradation at the door of industrial capitalism. In the second article, about the nature of the ongoing climate change negotiations, Tim Cadman, Klaus Radunsky, Andrea Simonelli, and Tek Maraseni focus on (3) market-based approaches and (4) nonmarket-based approaches. They claim this distinction has affinity with the distinction between neoliberal and neo-Marxist approaches, as well as a global bifurcation between North and South, or between developed and developing countries, or even as a state versus non-state demarcation. But, they add, none of these descriptions entirely captures the osmotic nature of negotiating positions within the climate talks. In the third article, about the case of the Plastic Soup Foundation (PSF) as an environmental movement, Laurent van der Maesen presents also in a sketchy way a distinction: first, (5) a covering hedonistic-driven commercial approach of companies by delivering more attention to the damaging externalities of their production and distribution systems, without changing their business values and models. Furthermore, (6) the eudemonic-driven approach by accentuating ecological acceptable use values of production of commodities instead of the one-dimensional orientation on exchange values and herewith related shareholders value. It will prevent any form of pollution and, in the case of the PSF, the plastic pollution of oceans, landfills, seacoasts, and rivers.

David Phillips has explained that the concept of eudaimonia, introduced by Aristotle, means a high quality of people’s daily circumstances—to moderation, reason, and justice—and it focuses on the self-realization and actualization of human potential within the intrinsically related context of societal wholes. Aristotle—with his reflections on “the social” in this way—rejected hedonism as an egocentric vulgar

position (2006: 32). This is incorporated in the social quality approach, which is applied to clarify the case of the PSF. Of interest is understanding the similarities and differences between these distinctions and their functions for analyses, as well as their potentially complementarity. With actual inevitable realities in mind, this question disposes of a heuristic meaning. These realities will influence in one way or another the issues addressed in these articles. First, the global-oriented Institute for Energy, Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA 2018) concluded at the end of 2018 that China continues to position itself for global clean energy dominance as the United States steps aside. It has become an example for the world. Shortly afterward, the IEEFA concludes, Chinese private and state capital are the lenders of the last resort for new coal plants with outdated production systems in twenty-three countries in Asia and beyond (IEEFA 2019). They will function for many decades in these countries.

Second, *The Economist* notes that the US oil giant ExxonMobil proclaimed in February 2019 that it plans to pump 25 percent more oil and gas in 2025 than in 2017: “If the rest of the industry pursues even modest growth, the consequences for the climate could be disastrous.”¹ According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2018), in order to restrict the global warming of 1.5 °C, the world must nearly halve its carbon dioxide emissions by 2030. Furthermore, it should reach net zero emissions by 2050. According to the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL 2019), this target can be realized only if fossil fuels are eliminated from the economy. Its recent report demonstrates that “geoengineering our way out of climate crisis”—as proposed by ExxonMobil and other oil and gas producers—threatens to entrench fossil fuels and accelerate the climate crisis. Recently, the International Energy Agency (IEA) had to conclude, that 2018 showed the fastest pace in the last decade of energy-related CO₂ emissions growth. The USA, China and India accounted for nearly 70 percent of the rise in energy demand (IEA. 2019). These issues, from China, India and from the United States, demonstrate that outside new green business orientations on the national economic level, or the endeavors to change politics and policies as expressed by many partners during climate negotiations, or the realization of global activities as those from the PSF, cannot be approached in isolation. Macro economic processes happen today that are rightly in contrast with values, visions, and their operationalization of, for example, these orientations, expressions, and realizations. Especially in the case of the Plastic Soup Foundation, an increasing number of people, organizations, and companies are convinced the world needs a drastic reduction of plastic products. Moreover, new plans currently demonstrate that the production of these products will explode in the near future.

This legitimizes the rationale of a new social quality project, namely, the elaboration of social quality indicators in collaboration with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). The project aims to understand the nature and consequences of these processes influencing the daily circumstances of people. In order to guarantee the comparability of the outcomes, these indicators should be suitable for all countries and their localities. This collaboration has been introduced in the editorial of the

previous issue of this journal (Van der Maesen 2018). In September 2018, the CASS organized an expert meeting with Chinese scholars and members of this journal's editorial board and international advisory committee. At this meeting, it was decided to deepen the current (third) wave of social quality indicators research. (The first wave concerned the indicators' research in fourteen EU member-states from 2002 to 2006 and the second in Southeast Asia and Australia from 2007 to 2014 (Van der Maesen and Walker 2014).) The third wave started in China and may be extended to many other countries. This was the main topic of the expert meeting. The fourth article, by Wei Li and Yan Cui, may be understood as one of the steps to be made for starting this third wave. This particular study will pave the way for a yearly "Social Quality Report of China." In the previous issue, a first step was made in this direction (Cui and Huang 2018). The project's challenge will be the evolution of social quality indicators research, incorporating the connection of societal processes and environmental processes. This connection was not taken on board yet during the first and the second wave, neither in both Chinese articles.

The first article represents a long-term investigation into determinants of the greening of businesses in the United Kingdom and their implication for the broader decarbonization movement debates and praxis. According to the authors, the research provides evidence of the impact of radical green activism (RGA) on the further greening of small to medium-sized enterprises. They also argue that, thanks to our increasing understanding, continuing research needs to fill in specific gaps around causal factors. They are convinced the extension of radical environmentalism from societal based activism into the production sphere of the market opens new horizons. It will represent a substantive addition to existing knowledge of the impact of the latent environmental movements and how the strengthening of these movements may change markets in the future. Furthermore, their study underpins the conclusion that the presence of RGA connects with businesses that are greening. Therefore, their research finding adds to our knowledge of the environmental movement specifically and societal-based movements more generally. They propose that, as local communities begin to develop, a gravitational pull toward a "postindustrial" green agenda leads to businesses adopting a more "post-material" approach to their production and distribution activities. The authors have used the length of journeys to work as a rough indicator of "localness." This could, among other things, be seen as an indication of the degree to which workers were choosing to adopt a greener lifestyle, by connecting work and residence within their locality. Equally, the variable of energy usage per person indicates a choice to adopt various levels of energy consumption. This means this study may stimulate existing social quality indicators research to extend the attention to the connection of environmental processes and societal processes, including changes of the socioeconomic/financial dimension of daily circumstances.

The second article introduces an overview of the intergovernmental negotiations aimed at combatting human-induced greenhouse gas emissions. These negotiations happen under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The authors start with the 2015 Paris conference, explain the next step during the 2016 Marrakech conference, followed by the 2017 Bonn conference, and finally in the 2018 Katowice conference. The three latter conferences were dedicated to the Paris Rulebook negotiations on how to implement market- and nonmarket-based approaches to mitigating climate change. The authors have applied a specific method of analysis. The content of the discussions, which are often behind closed doors, are elaborated from contemporary media accounts, scholarly commentary, and the perspectives of the authors as both participant observers and negotiators, in the approach referred to in methodological theory as “triangulation.” Of course, the latest conference explains “where we are.” But the route, starting from Paris 2015, will explain essential aspects of the outcomes at the end of 2018. The authors remark that the fact that Katowice was a triumph of international diplomacy in the face of intransigence does little to assure the community that the Paris Rulebook, at this stage, will be sufficient to address the necessity of reining in global carbon emissions. Coal loomed large in Katowice, and decarbonization remains a major political challenge, given the unwillingness of the fossil-fuel-rich countries like the United States, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Russia to accept the need to ecologically modernize their economies. And, as noted earlier, new coal plants are planned with support from China in twenty-three Asian countries and beyond. This is therefore at odds with the plea described in the 2018 IPCC report known to the conference participants; the recent dramatic consequences are explained by the IEF (2019). The authors conclude that, with the outcomes of the 2018 conference in mind, it now remains to be seen what will happen to human rights as mentioned in the Paris Rulebook at the next conference, in Santiago in 2019. With the prospect of increased aviation powered by palm oil, carbon offset programs on indigenous lands, and ongoing exploitation of natural forests for power generation, issues of climate justice and human rights are more relevant in the climate policy space than ever. From a social quality perspective, there is a substantive difference between countries considering their human rights obligations, or even respecting and promoting them (which are fundamentally passive acts), and actively protecting those rights.

The third article presents an endeavor to connect the social quality approach (oriented until now mostly on societal processes) with the rational and work of the international operating Plastic Soup Foundation, which is dedicated to environmental processes as consequences of the ongoing pollution of oceans, seas, coasts, and rivers with plastic pollution, as well in a huge number of landfills. This connection aims to enhance the social quality approach in order to become functional for contributing to environmental movements for restoring the balance in the ecosystems. This also implies that social quality indicators research must be extended to indicators suitable for understanding societal consequences of environmental processes and vice versa. During this research, the author was continually assisted by Michiel Roscam Abbing (2018), a PSF researcher. This collaboration aims to pave the way for a project to elaborate also—with help of this case, dedicated to one of the three

most pressing emerging issues for the global environment (UNEP 2011)—the social quality approach for better coping with the connection of societal and environmental processes. A start is made in this study to demonstrate the functionality of the four-dimensional approach of the overall sustainability, namely analyzing processes in the socioeconomic/financial, sociopolitical/legal, sociocultural/welfare, and socio-environmental dimensions for exploring the nature and actions of the PSF. This is at odds with the traditional triangular dimensions as proposed in the famous Brundtland Report and still applied nearly everywhere in studies about aspects of the connection between societal and environmental processes. From the side of the social quality perspective, the “social dimension” of the Brundtland Report especially is on the base of theoretical arguments contested in the social quality approach for stimulating a creative dialogue about this relevant global issue. Does an undefined noun “the social” and its adjective—as happened with the “social dimension” in the Brundtland Report—imply a contra-Aristotelian position and pave the way implicitly for ego-centric orientations as happens in the philosophy of neoliberalism?

The fourth article, about the application of social quality indicators in China, opens with the conclusion that China’s socioeconomic/financial dimension has improved significantly in recent decades thanks to the country’s economic growth. Therefore, it is attractive to analyze the change of the four conditional factors of social quality in China. This research is stimulated because of the supposition—based on previous social quality analyses in this country—that the current level of social quality in this country is not really satisfactory. One method to investigate the nature of social quality is to analyze the four conditional factors of social quality, namely, socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment. The instruments are the social quality indicators. Important is the annotation: that the adjective “social” is derived from the theoretical-based concept of “the social” as developed in the social quality theory. The researchers describe the specification of the indicators and their application under the lead of the Institute of Sociology of the CASS. Their national survey, taken from June 2017 to November 2017, covers more than 150 cities (districts and counties) and more than 600 villages (neighborhood committees) in 31 provinces, municipalities directly under the central government and autonomous regions across the country. Concluded is that the overall level of socioeconomic security is far behind the actual needs of the public. Its level for rural residents is still far lower than that for urban residents. Regarding social cohesion, they conclude that the current level of trust is generally lukewarm or rather unresponsive. A majority of respondents said they lacked belief and morality in the current Chinese society.

Regarding social inclusion, the authors note that, despite increasing diversification, some respondents also harbor rejection toward specific groups in the Chinese society. This will undermine the necessity of positive identification. Also, differences due to family background and relationships result in negative comments. As far as social empowerment is concerned, the level of job satisfaction of the public sector has

greatly improved, but local government agencies need to further improve their prompt responding to people's appeals, raise service awareness, and increase the transparency of the governmental work. As mentioned earlier, this research and the study in the previous issue of this journal on the analysis of the evaluation of different classes in China (Cui and Huang 2018) are starting points for opening the debate about the nature of the third wave of social quality indicators studies. It concerns especially the new debate about epistemological aspects of the social quality approach: the concept of indicator, the subjects of indicators, and the connection of the four conditional factors with these subjects. It concerns a connection of deductive forms of reasoning and inductive forms. This will be the challenge of the aforementioned new project in collaboration with the CASS. To deepen this subject matter is highly important because the outcomes will be used in the annual "Social Quality Report of China," which, if positive, can function as examples for reports in other countries. A challenge for the third wave is—as noticed already—to connect this work with reflecting environmental processes, which influence the state of affairs of cities and rural communities and vice versa. Some years ago, a start was made with the analyses of the Jiaxing model of environmental protection by its citizens, a Chinese-European project from 2015 (see also Van der Maesen and Wang 2015). It makes sense to take on board the outcomes of this research in the new social quality indicators project.

Note

1. "Crude Awakening: The Truth about Big Oil and Climate Change," *The Economist*, 9 February.

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