A transatlantic approach to sustainability? The perspective of sociology

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Abstract Differing views of the state and varying ideological postures in the United States and Europe place "invisible and clandestine" obstacles against the smooth functioning of transatlantic treaties, agreements, and cooperation in general. These differing views and postures must be rendered visible and acknowledged if efforts to perpetuate a cross-Atlantic dialog are to be viable and stable. Neither the advantages of sharing technology nor common economic and political interests will alone adequately ground cooperation. Sociologists in particular are aware of the ways in which indigenous values and beliefs frequently endure, despite the homogenizing structural change that accompanies industrialization, urbanization, and globalization, and cause misperceptions and misunderstandings.

Keywords Transatlantic dialog · Ideology · Small state · Sustainability · Misperceptions

Sustainability can be viewed from a number of angles. The impact of technological, geographical, economic, and geopolitical factors has been frequently investigated. Too often rigorous sociological research is lacking, particularly with respect to the analysis of transatlantic dialogs and policies focused on the environment.[1] How would Sociology address sustainability issues?

At the most basic level, a sociological perspective would insist upon locating sustainability's main concerns—whether, for example, climate change, biodiversity loss, renewable resources, wilderness integrity, fresh water sources, or food production—within a context of groups.

Reference to at least several of the discipline's major explanatory variables—such as class, status groups, ethnic groups, organizations, the state, power, gender, ideology, and religion—must occur. According to sociologists, because all of these variables influence the formation of environmental policy, they must ultimately be incorporated on a regular basis into sustainability-oriented investigations.

This study cannot address the influence of all groups pivotal to sociologists. It attends exclusively to two concepts indispensable for the study of transatlantic relations and powerful as causal factors. First, the foundational role of the state will be briefly examined. This article then turns to its major theme: the importance of ideology. Often amorphous and difficult to identify, ideologies may obstruct—frequently clandestinely—all attempts to formulate coherent transatlantic policies. Both of these concepts, it is argued, must become incorporated into any international discourse on sustainability policy.

1 The state

Many sociologists maintain that strategies to address the dilemmas presented by environmental problems relate strongly to the nature of the state. The constitutional state—an organization endowed with a law-based and court-system infrastructure capable of adapting to social movements even while placing the demands they articulate within a legal framework—provides the necessary precondition for the formation of international laws and

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[1] For our purposes, following the definition offered by the United Nations, this concept implies the attempt to fulfill the needs of both present-day populations and future generations while respecting the requirements of the environment.

organizations. These organizations include environmental groups concerned with cross-national environmental destruction.

Anchored in nation-states, legal frameworks enable viable cross-national cooperation. Agreements may be formed on a regular basis as binding treaties rooted in international law and accepted practices. Disputes regarding sustainability issues can then be mediated.

As noted, however, sociological concepts span a broad spectrum. Albeit foundational, legal frameworks are recognized by sociologists as formal structures only. Cognizance must be taken of forces that potentially disrupt even cross-national cooperation anchored in international law.

The potential threats presented to the legal order by, for example, the heterogeneous political location of sustainability initiatives in Europe and the United States must be acknowledged. Environmental issues have been institutionalized in Green parties throughout the Continent for three decades; in the platforms of Social Democratic parties they have been central for two decades or longer. An SPD-Green coalition came to power in Germany in 1998. The contrast to the United States is evident: neither the Democratic nor Republican parties have addressed sustainability issues over a longer period or with a similar degree of intensity. Instead, especially under George W. Bush, they have been pushed aside. A Green Party is virtually non-existent. This discrepancy hinders and skews a transatlantic dialog on sustainability issues and obstructs the formation and implementation of systematic policies grounded in law.

However, ideologies may pose barriers of a greater magnitude for law-based and state-based transatlantic efforts to address sustainability themes. Seldom acknowledged, several of their major manifestations must be demarcated. Four aspects of the American ideology deserve attention.

2 Ideological barriers to transatlantic cooperation

A variety of ideological—even "world view"—factors may interfere with every transatlantic relationship. Although frequently invisible to policy makers, ideological obstacles to the development of smooth international cooperation may crystallize and acquire an unyielding posture. They may become salient to such an extent that legally binding treaties are compromised.

2.1 The state

The general tendency in Europe to look to the state for leadership—even in those cases where the initiative has been taken by a grass-roots movement, as is occurring more and more frequently—resonates only partially with the main axes of the American political landscape. Recognition of the state as a major actor with respect to environmental issues highly depends upon contingent political configurations in the United States. Large segments of the Republican Party, at least since George W. Bush's refusal to sign the Kyoto Treaty, have vigorously opposed American participation in international climate change agreements. Conversely, political parties across the entire political spectrum in Europe agree upon the necessity for the state to play a strong part with respect to the formation of sustainability policy and its implementation.

Behind the ambivalence with respect to the state's role stands a particular aspect of the American ideology that is only marginally echoed in Europe: an ethos of "self-reliance."[2] The capacity of individuals to fulfill both their own wants and civic obligations without state assistance is widely praised in the United States. If upheld by a facilitating dynamic of short-term forces, this powerful component of the American world view may undergo aggrandizement. A posture of antagonism to international contracts may then expand across diverse segments of the population and the "small state" may become an ideal for many policy makers. This "self-reliance/small state" configuration calls into question the legitimacy of the state to initiate projects on behalf of the environment.

2.2 A foundational optimism

A second ideological ingredient also may play a significant causal role. It can be best depicted by reference to a further aspect of the American value constellation: a foundational optimism. A "can do" attitude, rooted ultimately in a "world-mastery" (Weltbeherrschung) Protestantism that viewed obstacles as God-given challenges to be mastered by devout believers intent upon constructing in His honor a Kingdom of God on earth (see Weber 2011, 1968, pp. 1198–1200, 1204–1210),[3] could flourish on American soil on the one hand owing to the historical absence of feudalism and on the other hand to the array of rights and

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2 Heralded by Ralph Waldo Emerson and the late nineteenth-century Horatio Alger stories of heroic upward mobility, this idea locates its original source in the "self-responsibility" of Puritans: through self-guided ethical conduct, the devout must "certify" their membership among the saved (see Weber 2005: 277–290, 2011; Lipset 2005). Self-reliance as an ideal remains visible throughout twentieth-century American thought. However, especially after 1970 it became increasingly located on the conservative side of the cultural divide. More recently, the self-reliance ideal is manifest in the biographies explored by Bellah et al. in their now-classic volume, Habits of the Heart (1985).

3 This world-mastery heritage and its longer range impact has been examined elsewhere. See Kalberg (1997, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2011); see also Bendix (2005).

liberties bestowed upon citizens by the Bill of Rights. An expansive and unsettled Western frontier also presented opportunities that intensified the energy of Americans.

These early features of the American cultural landscape enabled a "dream" of unlimited opportunities and upward mobility to unfold as the American economy expanded rapidly after 1860. Problems could be solved, it was widely believed, and even extreme difficulties would be overcome once additional effort was brought to bear. Dilemmas and setbacks came to be viewed as "irritations" along an evolutionary and progressive trajectory.

Lacking a world-mastery heritage, an American dream, and vast frontier, European nations frequently viewed this hopeful posture as naive, illusory, and even counterproductive. Moreover, American optimism—"problems will be solved"—often had the effect of ameliorating the urgency of complex conundra, for citizens intent upon shaping their life pathways were persuaded that in the end social upheaval would be managed.[4]

This denial of urgency stands in opposition to the more pessimistic view widespread in Europe, particularly in Germany. Action must be immediately undertaken, it is widely perceived, for the solution of environmental problems presents only a narrow window of opportunity.

2.3 The antagonism to scientific opinion

A third ideological element also may serve at times to obstruct transatlantic dialogs and even treaties. Owing to both a strong populism heritage anchored in a longstanding ideal of social egalitarianism[5] and the absence of feudalism, Americans generally endow elite opinion—including scientific opinion—with less prestige and respect than do Europeans (and, in particular, owing to the elevated prestige of the university in German society, the average German). As a result of this populism,[6] professional opinion and the admonitions of experts carry less weight in the United States with respect to policy formation. The "voice of the people" must be heard, and the practical experience of the common person is frequently viewed as equal in standing to that of "the professional" and "the expert."

This comparatively expansive populism influences many corners of American society. It accounts, for example, in part for the uniqueness of the American

"management style." An important source of transatlantic misunderstandings can also be located here.

European and American styles of management in large corporations differ significantly (see Hall and Margaret 1980; Zigler 1997; Nees 2000; Vernon 2003). Attempts by American multinationals to introduce an egalitarian and team-based workplace—despite the formal hierarchical lines of superordination and subordination in place in all bureaucracies—often abrasively rub against the less egalitarian and more formal workplace climate in many bureaucratically organized firms in Europe. In this milieu, the American tendency to demonstrate competence through largely unstructured participation tends to clash with a greater evaluation of persons in Europe by reference to positions held in firm hierarchies (see Vernon 2003). This infrastructure incompatibility plants seeds for an intensifying cycle of misperceptions.[7] Obstacles to international cooperation may also arise from these misunderstandings.

2.4 Large corporations

Fourth, and finally, the American unwillingness to place strong constraints upon the international activities of large corporations based in the United States, whether directly financial or otherwise, must also be noted. This reluctance, together with American society's unusually high bestowal of great status—and even trust—upon the businessperson, anchors a constellation of variables fundamentally amenable both to entrepreneurial activity and the awarding of significant prestige to business-oriented endeavors.[8]

This unwillingness to regulate large concerns is especially evident in respect to cross-industry coordination. It is underpinned by an ideological presupposition: a largely unquestioned belief that free markets are benevolent and offer the most efficient mechanisms to solve problems in almost all cases.[9] This view stands in opposition to the more skeptical position in regard to unfettered markets and the benevolence of large concerns prevalent in Europe for 150 years (see Allen 1989a, b; Hall 1989).[10]

This article has primarily investigated the manner in which Sociology calls attention to the amorphous and often

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[4] This American optimism and "can do" posture has been discussed in more detail at Kalberg (2006, pp. 236–239; see also 1992).

[5] Tocqueville's study places just this theme—the social egalitarianism in the United States—at its core. See Tocqueville (1945), Kalberg (1997).

[6] "Populism" is used here to imply a belief in the good judgment and common sense of the average citizen.

[7] In my view, the Daimler Benz/Chrysler merger failed in part as a consequence of differing German and American management styles. Related to this issue, see Kalberg 1987.

[8] Weber would trace this trust and prestige back to the influence of a "Protestant ethic" and a "spirit of capitalism" in America. See also Lipset 2005; Bendix 2005.

[9] This ideological element became recently most evident in the call by President Sarkozy and Chancellor Merkel for strict limits upon executive pay—a call rejected by the Obama administration.

[10] Again, Weber would trace this America–Europe distinction back to American ascetic Protestantism's salvation-oriented focus upon methodical work, wealth, and a search for profit.

"invisible" influence of ideology. It has maintained that four components of the American world view may interfere on a regular basis with efforts on behalf of harmonious transatlantic relations and even law-based cooperation. Moreover, strategic, geo-political, and domestic political and economic configurations may at times crystallize in ways that intensify ideological differences. Long-term power considerations and short-term tactical machinations may do so as well. A spiraling effect may ensue—with the consequence that even seemingly minute differences become rendered as firm and irreconcilable (see Kalberg 1991, 2003).

When applied to the question of "a developing transatlantic approach to sustainability," the focus in this article upon a central sociological variable—the role of ideology—indicates that great complexity and frustration may surround attempts at transatlantic cooperation. This conclusion flows in part from cognizance by sociologists of the ways in which indigenous values and beliefs often endure despite homogenizing structural change, such as that called forth by industrialization and urbanization generally. When viewed through the lens of ideological constellations, all attempts to create a viable cross-Atlantic dialog, and to convert joint projects into effective policy and binding trans-national treaties, will be characterized by a rocky pathway.

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