

Does Democracy Impede Sustainability in Eurasia?

Editorial to Vol. 1, Issue 2

Wolfgang Sassin¹



Wolfgang Sassin,

Dr-Ing,
Independent researcher,
formerly Senior Scientist of International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis
and Lecturer of Technical University Vienna
Austria

Вольфганг Зассинъ,

докторъ-инженеръ,
независимый изслѣдователь,
въ прошломъ главный научный сотрудникъ
Международного института прикладного системного анализа
и лекторъ Технического университета Вѣны
(Австрія)

Article No and Translation / Номеръ статьи и переводъ: 020000201 ENG

¹ Please send the correspondence to e-mail: w.sassin@aon.at.

For citation (Chicago style) / Для цитування (стиль «Чикаго»):

In English:

Sassin, Wolfgang. 2020. "Does Democracy Impede Sustainability in Eurasia?" *Eur Crossrd* 1, 020000201.

Permanent URL links to the article:

HANDLE: 20.500.12656/eurcrossrd.1.020000201

<http://eurcrossrd.ru/pdf/Vol.%201.%20Issue%202.%20020000201%20ENG.pdf>

Received in the original form: 10 June 2020

Review cycles: 2

1st review cycle ready: 27 July 2020

Review outcome: 3 of 3 positive

Decision: To publish with minor revisions

2nd review cycle ready: 8 August 2020

Accepted: 11 August 2020

Published online: 18 August 2020

HEADLINE. Eine Antwort auf die Frage von Volker Hauff [A Response to the Question Posed by Volker Hauff].

ABSTRACT

Wolfgang Sassin. *Does Democracy Impede Sustainability in Eurasia?* Volker Hauff was Federal Minister of Research and Technology of the Federal Republic of Germany. In 1983, he became a member of the World Commission on Environment and Development set up by the United Nations. The final report of this commission (Brundtland 1987), entitled "Our Common Future," defined "environmentally friendly, long-term sustainable development as a global task." Looking back on globalization, general growth, environmental crises and climate change, Dr Hauff recently questioned the ability of democracy to ensure sustainability to a sufficient degree. He closely interlinked notions of sustainability with human dignity. In my paper, I examine the connection global democracy – sustainability – human dignity and what it may mean for Eurasia during future generations.

Key words: Eurasia, democracy, human dignity, globalization, Brundtland Commission

We begin the second issue of *Eurasian Crossroads* with the introductory article, which is intended to highlight the now undeniable need for today's Eurasia to develop its own position on sustainability and the risks and constraints that go with it. Dr. Volker Hauff, at first Minister for Research and Technology, later Minister of Transport of the Federal Republic of Germany before German reunification, has posed the question: „Does democracy impede sustainability?“

In my contribution as Editor, I will outline an answer that I believe is the only reasonable way for policy makers in the Eurasian region of the twenty-first century to make development here truly sustainable. This requires a critical examination of traditional values, such as human rights and human dignity, as well as a more rational use of concepts such as nature and civilisation, closely linked habitats, but whose inner principles differ significantly.

The contribution of the former German Federal Minister for Research and Technology to the North Academy (Hauff 2020) sums up a development that could be described as a sacralisation of a highly incomplete material understanding of the world. And one must add: The understanding of what really distinguishes humans from animals has largely been lost in the short era in which machines have replaced animals that are gone now. This also applies to psychologists who grew up in urban environments, especially to medical professionals who do not understand that fetuses and newborns first have to go through those stages of evolution at a rapid pace that *homo sapiens* took when it finally separated from *homo erectus*, i.e. in a period of approximately 2 million years.

A look at a simple fact suffices: language as the decisive means of communication with the help of which the abstract knowledge is passed on, is not a human characteristic that can be inherited through genes. It is passed on culturally and contributes to the physical development and “programming” of the brain. And depending on the “culture” in which a biological substrate grows up, different “brains” arise.

The classification of the new concept of sustainability was developed in the Brundtland Report (World Commission On Environment and Development 1987), to which the author Volker Hauff (2020) refers: *Homo sapiens*, the human being par excellence, bears responsibility for the entire planet and life on it, but especially for the dignity of all subsequent human individuals, however different they may be.

When the Brundtland Report appeared in 1987, the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) had already published a comprehensive study of the global energy system at least five years earlier (Häfele et al. 1981). In the field of tension between the USA and the Soviet Union, a quantitative model of the world was developed for the first time between 1974 and 1980, which set human activities and needs in relation to nature and examined possible limits and opportunities for the further development.

Without being able to go into many postulates that arose from the report of the Brundtland Commission understood in a mere political sense, it is sufficient to concentrate

on the last sentence of Mr Hauff's remarks (Hauff 2020). It reads: **Can globalisation be shaped in such a way that the dignity of the people who come after us, is respected?**

This raises the question: What is human dignity? Is a person's dignity violated if he or she has to live his/her life without a bicycle, without a steam engine, even without a car with a combustion engine or, *horribile dictu*, without electricity? Is it "unworthy" to live in a dead zone without a cell phone?

Should we understand that people like Aristotle, Augustine, Luther, or Goethe had no dignity?

Further, the idea of future generations that would be related to the opportunities that our technical civilisation offers us today depending on the extent to which we understand and master it and its instruments, is preposterous. Any school dropout who buys a flight ticket says quite naturally: I'm going to Hamburg or somewhere else. He or she feels himself/herself like a pilot who had to learn and train for years. However, knowledge and skills that have been accumulated generations before are not a general good. There is no right to it, unless you acquire it by yourself, following the motto by Goethe „*What you inherit from your fathers, acquire it in order to own it.*“ The idea that any of the generations to come would have an innate right to a life that some of their ancestors could live is as illogical as it is unreal. It resembles the dream of the paradises located in some unattainable place.

In the 1983 lecture at the Episcopal Academy in Aachen, human civilisation was defined as an integral part of the global ecological system (Sassin 1980; 1983). Only such a classification provides the framework for values and possible behaviour. Even then it was already clear that our "Western" worldview, influenced by Christianity, only allows a special view of people and the world, of which we are an inseparable part. But the world of the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Hebrews and the Europeans, in which our values and ideas today are rooted, no longer exists. It was almost completely dissolved in about two generations.

From a scientific point of view, the largest part of „humanity,“ i.e. those who have become existentially dependent on the functioning of an artificially constructed, technical civilisation, moved to another planet from about the middle of the twentieth century onwards. There, different principles and laws prevail than in the small spatially limited and manageable niches of farmers, cattle breeders and nomads. The sacred values derived from „before this relocation“ should actually have long since been adapted to a fundamentally changed harsh new reality.

Our natural sense organs cannot grasp this new reality, because it is beyond their reach. Our perception is fundamentally changed because it has to be conveyed through systems whose principles an individual cannot even begin to realise. As "citizens," we depend on "sensors" and "imaging technologies" if we want to get an idea of the networked, foreign to us and globally extending livelihood on which we have become existentially dependent. In this sense, we have already mutated into **bio-technological hybrids**. Previously, *homo sapiens* was dependent merely on its natural senses.

This fact goes beyond the classical theories of biology, ethnology and even more so anthropology. The vast majority of people living today do not understand wherefore they exist. They do not exist because they were simply created and born. The fact that they and their parents had a chance to survive and reproduce, results from the few people living in the past who developed the steam engine, invented artificial fertilizers, made electricity usable, explored the world of bacteria and much more. It is thanks to those people that eight billion human beings can exist today and not just around one billion as in 1800, at the time of Napoleon.

The 1992 Conference in Rio missed a crucial point in this transformation of the human, namely demographic growth (Folke and Gunderson 2010). After the Apollo missions to the moon, a new, previously unimaginable look back at the planet Earth as a whole became possible. Then around four billion people lived on Earth. In 1900, at the time of our grandparents and great-grandparents, there were only two billion. While the delegates from 178 countries were talking about sustainability in Rio, there were already five billion people inhabiting the Earth - and that means in the sense of Mr Hauff - claimed the fruits of those who had learned to submit nature.

More than 2.5 billion have been added since that time, as many as there were before the Second World War. The biggest problem is that most of them are still below the biological threshold at which they can reproduce. Is it a part of human dignity to be able to reproduce freely and at will and then to burden the united world community with the responsibility to look after its children and grandchildren?

If one considers the consequences of the idea of developing the Third World for humanitarian reasons, then does this idea help to seriously investigate the question of how we see and classify our ancestors? Were those people underdeveloped who invented telescope and microscope, discovered bacteria and tried drugs against them, people who composed symphonies, wrote treatises, people who discovered the relativity of space and time, but who could not yet jet to southern beaches on a low-cost plane, in order to be able to live according to their archaic instincts there?

The idea of a democratic world in which everyone should be equal to each other and have the right to live according their wants and needs, is a dystopia. Globalisation and the right to a stable climate boil down to nothing less than the abolition of what distinguishes us from primitive hunters and gatherers, namely our property. And that is true not only in the material, but also in the spiritual sense. What consequences may the idea to protect the climate of a planet have? The fact that such an approach would ultimately mean a desire to permanently control the climate in the sense of human needs, is a taboo in modern social sciences.

If we do not succeed in moving the fundamental principle into the centre of our political consciousness, the principle that every right only arises from the fulfillment of duties, then we are probably drifting towards a social state what Thomas Hobbes already described in his *Leviathan*, into the state of „warre,“ that is, of general confusion and chaotic conditions in which everyone becomes the enemy of his neighbour. What else becomes apparent when

one considers the increasing number of failed states, civil wars and divisions, especially in the richest societies?

In view of what has changed since the supposed end of the Cold War, the only answer to the question formulated as a topic of Mr Hauff's essay „Does democracy impede sustainability?“ is „Yes, democracy as we wrongly understand it here, in the West, fundamentally excludes sustainability.“ There is not a slightest doubt that a view of today's world only briefly summarised here, is irritating. Nevertheless, if people do not learn to measure their ambitions against what everyone is actually capable of, but to treat each other with respect instead of wishing to „convert“ and „improve“ them, Eurasia will probably be put on the *Titanic II*, what Mr Hauff tacitly speaks about too.

After having pointed out at the beginning the necessity to develop, define and represent an independent position of Eurasians in order to reconcile the ideas of sustainability and human dignity, I invite the authors of the further contributions of issue 2 of *Eurasian Crossroads* to tackle this task.

Funding. This work did not receive any specific financing from any governmental, public, commercial, non-profit, community-based organisations or any other source.

Conflicts of interest. None declared.

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Author / Авторъ

Dr-Ing Wolfgang Sassin's teaching, research, advisory activities and affiliations included the Technical University of Vienna (Austria), the Research Centre Jülich (Germany), IIASA (Austria), the International Panel on Climate Change IPCC, the UN Program Habitat, the Directorate General on Research and Innovation of the European Commission (Belgium), and OEMs in the German automobile industry on man-machine interfaces.

Wolfgang Sassin,
Independent researcher,
Jochberg 5
6335 Thiersee
Austria

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