

EDITOR

Brigitte Bernard-Rau

# Sustainability Stories

The Power  
of Narratives to Understand  
Global Challenges



Springer

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*Editor*

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*To the unsung heroes of sustainability,  
the change agents working tirelessly in the shadows,  
determined to make the world a better place*

# Preface

2030 is widely recognized as a pivotal milestone within the frameworks of both the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change. These initiatives outline a comprehensive and interconnected agenda, establishing specific targets and deadlines across economic, social, and environmental domains to address global challenges. Addressing various sustainability issues such as poverty eradication, quality education, clean water and sanitation, climate action, gender diversity, and more, these frameworks underscore the need and urgency to find solutions.

In a notable trend, initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable and responsible action are steadily gaining momentum, demonstrating some level of success. The pressing grand challenge of climate change stands prominently at the forefront of global concerns, sparking extensive studies and analyses. Innovative forms of climate activism, including the emerging realm of digital climate activism, have emerged as dynamic tools that showcase how the relationship between business and society can be strengthened (Belotti et al., 2022; Fisher & Nasrin, 2020).

However, five years away from 2030, it becomes evident that progress is not being made at the speed or scale required. The urgency of addressing global challenges has never been more apparent as noted by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres: “We need to wake up—and get to work” (Guterres, 2023). The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing violent geopolitical conflicts, and natural disasters, from floods to earthquakes, further underscore the fragility of our interconnected world, testing our resilience as a global community.

In this era of polycrisis, characterized by extreme uncertainty, the need to solve societal grand challenges has become a top priority for both national and international entities (World Economic Forum, 2023). For instance, Gen Z and Millennials, concerned about their uncertain futures, are drawing attention to issues beyond climate change, including racial justice, mental health, work–life balance, the cost of living crisis, and inequality in general (Deloitte, 2023).

Increasingly, public organizations are turning to private organizations to drive meaningful change and to address a unique combination of challenges. One powerful avenue for transformative change involves tapping into the potential of financial markets. The landmark Paris Agreement dedicated to combatting the climate crisis establishes a foundation for redirecting investments toward sustainable, low-carbon initiatives. Similarly, the strategic European Green Deal recognizes the crucial role of the private sector in financing the transition toward a sustainable economy.

In recent years, the field of sustainable finance has therefore witnessed innovative strategies and collaborative efforts among various stakeholders, including financial institutions, governments, NGOs and corporations, among others. The attempt to reconcile the utilitarian approach of the financial markets with the need to solve major societal challenges has emerged as a key way forward. Responsible and sustainable investors promote explicit social and environmental agendas and serve as advocates for social and environmental needs. More specifically, impact investors have adopted an investment style that considers not only financial returns but also the social and environmental consequences of the allocation of their funds. Many policy makers see this investment approach as a source of hope and vision for the future (e.g., Logue & Grimes, 2022).

This is, however, a journey where each of us has a role to play. So, my question is this: How can we, as individuals, contribute efficiently to solving long-standing societal problems and effecting real change? And my proposition: Should not we consider new epistemological and ontological approaches, new codes of ethics, new altruistic ways of living, new imagined futures, and new narratives, to bring about real change (Beckert, 2016; Gabriel et al., 2022; Pelluchon, 2021)?

I embed my proposition in the idea of a purposeful, sustainable world in which human beings and their social and ecological concerns prevail. In their seminal book, *On Justification*, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]) refer to several “common worlds” that are in constant competition and experience situation of disputes. Among them, the “market” world is typically opposed to the “civic” world. The former emphasizes competition, efficiency, and

profit-making, contrasting with the latter, which focuses on equality, cooperation, and public interest. Boltanski and Thévenot claim that their “Economies of Worth” framework can, through “higher order principles” such as “common good” and “justice” resolve these tensions. This approach necessarily introduces ethical values into the relationship between financial and social commitments in terms of values and beliefs. It not only changes the current narrative around the opposition between two paradigms—profit maximization vs. social impact contribution—it goes beyond it by supporting the perspective of a post-materialistic world in a “new enlightenment” paradigm (Pelluchon, 2023).

The relationship with oneself and with others remains an essential notion for a just perception of the world, the world in all its complexity, but ethical, poetic, and real (Glissant, 1990, 1997, 1999; Ricoeur, 1992). There is, therefore, not only hope but an urgent need to reflect, discuss, and propose, together with a reformulation of the SDGs, a profound reorientation of traditional material assumptions based on targets, metrics and performance indicators, by introducing normative and ethical assumptions and integrating future-oriented visions for the common good. This should not be a mere ideal, but the result of concrete, direct, tangible actions aimed at establishing the foundations for a future full of hope in which all human beings can flourish (Pelluchon, 2023).

The contributors to this edited volume answer this call for action by pursuing individual and collaborative efforts that lay the groundwork for an optimistic future for humanity. They navigate the complex web of issues threatening our world and proactively engage to drive meaningful social change. In their narratives, the authors show how governments, businesses, investors, and individuals must work together to create an ecosystem that rewards responsible practices, encourages innovation, and accelerates the transition to a more sustainable future. The clock is ticking, but it is through collective and individual commitment that we can bring about lasting positive social change.

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# Acknowledgments

The completion of “Sustainability Stories” is a testament to the wonderful support and dedication of countless individuals who have contributed their time, knowledge, and inspiration. This collection of narratives on sustainability-related topics has been a labor of love, dedication, and relentless determination and I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who made this project possible.

First and foremost, I extend my sincere appreciation to my fellow authors whose distinctive and authentic voices have shown how sustainability manifests itself in our daily lives. Through their narratives, they have shed light on how they are confronting and navigating the multifaceted implications of the social and environmental challenges of our era, enriching the understanding of readers.

A special appreciation also goes to those who introduced me to some of these authors: Sandrine Benattar, Franky de Cooman, Jean Martin Herbecq, Anna Kaschke, Beatrice King, Nicole Lappe, Pascal Léger, Karmele Fernández de Larrea, Christine Taylor, Flora Balet-Schnerring, and Janice Vogel. Your trust and enthusiasm helped me bring this collected work to fruition.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Beatrice King and Janine Kaiser, the two graphic and layout designers, as well as to all the copy editors, whose meticulous work ensured the quality and visual appeal of this collective work. Thank you for your invaluable support.

At Springer, I wish to thank Prashanth Mahagaonkar and Ruth Milewski for making this book project possible. There is nothing like having a dedicated team at a professional publishing house.

To my husband Christian, your unwavering support and encouragement have sustained me through the challenges and triumphs of this endeavor. Your

belief in the importance of sharing these narratives with a wide audience and in my ability to contribute to the field of sustainability has been a constant source of motivation and inspiration throughout this project.

I must here also express my deep gratitude to my mother, Marie, who instilled in me the values of empathy, responsibility, and stewardship from a young age. Your legacy of caring for the vulnerable ones in our world has been an invisible but driving force behind this collection.

Lastly, to all the pioneers and role models in the field of sustainability who paved the way for the work we continue to do. Your dedication and vision have provided a foundation upon which we can build a more sustainable future. Thank you.

## About the Book

The idea of collecting narratives for this book originated from a spontaneous desire to connect with sustainability-minded individuals and encourage them to share their knowledge with a broader audience. Terms such as sustainability, sustainable development, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and ESG (environment, social and governance) have become prevalent in public discourse, politics, media, marketing, and advertising. However, few grasp the wide and complex issues these terms encompass. While numerous books and articles exist on sustainability and CSR, to the best of my knowledge, none uses a narrative approach to reach a broader public.

Amid the global spread of COVID-19 in 2020, I took the opportunity to contact friends and colleagues, inviting them to join me in writing a collective book on sustainability, sustainable development, business ethics, CSR, ESG issues, and sustainable finance, sharing short sustainability stories. Many welcomed the idea and contributed with their stories to help build a more informed sustainable world.

In this collective book, artists, entrepreneurs, lawyers, professors, sustainability experts, and change advocates from all over the world share their observations, suggestions, and solutions for a sustainable future. These unheard voices, very active in their fields, will inspire readers of all backgrounds, young or old, educated or not, from the North or the South hemisphere, to care for our planet and society at large. Driven by optimism and determination to bring about change in society, they will edify readers on a series of sustainability issues, acting as communicators of vision, connectors, or responsible leaders.

I believe that sharing the sustainability stories of this book with a broader audience can help better understand and tackle the complex grand challenges of our times. By leveraging the power of storytelling, these stories contribute to a more compassionate, environmentally aware, and collectively responsible world. They can empower managers seeking to make a difference in their organizations and also influence us, individually, to adopt a prosocial behavior. It is my sincere hope that these stories will resonate deeply within the hearts and minds of every reader and challenge us all to

contribute to an enjoyable, equitable, and sustainable world. In fact, I truly believe that every individual, regardless of background, can contribute to make the world a better place. Reflection and sharing are exceptionally powerful ways to connect us and inspire change through personal experiences. These narratives demonstrate that with passion, determination, and a genuine desire to create a more harmonious world, together, we can drive positive change and transform the world.

The book categorizes the sustainability stories into four main parts: (1) Calling for Change—in Theory and In Practice, (2) Exploring Environmental and Social Challenges, (3) Addressing Governance and Financial Matters, and (4) Art as a Driver for Transformation.

In an age where good news is scarce, these stories remind us that it is the heart and the mind that can make the most profound impact on people and the planet.

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## About the Editor

**Brigitte Bernard-Rau** is a sustainability expert, lecturer and researcher at the Chair of Management and Sustainability at the University of Hamburg in Germany. She teaches sustainable finance with a focus on impact investing, environmental, social, and governance (ESG) issues, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) to Bachelor and Master students. A French native, born and raised in the French West Indies (Martinique and Guadeloupe), Brigitte has extensive international experience in business corporations, transnational public administrations, and not-for-profit organizations. Thriving in multicultural environments, she enjoys establishing connections with positive and inspiring individuals.

Firmly believing in the synergy between knowledge and action, Brigitte dedicates herself to initiatives promoting sustainability awareness and driving significant social change. Her motto, “Better Be Responsible,” fuels her aspirations for a more harmonious, equitable, and respectful world. With an ultimate vision of progress built on shared understanding and cooperative efforts for the common good, Brigitte aims to inform the public about global societal challenges sharing observations, studies, suggestions, and innovative solutions from sustainability-minded actors of society and change advocates.

Brigitte’s interest in the field of sustainability was sparked during her tenure at the nonfinancial rating agency oekom research AG (now ISS-ESG) in Munich, Germany, where she worked as an ESG analyst. This experience deepened her understanding of the importance of thorough assessments and precise evaluations of companies and countries from social and environmen-

tal standpoints for a sustainable future. Brigitte conducted extensive research on the role of social rating agencies, culminating in the successful defense of her Ph.D. thesis in management sciences at Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. The title of her thesis is “Better Be Responsible—The Impact of Social Ratings on Bringing about Change in Organizations.”

Brigitte has a diverse academic background, including graduate studies in English, Spanish, and International Business Development from Novancia Business School in Paris, France, and an LL.M. in European and Comparative Law from the University Carlos III in Madrid, Spain. She worked as an international business development executive in Paris and Madrid and served as a public procurement officer at the European Commission in Brussels, Belgium, overseeing contracts and financing at the External Aid General Directorate for Latin America. Brigitte is fluent in English, French, German, and Spanish.

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# Part I

Calling for Change: In Theory and  
in Practice



# 1

## Ecology as New Enlightenment

Corine Pelluchon

### The Reversal of Reason into Irrationality and the Scheme of Domination

The COVID-19 pandemic and the threat of collapse due to climate change and the erosion of biodiversity point to the aberrations of a development model that is based on the unlimited exploitation of natural resources and other living beings. More than ever, it appears necessary to reorient the economy in order to put it at the service of people and the preservation of the common world.

To understand why ecological transition is a chance for re-initiating a civilizational process, we must explain the reversal of progress into regression, of rationalism into irrationality. A double amputation of reason explains its degradation. First, during late modernity, that is, after the eighteenth century, rationalism became instrumental and gave rise to the era of quantification. Whereas reason in Kant or Rousseau was viewed as the most appropriate way to develop a common project, it gradually became an instrument at the service of individual desires. By being cut off from truth, reason was reduced to

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C. Pelluchon (✉)

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calculation. It lost its moral dimension as well as its capacity to distinguish the just and the unjust and could support the most barbaric and disproportionate enterprises. The second amputation of reason is more ancient since it is a consequence of the radical separation between civilization and nature that is specific to the Western world. It underpins the will to master inherited from the Enlightenment, and we realize today that it could lead to the ruin of our civilization.

The global crisis to which we are confronted is a crisis of reason. The latter is trapped in the net of domination, which is exercised over others and nature, but is also rooted in the rejection of our vulnerability and in the repression of our carnal condition. This largely explains our obsession for control and our contempt for other living beings.

This process of self-destruction of reason and civilization is not a fatality. However, to interrupt it, we need to identify its mechanisms and characterize what we call the Scheme of Domination. A Scheme is the organizing principle of a society. It is made up of all the conscious and unconscious representations that guide our economic, social, and political choices and also determines our values and desires as well as our behavior (Pelluchon, 2021: 98–100). The Scheme of Domination transforms everything (agriculture, husbandry, politics) into war. It elicits an attitude of predation toward nature and other living creatures and turns techniques into ends that are disconnected from any civilizational purposes. When we are aware of the Scheme of Domination, we understand the connections between apparently distinct phenomena, such as totalitarianism and capitalism, the destruction of nature and the exploitation of other human beings, animal abuse, and our inability to coexist with people who are different from us. This awareness prevents us from limiting ourselves to the mere denunciation of a single economic or political system and helps us to decolonize our imaginary.

It therefore becomes clear that positioning ecology at the center of public policies not only implies combatting global warming and the erosion of biodiversity. The required changes in our modes of production and lifestyles depend on a radical questioning of our representations and our relationship with other living beings. So, what makes ecology an emancipation project and the translation, in terms of public policy, of a new Enlightenment? What enables the latter to lay the foundations of a common project which, while being radically ecological and avoiding the pitfalls of the hegemonic universalism of the past, also strengthens the fundamental principles of the Enlightenment, namely autonomy, democracy, and the idea that there is one humanity and one planet?

## Eco-phenomenology as the Foundation for a New Social Contract

Ecology cannot be reduced to its environmental dimension, which is mostly associated with the fight against global warming. It entails a social dimension linked to the organization of work and the fair allocation of resources and has a subjective meaning (Guattari, 2000). More precisely, ecology is the wisdom or the rationality of our habitation of the Earth and our cohabitation with others, human and non-human. Thus, it is part of our existence.

An inquiry into human existence that takes our carnal and earthly condition seriously highlights our dependence on nature and other human and non-human beings. As a consequence, ecology is a major component of ethics and politics. We can no longer ground the political association upon an atomistic and abstract subject, considered only in light of freedom conceived as the ability to make choices and to change them. The phenomenological description of eating, dwelling, living in a place, and being co-residents with other humans and animals leads to an eco-phenomenology which shows that the subject is always relational and dependent on natural and cultural things that nourish his or her life, giving it meaning and flavor. This philosophy of corporeality provides the foundation for a new political theory. The goals of the State are not only security between people and the reduction of unfair inequalities. The protection of the finite biosphere, the alleviation of animal suffering, the concern for future generations, and the consideration of all the dimensions that enable us to flourish frame a new social contract (Pelluchon, 2019a: 254–262).

Ethics defines my ability to make room for others, be they human or non-human, present and future. Additionally, justice supposes that my right to use whatever is good for my own preservation is not only limited by my fellow citizens. The impact of our lifestyles and activities on future generations and other cultures, the respect of the ethological norms and the subjectivity of animals, and the attention to the irreversible nature of certain technologies are to be taken into account by laws and public policies. Thus, the declaration of human rights which is based on the individual moral agent is no longer sufficient to guarantee equity, justice, and peace in the present ecological, technological, and demographical context. Moreover, globalization and our ecological footprint have changed the structure of our responsibility because we may unintentionally inflict damage on unborn beings and on people we never encounter. This is why the 2015 Universal Declaration of Humankind Rights proposed at the Paris Climate Summit in 2015 complements the former philosophy of human rights by proclaiming the right of humanity and of

all living species to exist and live in a healthy environment and describes our duties to preserve the common goods. (<http://droitshumanite.fr/>).

These criteria of justice can provide guidance both at the individual and collective level. They are not values but structures of existence that proceed from the phenomenological description of the human being considered in his geographical, social, and technological environment and in his interactions with other forms of life. Phenomenology then offers an alternative to relativism, but also to the abstract and hegemonic universalism of the past Enlightenment, which has been accused by postmodernism of hiding behind so-called general principles to impose a model of civilization. Thinking about our carnal and earthly condition restores the ideal unity of humanity while recognizing the diversity of cultures. Everyone can admit the validity of these principles, which stress the centrality of ecology. However, even if they are universalizable, their application must be contextualized and put to a debate. Public policies cannot be the product of arrogant reasoning that seeks to impose fixed conceptions of good and evil, just and unjust, in a vertical and homogeneous manner. The universalism constructed here is in context and lateral: it is not the result of an overarching reason but is nourished by multiple perspectives on the world (Pelluchon, 2021: 72; Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

However, acknowledging that the duties of the State entail an extension of the common good to other generations, other cultures, and other species is still insufficient. We are only halfway there. In fact, everyone knows what is wrong and numerous reports and discourses explain how to concretely execute the ecological transition. Yet, few people are changing their lifestyles and most governments still opt for an extractivist and productivist model or support intensive livestock farming. In addition, the ecological transition appears as a burden from which everyone tries to escape. The current challenge is therefore to bridge the gap between theory and practice, awareness and action, and to make the ecological transition a stimulating project. Does the current pandemic, by highlighting the counterproductive nature of our development model in environmental, health, economic, and social terms, provide an opportunity for a profound reshaping of our representations and a change of scheme that could lead to an ecological realignment?

## **The Emancipatory Strength of Ecology and the Scheme of Consideration**

In order to respect planetary limits and other living beings, we must overcome the separation between nature and civilization and the narrow anthropocentrism in which we have been brought up. Today, ecology is at the center

of the reflexive attitude that defines Enlightenment, which is the ability to relate critically to the present in order to define its challenges and to meet them. We need to know what has to be preserved and what has to be abandoned. In other words, we must initiate a civilizational *epoché*.<sup>1</sup> Admitting the aberrations of our model of development, which testifies to the irrationality of our dwelling on Earth, obliges us to examine our practices in agriculture, trade, urbanism, and health care one by one. It also implies freeing ourselves from the prejudices and ways of beings that support our predatory attitude toward nature and encourage our addiction to consumption. By combatting the ideas and attitudes responsible for the radical separation between nature and culture and for the denial of the community of vulnerability that unites us with others, human and non-human, we can gradually dismantle the Scheme of Domination and make room for other forms of life and culture.

Ecology is an emancipatory force, because it is impossible to respect nature and other living beings while continuing to conceive oneself as an empire within an empire. Ecology which involves the respect of planetary boundaries in our ways of producing and consuming presupposes the acceptance of our own limits. The latter are primarily related to our carnal and earthly condition, our vulnerability and finitude, but they also refer to our fallibility and to the fact that our knowledge is always limited. Ecology therefore implies humility, without which we cannot cooperate with others or institute the common good. To operate the ecological transition, we ought to carefully formulate what risks not to run and have a cautious response to the unexpected events emerging from the interactions of humans with their environment and technologies. Ecology is the political translation of the Scheme of Consideration, for which individual creativity and the preservation of the common world are the two main criteria of justice (Pelluchon, 2021:141–148). These criteria impose to invest in specific areas of research and to refuse technologies and products that can degrade the conditions of life of other beings or cause our own extinction.

Consideration means recognizing the value of things and beings, in order to make good use of them or to treat them with respect. It is based on an experience of something that is incommensurable: the common world (Pelluchon, 2019b:106–115) The latter welcomes me at my birth and will survive my individual death. It is made up of generations and encompasses the living and the cultural and technological heritage. The awareness of

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<sup>1</sup> E. Husserl defines *epoché* as the first operation of phenomenology understood as a way to accomplish the Enlightenment, whose spiritual figure is Socrates. *Epoché* means that we put into brackets the “natural attitude” which is characterized by a certain dogmatism, leading people to believe that their representations are reality and to naively adhere to them.

belonging to a world which is older and larger than ourselves gives depth to our existence and makes us feel the bond which unites us with other living beings. It transforms our desires to the point that we have pleasure in consuming less – and in a different way. The desire to transmit a habitable world becomes a concrete motivation of our actions. Living means “living from” natural and cultural things, “living with” others, be they human and non-human, and “living for,” that is, having the common world as the horizon of one’s thoughts and actions. To eat, work, produce, or create a company, having in mind the preservation of the common world, and respecting the dignity and creativity of people contributes to a development model based on the Scheme of consideration.

This scheme corresponds to an enlargement of the self at several levels, ranging from civic-mindedness to a commitment to the protection of other living beings. It actually answers the aspirations of many individuals who are convinced that the current development model is outdated and would like to find meaning and conviviality in all aspects of their lives. The growing interest manifested by numerous people for the environment and the fate of animals are the harbingers of the age of the living. Gradually substituting the Scheme of Domination for the Scheme of Consideration to guide our social, economic, and political choices would enable us to build a common project that responds to these aspirations instead of disappointing them and nurturing resentment and racism, hatred of reason, and rejection of democracy. Therefore, ecology is at the center of the new Enlightenment, which goes hand in hand with a form of humanism that is based on the recognition of our carnal and earthly condition upon which our responsibility toward others, human and non-human, is grounded.

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