CHRISTOPH WULF[1]

The Dispute about the Future: Anthropocene and Sustainability as a Challenge

ABSTRACT

The upcoming transformations of today's societies into sustainable societies pose numerous problems. To avoid the destruction of the foundations of life in the Anthropocene, a profound social and cultural transformation encompassing all areas of life is required. To know how this can be accomplished requires extensive research and knowledge, the reliability of which plays an important role. The more open and diverse the global world becomes, the more difficult it is to determine which facts are important and what consequences can be drawn from them for human action. Instead of a reflexive approach to the results of scientific research, today one often encounters a populist approach to science. Its results are used to support preconceived opinions. One is not interested in new findings but aims at the disparagement of people of other opinions and their hateful insult. A destructive division of society is the result of the debates that are so important for the future of humanity.

Keywords:
Anthropocene, sustainability, globalization, facts, truth, populism, grand narrative, utopia.

What are facts? Colloquially, it seems easy to answer this question. On a well-known talk show, for example, a fact checking is offered as a solution to contentious dispute. But are we really capable of doing so? What do we mean by facts and by factuality? If we take a closer look, it becomes clear that these questions are by no means easy to answer. In philosophical anthropology it was assumed

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1   The Department of Education and Psychology, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany.
E-MAIL: chrwulf@zedat.fu-berlin.de

that animals are only capable of grasping an "environment" determined by their instincts and varying from species to species. Because of early birth and their residual instinctual endowment, humans are able to grasp the "world" in a perception not determined by instincts (Wulf, 2013a). In the meantime, however, it has been recognized that the comprehension of the "world" is also species-specific or anthropomorphic. In the case of the human being this perception is determined not only by the physiological conditions of the body, but also by history and culture, which are also constitutive for the human perception. How the "reality" preceding the human perception and understanding of the world looks like, the human being does not know either. For the understanding of nature, the world and the self is related to anthropological prerequisites.

How we deal with the challenges of the Anthropocene and which forms of sustainability we find as answers is bound to the anthropogenic, historically and culturally shaped possibilities of our perception and processing of the preceding "reality". In the disputes about differentiated perception and interpretation, which are therefore also unavoidable regarding the Anthropocene, it is a question of how we assess the scientific facts obtained in this regard and which consequences for action we draw from them. How do we understand the human situation and what value do we ascribe to the data, facts and arguments collected by scientific methods to grasp it (Wulf, 2003; Michaels & Wulf, 2020)? The spectrum of engagement ranges from data collection to the construction of facts to scientifically based arguments and their reflexive review and critique. The value of these efforts can also be completely negated; then it gives rise to populist, slanderous rhetoric with rants of anger and hatred in which there is no reference to scientific knowledge. In view of this situation of humanity, new forms of transdisciplinary and transcultural knowledge are required, for the generation of which recourse to known and anticipation of unknown knowledge are necessary.

The example of the term 'facticity' can be used to show how wide the spectrum of meaning of terms is and how important it is to specify the meaning of the terms used. What is called facticity can be determined by different elements, values, and points of view, so that the term has different meanings. In everyday usage, facticity means 'factuality', 'demonstrability', 'givenness of a thing or a state of affairs'. In a philosophical interpretation, following the existentialism of Heidegger (2010) and Sartre (2001), facticity can also denote being thrown into the world as a fact or basic condition of human existence, out of which only everything else arises. This perspective emphasizes the defenselessness and powerlessness of human beings and develops a perspective that is important for understanding the Anthropocene. From the perspective of historical anthropology and cultural anthropology, nec-

essary additions are needed. These consist in a concretization of the existential situation through an analysis and interpretation of the respective historical and cultural conditions. Their spectrum ranges from general conditions characteristic of an epoch or culture to the singular features that distinguish every human being from every other (Reckwitz, 2017; Gebauer & Rücker, 2019). These conditions include the structures of globalization and the effects of the Anthropocene that are characteristic of our situation today.

FACTS AS INDICATORS OF TRUTH

In general, facts are regarded as a means of verifying the truth content of statements. They are regarded as assured knowledge that is supposed to facilitate the decision as to which a view or interpretation is correct in disputed issues. But it is not that simple. The word 'fact' derives from the Latin *facere*, which means 'to make' or 'to produce'. What is considered secure knowledge in this context is a man-made product that by no means offers the assumed certainty. Facts are products of human history and culture and differ according to the historical and cultural contexts in which they arise. They are anthropomorphic, that is, products of man, generated in the manner of man. Worldview, language, imagination, and performativity play a central role in the generation of facts (Huppauf & Wulf, 2009; Wulf, 2013b, 2022a). Produced by humans, facts are relative, criticizable, and changeable.

In the positivism controversy of the 1960s, the question of what constitutes a fact played an important role (Adorno et al., 1976; Wulf, 2003; Wiggershaus, 1986). The representatives of positivism and critical rationalism emphasized the possibility of being able to grasp the truth content of social facts through basic propositions and their relative freedom from value judgments. In their view, there was a close connection between information content and verifiability, and explanatory power and factual provability. The more often theories and facts are confirmed by repetition, the more they prove themselves and can claim validity. This assumption differs from the view of critical rationalism, in whose framework theories of medium scope are valid only if they cannot be falsified. Theories are thus considered valid if attempts to falsify them fail.

The question of how theories, facts and knowledge come about, how the presuppositions made in the process affect the generation of the facts, is not regarded by positivism and critical rationalism as part of science but is rejected as extrascientific. Thus, science is largely reduced to methodology. In contrast, the repre-

sentatives of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School insist on the importance of the origin context and utilization for the quality and understanding of theories and the facts constructed with their help. They emphasize the importance of these contexts for the development of theories and conceive this knowledge as part of science. To ensure their validity, Niklas Luhmann (2001) suggested, that the validity of scientific knowledge should be ensured not only by the quality of the arguments, but also by the legitimacy of the process.

In the positivism controversy it becomes clear: depending on the presuppositions, different conceptions of what counts as scientifically established facts are possible. This is also evident in the case of globalization in the Anthropocene. Depending on cultural, social, and political preconditions, different assessments of facts, theories, and arguments occur. Accepting this and taking it into account in disputes about the validity of knowledge regarding globalization and the Anthropocene is an expression of scientific honesty (Resina & Wulf, 2019; Michaels & Wulf, 2020). In the remainder of this paper, we will show how this interpretive system "Anthropocene and sustainability" claims validity by incorporating extensive research. Reflection and criticism of individual facts and the feasibility of sustainable development also belong in this context. These critical-constructive reflections are fundamentally different from the hate and rage rhetoric of those who do not want to acknowledge the current undesirable developments. Their rhetoric is not aimed at correcting facts, but merely at reducing complex interrelationships that are difficult to understand, at defensiveness and hostility.

GLOBALIZATION

A central feature of globalization in the Anthropocene is the simultaneity of the unequal. In the societies of the northern hemisphere, many people are in prosperity, but in the regions of the southern hemisphere, they are in poverty and hardship. Contemporary people live in different historical times and cultures and in clashing inequalities. They participate in global processes in which equalization and differentiation, adaptation and resistance occur simultaneously, and in which the equalization of life chances while maintaining cultural diversity is the task (Wulf, 2022a, 2022b). What is referred to as globalization is determined by the interaction of multidimensional factors and the complexity resulting from them (Wulf & Merkel, 2003; Wulf & Weigand, 2011; Wulf, 2013a). This arises from the fact that, on the one hand, globalization is used to describe developments that have long determined the structures of the international system. On the other hand, it

also refers to changes that are taking place today with great intensity and express expectations for the future, the realization of which is possible but not certain.

The processes of globalization are based on structures that have emerged in long historical processes, which to this day favor some developments and make others difficult or even impossible. These structures include: the conquest of America, Africa, Australia, and large parts of Asia by Europeans, the colonization of these continents, the spread of imperialism in the name of nationalism and capitalism, the division of the international system into a first, second, third, and fourth world. After the phase of national-liberal capitalism, the following emerge in the European countries: parliamentary democracies, a social system that curbs the excesses of capitalism, including growing educational opportunities for more and more people.

These developments are not linear; they are multifaceted and produce contradictory results. They are organized in networks, like rhizomes with different objectives and decision-making structures; they do not proceed at the same time and space and are subject to heterogeneous dynamics (Wulf, 2016; Latour, 1999). They are multidimensional and multiregional but take their starting point in the centers of neoliberal capitalism. Many of these developments produce destructive effects characteristic of the Anthropocene (Wulf, 2022b). Negative developments include, for example, climate change, the destruction of biodiversity, the destruction of non-renewable energies, but also the restriction of legal security, the spread of new forms of poverty, crime, and hardship. The crucial question is: Which forms, and processes of globalization are destructive and which are positive and desirable, i.e., sustainable, and how can we succeed in contributing to their realization? Globalization is understood as an ambivalent process, in principle open to the future, in whose development many people participate. Since the difference between the processes of globalization and the processes of shaping local life-worlds (*Lebenswelten*) requires different competencies for action, a co-design of these processes by many different people is necessary.

Education should enable people to deal with these conflict formations and to work towards a common sustainable future for humanity. Although education must face the demands resulting from social, economic, and political developments, it must not be reduced to the fulfillment of these demands. It must be understood as a value in itself and as a lifelong process. It must be flexible and consider the diversity and heterogeneity of the world and its regions (Wulf, 2016, 2020). What is required is the development of a society in which lifelong learning takes place for all people, but in different forms. Learning should relate to human coexistence and contribute to shaping it constructively and in a spirit of peace. Mutual understand-

ing is to be promoted and the ability to shape one's life productively developed. Within the framework of "Global Citizenship Education", racism, nationalism, xenophobia, and human rights violations are combated (Wintersteiner & Wulf, 2018; Bernecker & Grätz, 2018).

ANTHROPOCENE OR THE AGE OF HUMANKIND

Globalization can be understood as the engine of the Anthropocene. It accelerates and intensifies all criticized developments. At the same time, the Anthropocene provides the conditions necessary for globalization (Wulf, 2020, 2022b; Wallenhorst & Wulf, 2021, 2022; Federau, 2017). What are the main characteristics of the Anthropocene? Four phases can be distinguished: the first phase with its beginning about 12,000 years ago, in which humans become sedentary and develop animal husbandry and agriculture; the second phase determined by the invention of the steam engine by James Watt in 1773 and industrialization; the third phase, which extends to the present and is characterized by: global warming, the discovery of atomic energy and the production of about 15,000 atomic and hydrogen bombs, the digitalization – with Internet, robotics and artificial intelligence, the entanglement between human body and machine (*cyborg*), genetic research – with the discovery of DNA, cloning and stem cell research, which recently attempts to create human body parts in the bodies of animals, environmental pollution and destruction, the annual production of 400 million tons of plastic, the invention of hundreds of thousands of artificial materials, the destruction of biodiversity, the destruction of nonrenewable energies.

According to a UN report for the millennium, 12% of bird species, 23% of mammals, 25% of conifers, 32% of amphibians are endangered (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005, p. 35). According to WWF documents, the population of marine species decreased by 49% between 1970 and 2012 (Tanzer et al., 2015, p. 16).

The fourth phase of the Anthropocene is characterized by the global community trying to counteract its destructive conditions. At the UN General Assembly in New York in 2015, the representatives of the global community adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which humanity must work to achieve to overcome the negative situation of the Anthropocene. The 2030 Agenda emphasizes the interdependencies between the goals and the central areas of development marked by five "Ps": "people" (poverty and hunger, life in dignity, equality, healthy environment), "planet" (protection of ecosystems), "peace" (inclusion, peace, justice), "prosperity" (well-being of all people through economic and technical development), and "partnership" (cooperation). The realization of these

tasks should be guided by the principles of universality, indivisibility, inclusion, accountability and partnership (Bundesregierung, 2021; Kress et al., 2021; Wulf, 2022b; Wallenhorst & Wulf, 2021, 2022).

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In the realization of this turning point in local, regional, and global development, education and socialization play a central role. All 17 sustainable education goals need the support of education for their acceptance by the next generation and their realization. If this is lacking, realization of the goals is hardly possible. The fourth goal explicitly calls for *inclusive, equal, high-quality, lifelong education.* In terms of content, the goal is to support young people in developing future-oriented thinking and action. What is required is the ability to deal with risks and uncertainty, to act in a socially and ethically competent manner, to think reflexively and critically, and to be responsible and show solidarity. Education for sustainable development envisions the establishment of a twelve-year public school system. Compulsory education is to last nine years and include free, high-quality education at the primary and secondary levels. Inclusive here means not only the inclusion of disabled but also marginalized children and youth. Equality of access and treatment in education are necessary consequences. Especially for girls and women, there is still work to be done in many regions of the world. To promote the knowledge and creativity of children and young people, the quality of education must be improved, including through changes in teacher training and curriculum development. Finally, the promotion of education and training must not be limited to the school system. Vocational training and lifelong learning should be developed, and informal and non-formal education should be promoted. 4–6% of the gross domestic product or 15–20% of public spending should be allocated to education. As a result of the Corona crisis, the global financial requirement for this has risen to $200 billion.

The German Sustainability Strategy 2021 further develops the measures for Germany that were already drafted in the National Action Plan, which was adopted by the National Platform on Education for Sustainable Development in 2017. The National Action Plan was jointly developed by more than 300 representatives from the federal government, the states, local authorities, civil society, and academia and includes 130 short-, medium- and long-term goals that are being worked to achieve. Together with the *Conference of Ministers for Arts and Culture* (KMK), the *Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development* (BMZ) is implementing numerous projects in schools, universities, and vocational training. The

new measures developed by the 2021 Sustainability Strategy for Germany build on this work.

A central field of work in Germany is education, upbringing, and care in early childhood. Here, the federal government is providing the states and municipalities with 5.5 billion euros by 2022, which will be used to create more than 450,000 additional childcare places. A further 90,000 new childcare places will be created in daycare centers. Another area of work is in the field of education and care in schools. Here, more than 5 billion euros will be made available for the expansion of digitization. The area of vocational training is also receiving sustained support, for example with the "Vocational Training for Sustainable Development" (ESF) program. Also, important areas of education for sustainable development are higher education, continuing education, non-formal and informal education, inclusive education, and technology-specific skills development.

SUSTAINABILITY AS A "GRAND NARRATIVE"

As necessary as these efforts are to ameliorate the threatening situation of the Anthropocene through systematic strategic action, doubts are warranted as to whether it will be possible to realize the necessary changes. Is not the vision of sustainable development and a corresponding education for sustainability a "grand narrative" in François Lyotard's sense, whose function is to hide the fact that the necessary changes cannot be realized (Lyotard, 1986)? Such a vision already offers a certain degree of "satisfaction". It suggests that something has been improved with the 2030 Action Program and the 2021 Sustainability Strategy, that we now know more precisely what needs to be done and are beginning to act accordingly. It is possible that this insight already relieves many people of the need to act in a truly sustainable manner. It is true that the sustainability strategy attempts to translate the "grand narrative" into a change in society and to evaluate its realization. Nevertheless, the question remains open as to what extent this will happen to the necessary extent in view of the extensive social resistance.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS UTOPIA

An analysis of the great utopias of European history can be helpful for an assessment of whether the objectives of sustainable development and education related to it are realizable: Plato's *Republic* (Plato, 1958), Campanella's *Sunshine State*

(Campanella, 2009), Thomas More's *Utopia* (More, 1967). The series could be continued. In each of the utopias mentioned, the focus is on the idea of an ideal community. It shows what would be possible if people were not as they are and if utopias could be realized without unforeseen side effects. All utopias tend to limit the diversity and contradictoriness of human life in favor of a social order that is considered good. It is true that the desired utopia of sustainable development is more diverse than all previous utopias. But would its realization not also lead to problematic restrictions of individual basic rights? Even if such restrictions could be justified by the destructive conditions of the Anthropocene that endanger the future of humankind, the question arises to what extent such restrictions are still compatible with human rights. Would not such attempts at reform be in danger, as Horkheimer and Adorno made clear in reference to the "Dialectic of Enlightenment", of "turning into the opposite of their intention" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972)?

POPULISM AND HATE SPEECH

Doubts about the viability of the "sustainability" narrative and about the unintended side effects of this utopia that limit human diversity and freedom are important moments of a critical approach to the Anthropocene and attempts to explore, classify, and reduce its negative effects. In addition to these reflexive arguments and critical assessments, today one increasingly encounters expressions of anger and hate rhetoric that deny the negative effects of human behavior in the Anthropocene. Instead of dealing with the problems in a way that endangers the future of the planet and humanity, anger and hatred are directed against people who address these destructive developments through research, arguments, and political action. Much confirmed findings are devalued with crude conspiracy theories. Often, scientists, politicians, and activists even become targets of hatred as people.

In many populist groups there is a strong increase in aggression. Truth plays no role as a regulative idea. It is replaced by rhetoric linked to political intentions and based on moods, with the help of which attempts are made to gain the support of as many people as possible. Gaining influence and power is the goal. To this end, a contrast is often created between "elites" and "people", with populists claiming to be the "voice of the people" and to represent their true interests. This is often accompanied by the reduction of complex contexts to buzzword-like terms, the invocation of "common sense", and an anti-intellectualism. In view of the globally increasing uncertainty, simple solutions to problems are propagated with

defamatory accusations of guilt. These pronouncements are particularly evident in the areas of climate change and migration. Regardless of facts and findings, a baseless defensiveness is propagated, replacing unambiguity and catchiness with simplification and deliberate distortion.

On social media, hate speech is taking on disturbing proportions. As a result of this increase, many people who feel threatened by the conditions of the Anthropocene do not (or no longer) perceive the opportunities for exchanging political opinions that are in principle given to them in these media. Hate speech and "shit-storms" on the Internet are not about communicating different views and opinions. The aim is to devalue and insult people with different views. Hostile feelings, defamation, and threats against critics of the negative effects of the Anthropocene and proponents of sustainable development are generated from fictitious positions. Hatred and anger are generated by being unrestrainedly opposed to facts and arguments. The truth of objections and criticisms does not matter. Great is the gain of identifying an enemy whose arguments and attitudes are unsettling. He is to be "put down" and in doing so to have the opportunity to come together in a group of like-minded people and to reinforce each other. Facts, arguments, well-founded knowledge play no role in the intensity of one's own feelings.

OUTLOOK

The upcoming transformations of today's societies into sustainable societies pose numerous problems. The starting point is the dangerous impact of industrialization and modernization. To avoid the destruction of the foundations of life in the Anthropocene, a profound social and cultural transformation encompassing all areas of life is required. To know how this can be accomplished requires, among other things, extensive research and knowledge, the reliability of which plays an important role (Michael & Wulf, 2020). The more open and diverse the global world becomes, the more difficult it is to determine which facts are important and what consequences can be drawn from them for human action. Scientifically obtained facts require the willingness to examine what their presuppositions are and how, in view of them, non-knowledge must be dealt with. Facts are constructions whose validity must be continuously checked. This applies to empirical knowledge as well as to theoretical constructions. Scientific knowledge arises in a historical and cultural context that is changing and whose changes challenge critical reflection. Sustainability and education for sustainable development are answers to the threat

posed by humans to the future of the planet. To what extent, however, it will be possible to realize the necessary radical changes is an open question.

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