

Standing on Mount Lu

How Economics Has Come to Dominate Our View of Culture and Sustainability – and Why It Shouldn't

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1 Introduction

The study of economics has changed in the era since the Berlin Wall fell and a triumphal neo-liberalism, summed up by Francis Fukuyama in 1992 as “the end of history”, dominated the political discourse.¹ In 1992, the „end of history“ named the global tendency to free market policies, the shrinking of government economic intervention, and Western style democracy. Things have not, however, gone as planned. 2008–2009, for instance, witnessed the most massive state intervention in the economy since the Depression, as governments around the world massively backed up a collapsing global financial system. Meanwhile, the incipient transformation in the way the study of economics is conceived has evolved in tandem with the global system. Traditionally, economics systematically reflected in various methodological ways upon a specific sphere of our lives: the world of trade and markets. The unity of economics was thus secured by means of a common object of research, which could sustain a plurality of explanatory approaches. But contemporary mainstream economics has come to be monopolized by a certain subjective mode of looking upon the *entire* world. In this single conceptual framework, it proposes to give us a certain and permanent control over every aspect of our lives as long as we accept the precepts of “rationality”. What clearly distinguishes economics as a discipline, thus, is not its subject matter any longer but its approach (cf. Becker 1976, p. 5). By means of a disciplinary “mission creep” the methodological tools of a certain kind of economics, such as “rational choice,” “utility” or “profit maximization”, are presented as tools to analyze

“all human behavior, be it behavior involving money prices or imputed shadow prices, repeated or infrequent decisions, large or minor decisions, emotional or mechanical ends, rich or poor persons, men or women, adults or children, brilliant

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or stupid persons, patients or therapists, businessmen or politicians, teachers or students.” (Becker 1976, p. 8)

In short, economics has become imperialistic (cf. Lazear 1999). And as this imperialism continually expands so as to include “fertility, education, the uses of crime, marriage, social interactions, and other ‘sociological’, ‘legal’, and ‘political problems’” (Becker 1976, pp. 8f.), it seems only natural to incorporate both culture and sustainability also. Because of the power of the economic model, the latter two invasions of an intellectual territory that was previously deemed to be outside the realm of economics are well worth examining.

In the definition of economics that served as the standard model up until the 1970s, economic objects and processes were seen as embedded within culture, with the latter term denoting the sphere of those practices involving affects, beliefs and institutions that evolve according to norms that are independent of, and ethically superior to, those of economic activity. As such, culture was considered a prerequisite of the economy, but not as an object that could be reduced to the utilitarian paradigm of economic reflection. The classic sociologists, in fact, conceptualized culture specifically to distinguish our non-economic activities from our economic ones.

“On the one hand ‘cultural parameters’ are brought in – especially in the case of international comparative studies – whenever functional or otherwise ‘rational’ explanations do not suffice to explain certain phenomena. On the other hand, the cultural sphere is hypothesized as the social locus eluding the rational constraints of both economy and public authorities.” (Werner/Lackner, p. 41)

Today, mainstream economists are intent on weakening this sharp demarcation line by applying to culture the same tools of subjective preference (with the assumption that preferences are invariant over time, ordinal and transitive), and the same utility maximizing calculations, as are used when applied to rational choice in the marketplace. In this way, creative and performing arts, our world’s cultural heritage, ethical norms, family life and friendships, are all subsumed under the models of economics (cf. Towse 2005). Though a lot of questions have arisen from the mismatch between the predictions of rational choice theory and psychological experiments on choice making behavior even within the economic sphere itself (cf. Tversky/Kahneman 1981), the economic model that reduces the study of culture to another set of utility maximizing behaviors has been extremely successful in penetrating all spheres of cultural study and policy-making. How are we to define and measure the utility of cultural phenomena? How are creative and performing artists really motivated? On what scale do we measure the value, not to speak of the “efficiency”, of customs and traditions? Economics, especially its sub-discipline cultural economics, does not simply answer these kinds of questions, but it generates the paradigm in which asking

these questions come naturally. At the same time, cultural economics’ idea of cultural management goes a long way: it has made us perceive culture, or any part of it, as a predictable and orderly resource that should be planned, budgeted, and controlled (cf. Klein 2008).

In certain ways, the concept of sustainability, especially in its ecological dimension has met a very similar fate. This was not a topic that, for many reasons, swam into the ken of the economist as a reasonable object of research until recently. If anything, nature was considered a container from which we could draw resources without any limit, and dispose of our waste without any social cost (cf. Daly 1999). As such, the ecosystem was at best considered a mere adjunct to the economy. This adjunct did not constitute an object of economic investigation in itself, however, as the latter only dealt with marketable goods and resources that could be priced. And as long as nature’s elements remained unpriced, that is, outside of any market, they were not considered part of the economic sphere. Coined in modern terms, they were treated as positive and negative externalities, conditioning economic activity in as much as it took place within the living environment but forming by itself no object for economic analysis. Like culture, it was logically outside of that analysis, just as economic activity was embedded within it. This mindset, however, has considerably changed as the economic approach is now being applied to any kind of object no matter if it involves money prices or just *imputed* prices. While formerly nature’s parts needed to be actually traded on real markets prior to becoming an object of economic analysis proper, now they are a priori treated *as if* they had a price and *as if* they were marketable.

“Prices, be they the money prices of the market sector or the ‘shadow’ imputed prices of the nonmarket sector, measure the opportunity cost of using scarce resources, and the economic approach predicts the same kind of response to shadow prices as to market prices.” (Becker 1976, p. 6)

Nature is thus embedded within economics. As such, it is turned into a totality of *ecosystem services* that are calculated and predicted by an economic analysis that begins by assigning them current and future prices, and thus incorporates them into the system of costs and benefits. The reduction to pure quantitative units of utility makes everything from the weather system to the migration of butterflies subject to their assigned utility or wealth functions, which are then used to design policy. Given the dominance of economic thinking over any other value system, the issue of environmental sustainability now becomes a simple object of investigation, like the inflation rate, which is first to be measured by means of indicators, benchmarks, audits, and other reporting systems, and then to be efficiently managed and controlled. Ultimately it is thus tantamount to *sustainable exploitation*: getting the most out of natural assets for the sake of those who can, and in fact, do make the calculations.

It might be objected that economics has done nothing here to change the goals of either sustainable development or cultural formation, but simply crystallized both into quantitative units amenable to calculation as a means to instrumentalized social policy concerning the underlying reality of the environment. On a more general plane, mainstream economics places emphasis on the fact that it “does not deal with ends as such” (Robbins 1935, p. 24).

“The ends and purposes themselves lie beyond the action and the reason; they are for our theory [...] merely data, which we cannot further analyze by means of our science. [...] They themselves stand outside our explanation.” (Mises 2007, p. 15)

However, we contend that this mindset amounts to a deep seated problem rather than its solution, for if culture and sustainability are subordinated to the instrumental logic of economics, their true meanings become inevitably blurred by a contradiction: economists are treating them both as instruments and as ends in themselves while simultaneously claiming that there exists no kind of reasonable language by which to express the value of the latter. Thus, culture and sustainability are likely to be reinterpreted as mere means towards an ultimately unjustifiable end. In addition, all of human activity gets invariably preconceived not only as maximizing behavior but also as being coordinated through the market (cf. Becker 1976, p. 5). All people are thought of as unconsciously acting under the order of prices telling them what to do and what to leave undone (cf. Hayek 1996). Thus, what at first appears as a mere change of heuristic in actuality points to a shift in the value accorded to extra-economic value: culture and sustainability have been processed so as to seamlessly correspond to the spirit of every anonymous market transactions. The market, then, penetrates into the realm of every social activity, and essentially replaces the human and the natural as the highest term of reference.

What becomes visible here is an isomorphism between culture on the one hand and sustainability on the other. Metaphorically speaking, their identity stems from the credo that all aspects of our lives need to be looked through the same colored glasses, or in other words, that everything is susceptible to being analyzed in terms of rational choices once we make everything a market. But this identity is simply due to a certain fixed mindset, to the rigidity of a pre-given epistemology. This important insight, however, mostly remains hidden from view in that it is presupposed. For the more the economic approach is taken to be universally valid, the less we dare to question its premises. Eventually, we even come to consider such questioning as both trivial and ultimately unfeasible. As a consequence, we begin to uncritically conflate its way at looking at the world – the color of its lenses – with the colorfulness of reality itself. In order to overcome this epistemological and conceptual bottleneck, I consider it necessary to carefully reconsider the relationship between economics, culture and sustainability.

Let us first attend to the relationship between the former two. As we have seen, mainstream economists consider their own discipline – at least implicitly – as being analytically prior to and, thus, ultimately independent of culture. As such, they favor a universalistic approach: the methodological procedures underlying their research projects are not considered to derive from a given culture’s way of life, but are elaborated a priori. They excuse an empirical lack of acquaintance with a particular culture, since what is important is that one can quantify over any behaviors within it and find maximizing strategies and indifference curves. In this way, however, economists turn a blind eye to one of the most important insights of the cultural turn in the humanities and social sciences: today, we cannot consider cultures a mere object of research. For the researcher herself is always going to be entangled in deep cultural assumptions that tacitly inform as well as shape underlying research strategies prior to any particular act of observation or theory formation (cf. Lackner/Werner 1999). Said differently, cultures inform the presuppositions researchers have implicitly inherited not only from their disciplinary traditions but, as well, from the pool of assumptions sedimented over generations into the language, customs, and the life forms of the society they live in. Bringing “culture” back into economics thus cannot amount to studying the former by means of a set of analytical tools preset by the latter. It means first and foremost uncovering the hidden background assumptions of economic analysis itself. This in turn requires that economists heighten or actually develop the faculty of self-reflexivity. “The cultural turn is invariably associated with a critical revision of what has been formerly considered as self-evident truth” (Werner/Lackner 1999, p. 44). Living in a globalized world as we do today, this is not idle criticism, nor the expression of some fashion for postmodernism. Rather, we have become aware that the simplifying procedures by which Western social scientists have operated for centuries in order to reduce cultures to intellectually manipulable unities have resulted in an overemphasis on the homogeneity of cultures, as though marginal groups, the oppressed and poor, and the structures of privilege that advantage certain classes, ethnicities, and genders were minor cultural features. Since the movements of the sixties and their reflection in the social sciences, it is generally granted that the existence of a single organizing framework cannot be taken for granted even within a given culture. Even in Western cultures, the assumptions about the structure of preferences made by mainstream economists like Becker have failed, along with the idea that the price system reveals something “deep” about some universal tendency to maximize. But when we move these assumptions across even more diverse cultural context, rather spectacular misunderstandings arise. Here, a *tertium comparationis*, from which to bring important differences and commonalities into perspective, has first of all to be generated (cf. Yousefi/Mall 2005). It cannot be determined by the methodological proce-

dures of any scientific approach a priori. To the contrary, these methods need to be turned into an object of reflection in the light of the world's different epistemologies and ontologies instead (cf. Graupe 2007). Revising, in this way, the relationship between culture and economics also opens up possibilities to critically rethink the relationship between economics and sustainability. More concretely speaking, it allows us to first rediscover the unspoken background assumptions and implicit presuppositions hidden in economics' dealing with nature and even the world in general, and then to critically question and even transcend them by means of intercultural dialogue. Thus it becomes possible to systematically free sustainability from its status as another object of economic analysis and to fathom the rich scope of its possible meanings by means of a multi-perspective approach.

In what follows, I will attempt to sketch out an example of the explanatory power that can be drawn from this latter possibility. In doing so, I begin by focusing on one of the most powerful pre-analytic visions in mainstream economics, namely, its game metaphor. Then we will further immerse ourselves in this metaphor in order to demystify the pre-analytic vision of mainstream environmental economics vis-à-vis the central role played by competition, nature, and responsibility. Here, my approach will be implicitly informed by Chinese and Japanese intellectual traditions. In the second part, I shift to making explicit my reliance on East Asian philosophical sources in order to point to another ludic tradition, which, contrasted with the European one, can give us another understanding of competition, nature and responsibility. In this part of my paper, my goal is not to prove that the Japanese and Chinese conception of play is unique or superior; rather, my detour through Asian intellectual traditions should be construed, as Francois Jullien once put it, as "an attempt to deepen our own comprehension of the state of things, to renew the impulse to question, to rediscover the joys of inquiry" (Jullien 1992, p. 18). In Chinese there is an expression, "We cannot see the true face of Mount Lu because we are standing on top of it" (Sun Tzu 1993, p. 45). My paper is, so to speak, designed to attain an external perspective so as to see with greater clarity at least some aspects of the "true face of Mount Lu", upon which economists all too naively stand. In my concluding section, then, I am going to summarize our findings in an attempt to systematically rethink the core idea of sustainability.

2 Uncovering Economics' Preanalytic Vision

Ever since Adam Smith, economists have likened free market competition to a game played for the purpose of winning, in which the responsibility of the players is limited to obeying the rules of fair play.

"In the *race* for wealth, and honours, and preferments, he may run as hard as he can, and strain every nerve and every muscle, in order to outstrip all his competitors. But if he should justle, or throw down any of them, the indulgence of the spectators is entirely at an end. It is a violation of *fair play*, which they cannot admit of." (Smith 1790, part II.II.11; emphasis by me, S.G.)

This is not only an explicit statement of the case as in Smith but also, and even more importantly so, an implicit assumption of economic models. The game metaphor has become so deeply embedded in economic theory and model building that it constitutes the common basis of understanding in the field; a basis that is all the more solid since, being so integral, it often seems unnecessary to comment on it. If you take away the game metaphor, economics as a discipline would almost collapse. It is on this ground that I am justified in seeing this metaphor as the determinant of what economists consider relevant in understanding and addressing the environmental problem or any other aspect of sustainable development. Moreover, it has a prescriptive aspect, meaning that any policy to overcome environmental problems cannot violate the game metaphor. We must have competition, there must be "players", there must be "prizes", or "incentives", and the "rules" must be limited to allowing the players to fairly compete. So when economists speak of the "tragedy of the commons" or the "prisoner's dilemma" or, on a more practical plane, try to weigh the costs and benefits of alternative environmental policies to deal with air pollution, water quality, toxic substances, solid waste, and global warming, they concern themselves largely with devising changes to the rules of the international economic game, while uncritically assuming the game structure itself as pre-given and unalterable. In doing so, they derive their arguments from a pre-analytic vision that serves as the basis of reflection but is never turned into an object of attention. It is precisely this latter gap that this subsection is designed to fill in by presenting five propositions that implicitly govern the vision of environmental economics.

According to mainstream economics, competitors exist prior to the process of competition. We can take this as a sort of economic axiom. Uncritically affirming this pre-analytic vision, the *first proposition* we find is *that environmental economics considers economic agents as logically prior to their market environments and as ultimately independent from them. More generally, this reflects a culturally biased ontological assumption of context independent agency.*

The methodological fiction of an entirely isolated person has a long history in political economic analysis. It was under the sign of this fiction that relations between persons and property were loosened from all social entanglements in the bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and 19th century, when classical economics, in coordination with the lineaments of the capitalist order, came of age. The privileged metaphor for the isolated person in economics is Defoe's Robinson Crusoe: a man systematically cut off from the rest of humanity, whose individ-

ual desires and experiences are expressed in primitive accumulation, the production of tools for home use, and the systematic exploitation of the resources of his island for his pleasure and utility (cf. Defoe 1938). Friedrich Hayek, Nobel Laureate in economics in 1974, was right to claim that economic theory has advanced from the classical economists' use of such extreme forms of methodological individualism, with their stagnant consideration of isolated and self-contained individuals (cf. Hayek 1980, p. 6). Yet, if each man is not an island in neo-classical economics, each man is a player. My point is not that economics mistakenly supposes a world of single-player games, but that it analyzes competition as if it consisted "of a number of independent households, a number of Robinson Crusoes, as it were" (Friedman 1982, p. 13). Most games we cannot play alone, and economists have rarely interested themselves in *solitaire*. But by supposing only competitive play, economics presupposes other competitors who, somehow, in the same mold as their opponent, are only located on an opposite side at the same time. Strangely, however, competition neither defines nor shapes the competitors' identities according to the economic tradition.² While the players make decisions in social situations, those decisions are made on the ground of preferences and intentions that are defined exclusively by reference to themselves. Each is thought to define the content and borders of her social bonds herself (cf. Nawroth 1961, p. 55). More specifically, we are thought to compete neither because we enjoy playing with others nor because we wish to mold ourselves in the process of competition but only because we seek to achieve a certain preset goal. Repeating Smith vision of play, we run as hard as we can, and strain every nerve and every muscle in order to outstrip all our competitors. In this pursuit of ours, we depend on fellow men only as means to our pre-determined ends. Thus, "the first principle of economics is that every agent is actuated only by self-interest" (Edgeworth 1881, p. 16): Each player is an independent entity whose interactions with others are determined by given motives, goals, and intentions (cf. Becker 1976, pp. 5–13). The "unconditioned striving for personal advancement – even at the cost of the ruin of one's competitor" (Homann/Blome-Drees 1992, p. 26) becomes the great and singular cause of social interaction while cooperation, altruism, love, and the mere enjoyment of playing are all excluded by economic models.

Mainstream economics preconceives this cause not only as independent from any alteration by the players, but also from the process of competition as such. We are not socialized into being competitive; rather, individuals' goals, intentions and strategies logically precede their social interaction. Self-interest, defined solely in terms of winning and gain, is unalterable among human beings by any conceivable course of events. Within game theory, for instance, econo-

mists conceive games as given matrices of payoffs by means of which actors rank the desirability of expected outcomes – measured in terms of profits, quantities, or utilities – prior to entering the game as such. From the standpoint of the logic of competition, market environments thus must be premised as a kind of pre-existing stage upon which all economic games are performed. This means, among others, that the commons, or the environmental assets that nobody owns, can never serve as objects of intentional strategies, but instead only function as the pre-given, unquestioned background against which these strategies play out. Simply put, competitors do not do battle upon the battlefield to conserve or preserve it, but instead, adapt their tactics to its pre-conceived contours in order to pursue their individual goals; The battlefield – in this context, the environment – serves as the premise but not the result of self-interested intentional action.

As game theory tellingly demonstrates, such cognitive blindness even persists if environments happen to be damaged in the process of competition in such a way that they cannot be renewed. Only if we invent a new game in which the overhaul of these damages could be turned into a goal benefiting some player do we approach any rational for sustainability. But any game targeting the environment would depend upon not changing the rationale of players as such – as the possibility of changing the rationale of players would, by a chain reaction, put into question the whole of the game metaphor. This is, at least, the lesson we are supposed to draw from the tragedy of commons and other game theoretical images of social interaction. Here, players pursue their individual self-interest even as they diminish the capacity of the commons to renew themselves, thus damaging it to the ultimate cost of all (cf. Hardin 1968). The dynamics of deterioration is taken as an accident that affects neither the pre-given preference structure of the players nor their frenetic will to win. This is because the latter two are considered essential properties of the agents in the process, irrespective of the specific situation in which the activity of competing goes on (cf. Becker 1978).³ This fundamental idea also determines the logic of rational choice theory, the standard economic framework for understanding and formally modeling social and economic interaction. Here individuals are always weighing the costs and benefits of outcomes (with an eye to their own profit) prior to taking action. As Philip Mirowski has remarked, this makes preferences independent of both space and time: outcomes of interaction are not allowed to depend on how agents go about consuming or producing in the here and now of social interaction (cf. Mirowski 1989). The very activity of trading, for instance, is believed not to socialize either consumers or producers. As John Maynard Keynes critically remarked, "it does not count the cost of the struggle but looks only to the benefits of the final result

3 This is because, as Becker states, economics must proceed upon the presupposition of *stable preferences*, which do not change in time.

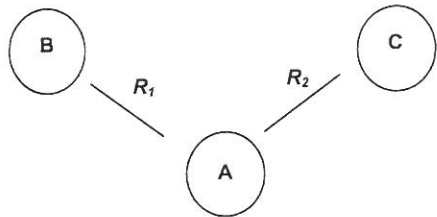
2 I have shown this in more detail in Graupe 2007, pp. 146–150.

which are assumed to be permanent” (Keynes 1926, part III). Taken to the extreme, economic agents are thought to remain wholly unaffected by nature’s destruction. For them, environments, as the etymology of the word suggests, are taken for granted as the circumstances within which they live. Even in the face of severe environmental crises they think of themselves as maintaining their integrity as unviolated wholes. Their identity corresponds with the fixed boundaries of the ego or I, which is considered “the unity of the acting person. It is given without question and cannot be dissolved through any thought” (Mises 1940, p. 34).

After mainstream economics has established the irreducibility of the individual to its own satisfaction, it next establishes the irreducibility of the market. Our *second proposition* is: *the relationships between players are externally defined by the pre-existing rules of the Smithian game. Thus, there exists a given, omnipotent framework that determines the range of possibilities for the outcome of competition, but is itself unaffected by any competitive game in particular. Fundamentally, this further reflects a cultural bias towards a metaphysics of atomism.*

Even though mainstream economics preconceives agents as entities pregiven to the process of competition, it does not think of them as being entirely socially independent. As noted before, its object of study is not Robinson Crusoe, but the interplay of many Robinson Crusoes. It remains, then, to say what connects them all. Figure 1 illustrates the fundamental economic situation, in which a series of external relations (R_1 , R_2) connects the discrete individuals A with other individuals B , and C .

Figure 1: Agents as Externally Related



Source: From Kasulis 2002

Here, the relations are not themselves A but instead something that associates A 's entity with B 's and C 's entity. A enters into her relationships in such a way that it remains essentially unchanged: if the connections were broken or dissolved, A would still be A . This does not mean, of course, that the relationships have nothing at all to do with A 's character. If A chooses to be in the relation R_1 and R_2 with B and C respectively, this indeed reflects something about A 's own

nature. That is: A has made the positional choice to get connected to the other entities B and C by means of external relationships. But the latter are not considered part of what A is; rather, all retain their autonomy in their independent choices to be connected. In short, an atomistic metaphysics obtains where primary existents bond together externally to form the parts of a larger whole.

Implicitly grounding itself in such metaphysics, mainstream economics understands the economy to be constructed from entities in external relations with each other. Put in the words of Smith, social cooperation in free market economies is thought to arise purely “from a sense of utility, without any mutual love or affection” (Smith 1790, part II.II.16). Economic man is believed to voluntarily agree to the social relationships upon which he depends, which are in turn independent of his agreement. Mainstream economics, however, does not grant individuals the freedom to creatively devise other social relationships. The latter are, rather, conceived as the preset menu of choices, which individuals may either fully accept or reject. Their freedom consists in entering the game and accepting its rules – or not entering the game at all. And just as a menu is unchanged by those who select items from it, the rules of the game, which define the relationships between self-interested players, are unchanged by anything that happens in the course of the play: once one chooses to compete, one must invariably follow them. This is to say that there is no freedom to alter the form of one’s relationship whilst playing. One might try to choose where to position oneself on the playing field, but the positions are already given in the same way that the squares of the chessboard are already given.⁴ Even upon defeat, the player cannot alter the rules of the games – else a different game would be played. In short, economics invokes the metaphor of games “as a form or spell of play or sport, especially a competitive one played according to rules and decided by skill, strength, or luck” in order to model and analyze free market competition (Hayek 1996, p. 184). More specifically, it seeks to distinguish

“the day-to-day activities of people from the general and customary framework within which these take place. The day-to-day activities are like the actions of the participants in a game when they are playing it; the framework, like the rules of the game they play.” (Friedman 1982, p. 25)

“In discussing ordinary games, we have little or no difficulty in distinguishing between the *rules* of the game as such and *plays* of the game within these rules [...] Rules provide the framework of the playing of the game, and many different patterns of play may take place within given rules [...] In a socio-political context, the same distinction apply between rules of social interaction and the patterns of behavior that take place within these rules. The distinction here is often more dif-

4 Adam Smith mentions the metaphor of the chess game explicitly in Smith 1790, part VI.II.42.

difficult to make than in ordinary games, and the discussion of the latter is helpful precisely in this respect. The validity of the distinction between rules and behavior within rules is general, however, over all interaction settings." (Brennan/Buchanan 1985, pp. 5f.)

One of the most crucial characteristics of economic analysis here becomes the necessity "to separate the process through which rules are determined from the process through which particular actions within those rules are chosen" (Brennan/Buchanan 1985, p. 6). Individual self-interest expresses itself in tactics that play out solely in the context of a nexus of pre-established, external and independent relationships. Coining another important metaphor of economics, Smith expresses this insight most famously by likening the economy to a machine:

"The wheels of the watch are all admirably adjusted to the end for which it was made, the pointing of the hour. All their various motions conspire in the nicest manner to produce this effect. If they were endowed with a desire and intention to produce it, they could not do it better. Yet we never ascribe any such desire or intention to them, but to the watch-maker, and we know that they are put into motion by a spring, which intends the effect it produces as little as they do." (Smith 1790, part II.II.19)

The mechanical image encoded in the pre-analytic vision of economics is that of agents who must bow to forces and obey principles they cannot hope to understand, on the one side; and on the other stand forces and principles such that they are shaped by a transcendent creative power standing sovereign, and even absolute over both economic agents and their activity. In as much as the mechanism of the machine is ultimately designed by an engineer standing outside and over above the machine and its parts, the rules of competition are thought to be designed by an outside force working behind the back of individuals. From any perspective within the game, this process of creation and construction remains utterly inexplicable. Rules are, so to speak, created *ex nihilo*: neither the players nor their playing do share in their making.⁵ "Play takes place within the rule, but play does not constitute part of the rules" (Brennan/Buchanan 1985, pp. 5f.). Thus the Smithian metaphor postulates that "a good game requires acceptance by the players both of the rules and of the umpire to interpret and enforce them" (Friedman 1982, p. 25). For the players, the dynamics of relating freely are systematically excluded by the rules of the game (cf. Hershock 2006, p. 27).

Our third *economic proposition* is as follows: *mainstream economics implicitly preconceives the competitive struggle of the few to take place within certain spatial and temporal boundaries. Competition is thought to take place inside some 'playing-field' so that the competitors tacitly position themselves*

5 For the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*, its strong influence on Western tradition and its marked absence in Chinese thought compare (cf. Ames/Hall 2003, pp. 16f).

against everything outside that playing field – culture, nature, and all agents not playing on the field. Given these framework externalities, the key concept of environmental economics, must arise not only regularly but also systematically. On a foundational plane, this reflects a cultural bias toward dualistic thinking expressed in terms of inner and outer.

Once the economy is considered as a form or a spell of competitive play played according to rules, it follows that these rules are tacitly assumed to delimit a playing space. We can see this with Smith's metaphor of the race, for instance, which premises a pre-assigned racing track of definite length, a definite starting signal, and a destination. Additionally, it filters the number of competitors, creating another boundary between the outside non-competitor and the inside competitor. More generally speaking, competitive games need to be thought of as spatially and temporally constrained, with a limited population of players, because one can only seek to outrun certain competitors on a given playing field in this moment. This is the meaning of the economist's phrase, *bar to entry*. What takes place at another setting, or at the same setting at another time, is without avail. Inevitably, it remains external to the race for wealth, honors and preferments. Competitive games designed for winning are thus implicitly exclusive. Only the foot racers race against the foot racers. The various forms of game theory, for example, take competitors to be competing only against their own kind, thus presupposing certain limits to the population of competitors. Also they assume that competitors must interact within certain known spatial and temporal boundaries because otherwise the possible payoffs could not be known *a priori*. The prisoner's dilemma for instance only conceives of two players entering the game, which automatically ends upon conviction. Also, the game is thought to remain confined to the spatial boundaries of two isolated prison cells. These temporal and spatial limitations of play and limitations of the population of competitors are not the objects of strategic reflections, but rather are unquestioningly accepted at the competition's start.

We can reframe this issue in this way: mainstream economics simplifies competition into a series of discrete finite games whose boundaries remain, from the perspective of the competitors, both inexplicable and not negotiable.⁶ This is the only way it can model these games. This strategy hides the problems inherent in the very conception of such boundaries, which is closely connected to environmental economics' notion of externalities. This problem arises because in finite games, there exist no meaningful ways for agents to relate to the natural and cultural environments placed outside competition's boundaries. Standard economic theory emphasizes the fact that there is a bound on the number of possible voluntary participants in a competition. This however only serves as one

6 I borrow the notion of finite games from James P. Carse (cf. Carse 1986).

face of the fact that any finite game must necessarily exclude some agents who could potentially play, and that their exclusion is not voluntary. This does not mean that the excluded are thus not affected by the game's process. However, their concerns don't count for those playing within the defined boundaries, as indeed all players are concerned with their own self-interest. In their will to win, competitors concentrate on those who are defined as opponents within the game, but remain entirely indifferent to the needs and aspirations of the bystanders. The well-being of non-players invariably remains external to inner logic of the game. It so happens that these games do affect the non-players, however. For instance, the competition among steel makers uses energy from coal and materials from iron mines and disposes of wastes so that it leaves a large environmental footprint – but the steel makers themselves are only concerned with their own profits. The external effects of commerce – from sicknesses born of polluted rivers to global warming – do not only occur regularly, they are built into the system. For it lies in the very nature of finite games to exclude not only bystanders, but also entire geographical regions as well as future generations. The very logic of finite games keeps outsider's needs below the radar of those who are happy enough to be in the game at present. Put into economic terms, Pareto efficient situations usually only hold for a given set of individuals, the selected players, so as to cast into the dark the fate of those "third parties" unhappy enough not to have been included in that set right from the start.

It is worth noting here that the possession of money either explicitly or implicitly provides the ticket to entry for economists. "The market process includes and excludes. The boundary is demarcated by money. If one has money, one has the ticket to the play of the market" (Brodbeck 1996, p. 229). This is to say that "solely the binary code of paying or not paying counts: whoever pays, receives, what he wants; whoever fails to pay, because he can't or won't, becomes a bystander" (Schramm 1997, p. 150).

"Any persons who are not acquainted at every moment with the prevailing ratio of exchange, or whose stocks are no available for the want of communication, must not be considered part of the market." (Jevons 1970, p.133)

Because they can get no access to the market game, their powers are reduced to zero, and in a competitive society they cease to exist (cf. MacPherson 1962, p. 56). Men who have no possessions to which others can ascribe a positive value find their existences within the boundaries of economic competition annihilated and, consequently, are pushed to its margin. This, of course, also holds true for all cultural and social phenomena that elude monetary expression. In as much as competitors turn a blind eye against the possible degeneration of their playing field, i.e., their immediate competitive environments, the conditions of their wider cultural and natural environments also remain below their radar.

My *fourth proposition* concerns the regulatory premises derived from our above-analyzed notion of externalities. *While mainstream economics has traditionally neglected the subject of externalities altogether, due to its insistence on analyzing competition in terms of finite games, environmental economics seeks to internalize external effects into the market framework. To do this, it tries to devise ways in which the rules of the game can be manipulated from the outside while preserving competitive behavior within game. Fundamentally, what is at stake here is the belief in a transcendent creative power standing sovereign and even absolute over both agents and their activity.*

Consider, for instance, global warming. Over the last several decades as temperatures have trended upwards, an increasing number of environmental economists have agreed that it can be considered an external effect of competition, whose elimination systematically eludes the inner logic of the game. The question, then, is not if the field of economics is aware of the problem at all, but rather how it poses a solution to the problem. Oversimplifying complicated matters somewhat here, the allocation of carbon emission certificates appears a good example of how the system of exchange, or market, must be preserved at all costs. Some central authority, deployed by nations or the entire international community, first sets a specific goal, say reducing carbon dioxide by an amount said to be sufficient to limit global warming to 2°C by 2050. Subsequently, the central authority caps the amount of carbon dioxide every economic agent is allowed to emit, limiting total emission to a certain level. Companies or other groups pay for emission permits and are required to hold an equivalent number of allowances representing the right to emit a specific amount. Because I assume my audience is well aware of the emission trading scenarios currently in circulation, let me skip the details and get straight to the underlying structure of argument here, which has a long tradition both in economic and political theory. Modern environmental economics confidently turns to the unquestioned presupposition that some external agency can design, alter and enforce the rules of the game independent of the inner logic that prevails within the competitive framework, so as not to impinge upon the principle of competition. More concretely speaking, the state here assumes its customary role

"to provide a means whereby we can modify the rules, to mediate differences among us on the meaning of rules, and to enforce compliance with the rules on the part of those few who would otherwise not play the game." (Friedman 1982, p. 25)

Here, the state is considered a transcendent agency standing sovereign, and even absolute over the interplay of self-interested individuals:

"What the state does [...] is to alter some of the terms of the equations each man makes when he is calculating his most profitable course of action. But this need

not affect the mainspring of the system, which is that men do calculate their most profitable course and do employ their labour, skill, and resources as that calculation dictates. [...] The state may, so to speak, move the hurdles in advantage of some kinds of competitors, or may change the handicaps, without discouraging racing." (MacPherson 1962, p. 58)

Bluntly put: due to their pre-analytic vision, mainstream economics, including the sub-genre of environmental economics, models the world, literally, on a board game where the players compete with each other under rules set by a higher power until they achieve optimum performance. Put in the words of Hayek, "as individuals we must bow to forces and obey principles that we cannot hope to understand, while still progress and even the survival of civilizations depends on them" (Hayek 1959, p. 127). In the liberal traditions of the 18th and 19th century, the supreme force was ascribed to God – now it is ascribed to the market mechanism (cf. Büscher 1991).

"Although the old God dies, an old sin lives: God's erstwhile children often try to take his place. The independent existence (the aseity) traditionally ascribed to an omnipotent personal being called God can be vainly arrogated by human beings themselves." (Stenson 1989, pp. 122f.)

One might consider, at this point, where the economist herself fits in all this. Is the economist in the market? On the side of the umpire? According to their own theory, (monetary) incentives chiefly motivate the players in the game to obey the game's pre-given rules; but somehow the economic scientist has the power to step outside the game so as to design the rules. For "it is the economists who design the rules of the game" (Kyrer 2001, p. 7). Economists, in their theory, are proxies for the God's eye perspective that sees the totality of the games and the externals of the games. They not only contemplate the spectacle, but also have a divine-like power to predict and control the performance of the economy. They only need to find the switches, apparently, for the mechanism. Thus, they think of themselves, or at least the body of knowledge they possess, as allowing them to transcend the self-interested behavior and rationality of *homo oeconomicus*, albeit not – as we have seen with their little examined pre-suppositions – self-reflectingly so. This has led to the economic triumphalism which we saw all too much of in the so called "Great Moderation" of the past two decades – although less so since the beginning of the slump. Interestingly, economists seemingly don't notice the performative contradiction in saying that the players can only attend to their strategies for maximizing their self interest in competitive games, but that they, the economists, can possess both knowledge of these strategies and yet transcend them in their models, which are not self-interested. Therefore, the logic according to which they have the possibility to devise and enforce the rules of the game remains altogether inscrutable from their own premises. The ulti-

mate question of who is to design the rule of the game, and how he is to accomplish this task, remains unaccounted for.

Another point worth mentioning here refers to the role of nature within competitive markets. As Herman Daly and others have pointed out, economics has traditionally referred to ecosystems not as the site within which the economy operates, i.e., what surrounds it, but as a subsystem of the economy that includes extractive sectors as well as dumps (cf. Daly 1999). This inverts the real relationship between nature and the economy. In conformity with the pre-analytic vision of mainstream economics, nature is defined for all intents and purposes as an aggregation of resources subordinated to economic agents. Mainstream economics considers nature's ecological web only as discrete objects or elements upon which economic man directs the force of his rational calculations and behavior. The river that passes by a power plant, for instance, is just an immediate resource for disposing of waste, and not a flow operating within the total global water economy. As such, these elements are not taken as the essential environs of competitive games – literally the physical material of the playing field and the players – but only as elements to be calculated upon within the game's pre-given matrices of possible in- and outputs. Contemporary environmental economics, inasmuch as it sticks to the mainstream paradigm, is prone to adopt this understanding of nature insofar that it seeks to internalize economy's externalities by making them, too, subject to a market game. This field of economics thus re-frames strictly environmental issues in the language of rules and incentives that will be accepted by economic agents as mere obstacles or handicaps in their unimpeded race for wealth, or as incentives to be used by these players to best each other in their competitions and as bars to entry. Said differently, environmental economics does its best to reframe environmental issues in a language of abdication, restraint and obstruction that, if viewed from the viewpoint of the competitors, holds no positive meaning. Economic man may be coerced to irrevocably bow to the rules of the game designed to protect the environment, but only due to an elaborate scheme of incentives and punishments, not to deeper insight into the planetary community of man and nature on the part of the individual.

The *fifth economic proposition* deals with the theme of responsibility: *Both for mainstream economics in general and environmental economics as a sub-genre posits responsibility against all forms of creative and spontaneous responsiveness. Thus, responsibility is confined to a negative notion, namely, that of strictly obeying pre-given rules within certain temporal, spatial and population boundaries. As such, it reflects a cultural bias towards an ethics that is primarily a morality of principles.*

"There is", Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman famously wrote, "only one social responsibility of business – to use its resources and engage in activities de-

signed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game”.⁷ Here we can see, from what we said above about finite games, that Friedman’s statement is in full conformity with the pre-analytic vision of mainstream economics. The systematic locality of moral responsibility, following a long-standing tradition in the history of economic thought, is disconnected from the whole of the economic and ecological system. This locality does not lie within the process of competition but is pushed to the latter’s margin. “The systematic location of morality for a free market economy consists in its framework of regulations” (Homann/Blome-Drees 1992, p. 35). Moral responsibility is thought to be fully embodied by the rules of the game, which then permits each move within the game to follow the logic of profit seeking. Morality, then, becomes a question of fairness of the competition – as in our original quote from Smith. As the rules of the game are thought to be exhaustively determined by an outer force, moral duty within the competitive process becomes wholly identified with the profit motive, and is adjusted only with that goal in mind. Economic agents are obliged to strive for their own personal advantage; their unconditional will to win is turned into a moral imperative itself. Each competitor needs to outrun the others without fail, because otherwise the social benefit accruing from the ‘invisible hand’, which from an absolute standpoint is believed to guide competition as a whole, will not be optimized. What I would like to point out here specifically is the fact that such a vision of responsibility runs the risk not only of downplaying our spontaneously responses to the immediate needs of our fellow human beings and our natural environs – it even precludes it. Because unstinting obedience to rules governing competition combined with the profit seeking goal are considered necessary preconditions of competitive play, they can never be abrogated, not even on behalf of compassion in the face of emergencies, such as famine, or ocean acidification. As the German ethicist Karl Homann unapologetically states, spontaneous help must be considered a “mortal help” and spontaneous sympathy for one’s neighbor as unethical.

“We must not yield to the intention, in the face of hungry children of the poorest of the poor, to give unedited ‘spontaneous’ help, because such conduct not only doesn’t solve the problem but makes it worse. [...] The conduct of a Saint Martin will only sharpen the poverty problem in developing countries and would be in that respect unethical, perhaps even a crime.” (Homann 2003, pp. 20f.)

The other is best helped, then, by strictly adhering “with the most obstinate steadfastness to the general rules” (Smith 1790, part III.I.122). As the Japanese ethicist Watsuji critically remarks: “every form of solidarity here can only finds its expression in a law, and responsibility and duty can only be enacted through coercion” (Watsuji 1996, p. 25).

7 Milton Friedman in: New York Times Magazine, September 13, 1970.

The five propositions common to mainstream economics and mainstream environmental economics come down to this: interhuman relationships are seen as subordinate to a universal framework of laws and regulations, elaborately enforced by incentives and punishments, with the result that equality (before the law) and freedom (to strive for one’s own personal advantage) are thought to complement each other and form the complete principle of civility upon which the social whole depends (cf. Gallu 1989, p. 91). More bluntly put, it is believed that the negative impacts of competition, inflicting immeasurable suffering upon millions, can be thrust aside by appeal to some outside force, be it an “invisible” or “visible hand”.⁸ The problem to be solved remains merely to decide on the best possible framework, be it “natural”, “public” or “divine”. But what if the process of competition as such happens to determine, in our complex societies, what the rules of the game are supposed to mean? What if the paradigmatic distinction between the rules of the game and playing the game is an illusion? As long as economists, bounded by the pre-analytic vision of finite games, paradigmatically presuppose this separation, such questions do not even swim to their view. They will, in as much as politicians, not only in the face of climate change and environmental degradation, but also in relation to continuing financial and economic crises, continue their knee-jerk call for “new rules of the game”. It is precisely this conceptual deadlock that, to my opinion, we need to overcome by engaging in intercultural dialogue with those Asian traditions that expressly do not share the pre-analytic universal vision that is capable of dictating rigid rules of the game, but instead urge us to explore an entirely different vision of play.

3 An Alternate Vision

As early as 1705 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz wrote in regard to the Chinese:

“Their language, their character, their way of life, their craftsmanship, *and even their games* are so different from ours as if they were people from another globe; it seems possible that even a very simple, but precise account of what they practice could give as a more useful opening than to study the rites and motives of the Greck and the Romans to which so many scholars attach.” (Quoted in Jullien 2005, p. 16)

While I am far from advocating Leibniz’ insight in its entirety here, I do share its basic vision that the Chinese and Japanese visions of games can in fact give us an opening to think beyond the pre-analytic vision and the privileged game

8 The Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, for example, strongly opposes this belief (cf. Nishitani 1990).

metaphor we have been discussing. Again, my argument here is far from universalizing some best game metaphor. I am not saying, for instance, that the contemporary Chinese and Japanese are all in disagreement with the foundational premises of mainstream economics if the latter is explicitly uncovered. However, clearly the other extreme, taking all cultural differences to be minor variants on the same premises, is ethnographically suspect, and tends to hide the acculturation processes by which the global market system came about. Cultures do disagree, most often below the radar of awareness, about their foundational premises. This is actually a creative affordance given to us by the plurality of cultures. Thus, in this section of my paper, I want to touch briefly on the very possibility of an alternative view of games, rules, environments and players. In doing so, I think I am contributing in my own way to the development of both critical and creative tools to expand the range of common solutions – and possible frameworks in which these problems and solutions can be articulated – to the environmental crises that all cultures today jointly face.

Summarizing the problem discussed in the preceding sections, we could say that environmental economics' concept of responsibility hinges on the presupposition of an external power or agency, standing sovereign, and even absolute over competing, autonomous individuals. As the risk of oversimplifying matters here, it seems to me that East Asian philosophy would regard the failure to examine this presupposition as more than the bad luck that we don't have more curious economists – it amounts, instead, to a systematic failure. This is because for them “there is no view from nowhere, no external perspective, no decontextualized vantage point. We are all in the soup” (Ames/Hall 2003, p. 18). Overcoming environmental crises cannot be a question of discovering another or better idea of an absolute ruler, designing independently an ever more efficient framework of continued competition. Rather, the hope of limiting the struggle of egoists through an exterior force, a prime mover, becomes regarded in itself as illusory. This is to say that the infinite terror of egotistic action – which, in the West, finds form in the Hobbesian image of the primitive jungle – cannot simply be thrust aside by “the renunciation of the opposing sides being imposed by something from the outside” (Nishitani 1990, p. 259) – that is, the Hobbesian solution. Every effort aiming at releasing the suffering of people, which lies in the reality of their absolute opposition as competitors, through reference to a pre-given universal “seems like trying to scratch your feet through the soles of your shoes” (Nishitani 1990, p. 260).

More concretely speaking, in the Chinese and Japanese traditions we find a pre-analytic vision that does not hinge on the notion of some originative and independent source of order or, expressed differently, on a “two-world” theory that categorically separates some independent source of order from what is orders (cf. Sun Tzu 1993, pp. 46–50). Speaking in terms of our game metaphor,

this vision supposes something radical: that instead of redefining the role of the umpire vis-à-vis the constitution of the rules, we simply abandon the notion of an independent umpire. Said differently, we do not seek to externally change or redefine some of the individual rules of the present game but to undertake an entirely different kind of play; a play, in which playing and ordering are so enmeshed that any rules are continually and attentively shaped and redefined in the very process of play itself. However, abandoning the notion of the umpire is only the first step – or rather, is dependent upon other steps. Most notably, the core assumptions of economics' methodological individualism must be re-analyzed. In his fascinating book on philosophy and cultural difference, Thomas Kasulis argues that the basic cultural orientation for the Japanese is not one of context independent agency but the intimacy of “belonging-with” (cf. Kasulis 2002). As stated earlier, the pre-analytic vision of economics makes us think that economic actors exist autonomously, and so independently from one another. Their relationships, defined by the rules of the game, are additive, not integral, to their individuality (refer back to Figure 1). If the basic cultural orientation is one of intimacy, however, then agents are thought to be internally connected: “It is part of the essential nature of the relatents that they are connected as they are; they are interdependent, not independent, entities” (Kasulis 2002, p. 36). In game terms, relations are now seen as integral to the players: how they interact with others defines their very identity as players. In a strong sense, they only exist in the “inbetweenness” of playing with others.⁹ What A is depends, in a fundamental way, on the relations he maintains with B and C. To dissolve its internal relationships with others would not merely disconnect him from the other two; it would actually transform an aspect of himself (see Figure 2).

Such vision of agency surely

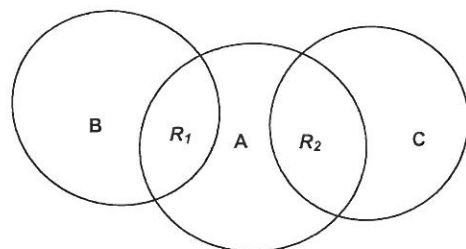
“amounts to an ontological gestalt shift from taking independent and dependent actors to be first order realities and relations among them as second order, to seeing relationality as first order (or ultimate) reality and all individual actors as (conventionally) abstracted or derived from them.” (Hershock 2006, p. 147)

Such shift does not only turn the assumption of context independent agency upside down; it simultaneously alters the notion both of competitors and competition. On the surface, this means that we have to abandon Robinson Crusoe to his place in our childhood – as an economic idol, he is misleading at best. Players don't choose to connect to others according to their pre-determined preferences.

9 Cf. for example the work of the Japanese scholar KIMURA Bin, who states: “The ‘betweenness of person and person’ (*hito to hito to no aida*) and ‘betweenness’ (*aida*) do not signify merely a relationship between two individuals. The ‘betweenness of person and person’ is the ‘locus’ (*basho*) functioning as the source from out of which both I and others arise” (quoted in Odin 1996, p. 70).

On a deeper level, we should no longer conceive of the game as a pre-given matrix of payoffs determined by external rules, but rather see the very dynamics of the process of playing as primary, shaping both players and play in an ongoing, evolving and ever changing process. Playing, here, becomes a subjectless, processual event, a “determination without a determining agent who could govern events from a superordinated level” (Nishida 1999, p. 166). Accordingly, setting its rules from any position outside the play would not only be a useless attempt but also an ultimately distractive and destructive one (cf. Hershock 2006, p. 138).

Figure 2: Agents as Internally Connected



Source: from Kasulis 2002

4 Rethinking the Core Idea of Sustainability

Unfortunately, I don't have the space to discuss in detail the rich meaning of this alternate vision here. But in this last section of my paper I would like to suggest that it might offer us a suitable starting point for carefully rethinking sustainability. Summarizing our findings, we might say that our vision has broadened from one that can only countenance finite games to one that intuits infinite plays, which, as they have no predetermined form or content, do not exhibit any fixed entanglements (cf. Shimomura 1990).¹⁰ As we have tried to show above, the pre-analytic vision of games behind mainstream economics makes players prone to consider their environments as simply pre-given settings, upon which they can play out their individual interests. Consequently, the latter attempt to follow a menu of set strategies derived from previously modeled situations (cf. Jullien 2005). As such, they remain incapable of reacting within the game to the concrete and site-specific circumstances of the game, even in the face of irreparable damage. According to the East-Asian pre-analytic vision as I sketched out

¹⁰ Shimomura uses the Japanese term *kukan*.

above, however, economic activity comes to be considered an *infinite game*, in which skillfulness depends on adequately responding to the potentiality of situations, adapting oneself skillfully to the changing events while shaping these events in turn. One acts relationally, not by distancing oneself theoretically from the situation, but by means of active improvisation (cf. Hershock 2006, p. 150). Such improvisation includes not only the fact that in some games the common rules of the game are altered even as the plays are being made, but, as importantly, the potential of the player being changed in the midst of play, as part of the game: protest against the economic conditions of our days becomes ultimately self-referential – “a criticism of an order in which one's self is a constitutive factor” (Sun Tzu 1993, p. 69).

But does this really encourage us to understand the concept of sustainability in radically different ways? I would suggest here that our two pre-analytic visions might possibly agree upon a very broad definition of sustainability as the *capacity to endure*; yet they will differ in fact upon *what* can, and in fact should endure. Let us have a look again at the imperialistic efforts to redefine sustainability in truly economic terms. If we were to truly take seriously its pre-analytic visions, then we would need to attribute the capacity to endure first and foremost to economic agents. This is because their pre-given motives, goals, and intentions are presupposed to outlast the course of events. More specifically, their self-interest is thought to persist both in time and space, including their irrevocable will to win. Yet, we don't mean that true human beings outlast the Smithian race for wealth, honors, and preferments. For any specific person always runs the risk of being barred from playing. The Smithian race unfolds within a border, and only those who are inside this border can be meaningfully defined. Moving outside the competitive sphere, thus, is tantamount to ceasing one's economic existence. As William S. Jevons, one of the founding fathers of the modern economic approach, formulates it:

“Any persons who are not acquainted at every moment with the prevailing ratio of exchange, or whose stocks are no available for the want of communication, must not be considered part of the market.” (Jevons 1970, p. 133)

“If he can get no access [to the market – S.G.], his powers are reduced to zero, and in a competitive society he ceases to exist” (MacPherson 1962, p. 56). Thus, “paying or not paying – that is, literally, the ontological question in commerce” (Luhmann 1990, p. 104). Said differently, it is only a general trait of human behavior – the will to win according to one's own self-interest – that can always prevail according to the pre-analytic vision of mainstream economics. This in turn means that whatever is not done in the interest of winning is not part of the game – and therefore does not have the capacity to endure, neither within nor without the competitive sphere. It is liquidated as inefficiency, sooner or later.

If we consider competition to exist solely for the purpose of winning like Smith does, then we must presuppose its definite ending. Otherwise we could choose no winner. Though we might consider free market competition as a series of games, it is nevertheless true that none of these games are designed to subsist. Instead they have fixed temporal, spatial, and numerical boundaries: a finite game has a definite ending, a circumscribed playing field as well as a selection process for continually expelling players, although, exogenously, new ones continually appear and enter the game. And as we have seen, nothing within these boundaries works to prevent the players from inflicting damage and suffering on the social and ecological environs outside these boundaries, even if, in the long term, such damage and suffering might eventually come to threaten their very own existence. Taking account of that long term while competing in the short term is hazardous, allowing other players in the game a competitive advantage. Thus, the pre-analytic vision of mainstream economics makes it for instance almost impossible to understand sustainable development as “the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (cf. the Brundland definition of sustainability). In the Smithian game the umpire can at best punish violations of fair play among a given number of competitors. But he systematically remains incapable of attending to the needs of, say, the next generations of players or spectators. The needs of the social, ecological and temporal environs could thus only be factored in by bringing the specific game to an end, changing both its rules and matrix of its payoffs and then starting off a new round of games. As we have seen, this is precisely the logic underlying current political endeavors of combating climate change. As we have also seen, however, the difficult task of amending rules is nothing to be possibly mastered by anyone competing within the boundaries of free market competition. It rather needs to be imposed by some outside force. Mainstream economists, however, still owe us an explanation to how this force itself could potentially outlive the economic struggle of all against all itself, especially considering its ‘neutrality; is, itself, caught up in the web of maximizing behaviors. Neither does it tell us how to change ourselves so as to become a source of paradigmatic innovations from within the field of economic interaction.

I would argue here that we do not only need to continue altering some of the individual rules of economic competition despite economics distorted view of sustainability but to start undertaking a very different *kind* of play. We need to change the economic understanding of sustainability as such. It seems that cross-cultural comparison along the line that I have been sketching out above can set us on the right track here. For what in fact endures in an indefinite game is the very process of playing as such. And this process in turn depends on adequately responding to the potentiality of situations, adapting oneself skillfully to

the changing events while shaping these events in turn. One acts relationally, not by distancing oneself theoretically from the situation, but by means of active improvisation (cf. Herschok 2006, p. 150). Here I think it might be important, however briefly, to ask about the self – the implication that self-interest implies self-identity, under the aegis of individualism. If the self really doesn’t identify with itself, but with its family, its institution, its nation, its environment, whatever, perhaps this is because the self can’t identify with self, as it is vacuous as an identifying term. Thus, the whole idea that we are ultimately basing our economics on individualism faces the problem that the self is anything but an individual-identifier. In this sense, the play could make the player. To adequately respond to the tragedy of the commons, for instance, one does not passively await the removal of obstacles to the game by an external agency but begins to act so as to change one’s own character. One needs to grow responsive to the present situation – beyond both the morality of fixed principle and economics’ deeply ingrained presupposition that we can and should not to alter our egotistic natures, but rather hedge it about with rules so as to mitigate its most disastrous effects by taming it from the outside. While *homo oeconomicus* thus becomes unmasked as truly unlivable figure, sustainability becomes a function of enriching relationships that are, necessarily, irreducibly shared; relationships that are not only expressed by contracts and communicated through price signals within the market sphere but also by other forms of communication (cf. Ostrom 1990, pp. 1–28).

As such, sustainability comes to be linked to the quality of a suite of variations in which the theme can change, not with gaining a definite victory (cf. Sun Tzu 1993, p. 62). My hope is that upon this alternate vision of sustainability adumbrated here we might eventually grow capable of conceiving our growing interrelatedness not as a threat to our individuality but as a heightened potential for developing and nourishing our personalities in a net of relationships expanding beyond any spatial, temporal or numerical boundaries. My more humble hope, however, is that the ambulant, existential dissatisfaction we feel with economics hidden pretense to define any aspect of our life according to its pre-given set of analytical tools crystallizes in a program of rigorous intercultural critique – including, but not limited to, culture and sustainability – so as to make the Mount Lu upon which economists uncritically stand a continuous part of our field of attention

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Sustainable Development – The Cultural Perspective

Concepts – Aspects – Examples

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Content

Preface	9
<i>Gerhard Banse, Gordon L. Nelson, Oliver Parodi</i>	
Introduction: “Culture” as a Challenge to Sustainability Research	15
<i>Verena Holz, Barbara Muraca</i>	
Address of Welcome	27
<i>Ulla Burchardt, MdB</i>	
Culture and Culturality	31
Approaching a Multi-faceted Concept <i>Robert Hauser, Gerhard Banse</i>	
1. MEANINGS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT	
What is Green?	53
<i>Gordon L. Nelson</i>	
Culture, Ethics and Sustainable Development	67
<i>Medardo Tapia Uribe</i>	
Key Issues of Integrative Technology Assessment	77
<i>Andreas Metzner-Szigeth</i>	
Sustainability Ideas in Indian Culture	109
Little Traditions and Post-modern Adaptations <i>Appukkuttan N. Damodaran</i>	
Cultural Sustainability	117
Anthropological Perspectives <i>Gabriele Tautscher</i>	
Considerations Regarding Cultural Differences when Operationalising Sustainability on a Regional Level	125
<i>Ildiko Tulbure</i>	

6	<i>Content</i>	
The Integrative Sustainability Concept of the Helmholtz Association	137	
The “Risk Habitat Megacity” Project as a Case of Application		
<i>Jürgen Kopfmüller</i>		
2. CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND SUSTAINABILITY. IMPLICIT NORMS AND VALUES		
Ethics and Sustainability	153	
<i>Larissa Krainer</i>		
Implicit Normative Settings in Concepts of Sustainability and Cultural Diversity	159	
Solving the Antagonism		
<i>Robert Hauser</i>		
The Role of the Cultural Heritage at the Local Sustainable Development Programs	167	
<i>János Szlávik, Miklós Füle</i>		
Water Issues and Sustainability	177	
A Cultural Aspect		
<i>Virender K. Sharma</i>		
Strong Sustainability across Culture(s)	187	
<i>Barbara Muraca, Lieske Voget-Kleschin</i>		
3. SUSTAINABILITY – POLITICAL AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS		
Sustainable Culture	205	
A Contrast to an Efficiency Society?!		
<i>Renate Hübner</i>		
“Personal Sustainability” – Including Body and Soul	223	
The Karlsruhe School of Sustainability		
<i>Oliver Parodi</i>		

<i>Content</i>	7
Integrating Art and Education for Sustainable Development	239
A Transdisciplinary Working Process in the Context of Culture and Sustainability	
<i>Verena Holz</i>	
Standing on Mount Lu	251
How Economics Has Come to Dominate Our View of Culture and Sustainability – and Why It Shouldn’t	
<i>Silja Graupe</i>	
Sustainable Development	279
An Issue of the Office of Technology Assessment at the German Bundestag	
<i>Armin Grunwald</i>	
4. CASE-STUDIES: SUSTAINABILITY – IS IT WORTH IT?	
Scientific Utilization of Energy and Sustainable Economy Development in China	293
<i>Ge Yang</i>	
Risks of Unsustainable Technologies	309
<i>János Szlávik, Miklós Füle</i>	
Tsunami in India’s Shorelands	321
Policy Implications of Learning Sustainability from the Victims	
<i>Appukuttan N. Damodaran</i>	
Sustainability of Marine Fisheries	327
Marine Reserves, Habitat Restoration, Aquaculture and Stock Enhancement in Florida	
<i>Jonathan M. Shenker</i>	
Climate Change in Several Central and South American Ecosystems	339
Challenges and Needs for Effective Management	
<i>Eduard Müller, Kenyon C. Lindeman</i>	
Cultural Sustainability and Sustainable Communities Initiative in Developing Countries	349
Evidence from Vietnam and Indonesia	
<i>Kien To</i>	

Perspectives of Cultural Interplays in Sustainability Research	377
<i>Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha, Oliver Parodi, Robert Hauser</i>	
The Authors	382
The Editors	384

Preface

This volume is the eighth in a series based on workshops that have been organized as an International Forum on Sustainable Technological Development in a Globalizing World.

A brief discussion about the origin of the Forum is important. Two universities, Florida Institute of Technology (Florida Tech) located in Melbourne, Florida, and the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BME) have cooperated together beginning in 2001, supported by a U.S. State Department, CUAP Grant for three years in the field of environmental protection and environmentally sustainable technologies (environmental studies). The then Department of Innovation Studies and History of Technology at BME also had long periods of cooperation with the Institute of Technology Assessment and Systems Research at the Research Center of Karlsruhe (ITAS/Forschungszentrum Karlsruhe, Germany) (now the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology – KIT), with the University of Basque Country, and with the former head of the Research Evaluation Unit of DG Research of the European Committee, *Dr. Gilbert Fayl*, (he also became foreign secretary of the European Academy of Sciences and the Arts). When BME and Florida Tech personnel met, in June 2002, in the beautiful small Hungarian town of Eger to conduct a “Sustainable Tourismus” workshop, Professors *Gerhard Banse* (KIT) and *Imre Hronszky* (BME) explained their idea to Professors *Gordon L. Nelson* (Florida Tech) and *Nicanor Ursua* (University of Basque Country) to initiate and develop a process to provide for a (loose) organizational forum for discussing how technological development can be made sustainable. It was decided that these institutions would try to develop and realize an annual international workshop devoted to this goal. Professor *Imre Hronszky*, Vice-President, and Mr. *Peter Gresiczki*, Secretary General of the Hungarian UNESCO Commission promised that the Hungarian UNESCO Commission would also do its best to support the Forum.

Sustainability Ideas & Topics

Three main ideas for a forum were put into focus. One was that a continuous discourse between European and US institutes could make the discourse truly trans-Atlantic. To this was added the perspective of UNESCO, and through this the thought that the views and interests of less developed countries should also be represented. It was agreed that a continuous effort should be made so that the workshops would be multi and transdisciplinary as far as possible and would represent different research and participant perspectives, including not only scientific researchers but also students, representatives of companies, governments,