

Visions of Sustainability

Location: Siegen, Germany

Institution: University of Siegen

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“Sustainability” is an omnipresent concept in recent media debates, economic and political plans, infrastructural as well as scientific endeavors. This workshop will deal with how discourses on sustainability emerged and transformed in the modern period: in what ways have these discourses been employed and how did they change as they “travelled” across disciplinary and geographical boundaries? How did utopias and dystopias contribute to their construction? When is sustainability conceived as being part of the project of modernity, when is it conceived as opposing the very idea of modernity? Invented in 18th-century German forestry, “sustainability” has been appropriated, for instance, by economics and politics, e.g. with their idea of “sustainable development”, which has been questioned at its very foundations by the de-growth movements. The aim of this workshop is to gather different perspectives on the development of this concept over time, its changing meanings according to different disciplinary fields, languages and geographic regions, and its being socially and culturally constructed.

The theoretical approaches might range from conceptual history and discourse analysis, to actor-network-theory and science and technology studies. Disciplinary perspectives include cultural studies, cultural history, economic and social history, the history of architecture, literary studies and art history, the history of technology and infrastructure, the history of agriculture, media history and the history of science.

Possible research areas include:

Architecture and Planning: how is sustainability interpreted in the fields of design, planning, and architecture? Is it related to the use of specific materials, to energy sources, or to social and political ideas?

Infrastructure and Transport: how is sustainability interpreted in the fields of infrastructure and transport research, which involve also the areas of urban and economic planning? How is sustainability constructed through infrastructure networks? Are existing structures substantially maintained and redefined as “sustainable”, or are they thoroughly changed and transformed according to (different) concepts of sustainability? How do issues of sustainability and the interpretations thereof relate with (the study of) global movements of people and goods?

Literature and Visual Arts: how has sustainability been interpreted in the fields of literature and the visual arts? What utopian and dystopian visions have been related to the concept?

Politics and Economics: how has sustainability been interpreted in political and economic discourses? How has the concept been used and misused? How was it problematized, contested? How was it negotiated, transferred and adapted to new contexts? In what debates did it play a

crucial role? How has “sustainable development” been invented, how has it been questioned and criticized? How does the de-growth movement stand with regard to “sustainability”?

Science and the Military: how has scientific research been shaped by sustainability issues and how did it on its turn shape the production of knowledge on sustainability, thus substantially contributing to its construction? In what ways was scientific research on topics related to sustainability entangled with military endeavors?

Forestry and Natural Resources: how did “sustainability” originate and transform in the field of forestry? Can natural resources be defined as the constant, although sometimes hidden, core of sustainability issues?

If you are interested in presenting and discussing your research on these and related topics, please send your abstract (max. 300 words, English or German) to laura.meneghello@uni-siegen.de by 16 March 2020.

The languages of the conference will be German and English.

Provided sufficient funding is available, travel and accommodation costs will be covered.