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Facing the future: Human ecology and “Bildung”

The conference Facing the Future: Human Ecology and Higher Education highlighted the term “Bildung” instead of “education”, showing the advances human ecology curricula achieved at universities outside Europe.

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“The evidence is clear: the time for action is now. We can halve emissions by 2030” was the title of a press release announcing the 6th report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.¹ We live in a world that is constantly changing through us and with us. This is not just about greenhouse gas emissions and global warming. To live sustainably and in harmony with nature, we need a transformation and transition of our community today – the time for action is now.

Unfortunately, in politics, the will to take action has been very modest, and the business world prefers business as usual. This raises the question of whether the education system should not step in by putting forth “agents of change” who have acquired the competencies to make an impact – especially if they got into politics or business.

Some will agree, but say, “We already have that. Today, practically all universities offer individual courses or even entire

study programs for sustainable development”. That’s true, except that we have been talking about sustainable development for 30 years, and yet there is hardly any progress. One problem lies in the underlying concepts: sustainability and development embody a fundamental contradiction, as long as development remains primarily linked to economic growth. In addition, the practical implementation remains on the surface, when aiming at technical-instrumental solutions, in which the underlying society structures need not to be questioned. One lives “business as usual”, now simply sustainable!

An education apt for the challenges of the future must build on a fundamentally human ecological basis. We must see the nature of human beings: how they have grown out of biological evolution, how they have shaped their survival, and how, in the course of cultural evolution, they have begun to change the natural environment for their benefit and often to the harm of nature. How can we counteract any lasting mistakes that have arisen from this?

Is the German education system fit for the task? In 2022, an independent group of experts led by the Center for Higher Education Development (CHE) rated it, based on a study called *U-Multirank*: “In the area of ‘study and teaching’, German universities perform only below average in an international comparison” (fok 2022).

Not surprisingly, the current education situation is also in the critical focus of the young generation. They demand new concepts of learning and teaching: education should enable students to become active promoters of change.

The conference

Against this background, the European College of Human Ecology (COHE), together with the Institute for Transformative Sustainability Research (IASS, new: RIFS) and in cooperation with prominent partner organizations, organized an international conference on a human ecology-tinged future of higher education, held in Potsdam, DE, in fall 2022. The crucial point here is that human ecology, beyond the pure knowledge aspect, is always a matter of perspective, of worldview. Aiming at consciousness-raising, it claims the whole human being. In doing so, human ecology must also go against the old demand for a value-free science. Solidarity and democracy are indispensable for the needed social transition accompanied by a responsible transformation of technologies, practices and methods.

One result of the conference: the Humboldtian ideal of joint teaching and research should be revitalized. Research, however, should not take place in a quiet chamber, but should be as practice-oriented as possible. Self-thinking and self-learning are important components of a person-cen-

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1 www.ipcc.ch/2022/04/04/ipcc-ar6-wgiii-pressrelease

tered education, and it is appropriate to speak of “Bildung” rather than “education” in the international English discourse.

The four-day hybrid conference was attended by about 100 participants from all continents in person or virtually. More than 60 presentations in 16 different thematic areas represented a broad spectrum of perspectives from various countries around the globe.

Well-known speakers included:

- **Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker**, Honorary President of the Club of Rome;
- **Richard Borden**, long-time Dean of the College of the Atlantic and Executive Director of the Society for Human Ecology;
- **Lene Rachel Andersen**, Danish economist, author, futurist, education activist and full member of the Club of Rome;
- **Jennifer Amparo**, Associate Professor at the College of Human Ecology, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Administration at the University of the Philippines Los Banos;
- **Thomas Schmaus**, Professor of Philosophy at the Alanus University in Bonn, former Dean of the Department of Philosophy and Social Innovation; and
- **Johan Rockström**, Professor at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Chair of the Advisory Board of the EAT Foundation and the Earth League, appointed Chair of the Earth Commission.



DGH Annual Meeting 2023

Water: too much – not enough – overstressed?! On quantities and qualities

May 11 to 13, Sommerhausen am Main

The German Society for Human Ecology dedicates its annual meeting to the issue water, in its different problem dimensions and appearances. Water scarcity (due to climate change or water withdrawals) as well as water surplus (due to weather extremes) need to be considered. Beside quantities, also quality is still an issue, for example related to groundwater or surface water contamination. However, the perspective of human ecology requires an additional perspective: that of the handling of water and the significance of water for social and cultural life.

Lectures will be given on social-ecological approaches to the management of water, on water resources and climate change, as well as on water and soil. Moreover, “water art” will be introduced, a documentation and discussion of approaches of artists to the element water. Several working groups will try to gain a deeper understanding of problems and solutions.

Conference language will be German.

MORE INFORMATION: www.dg-humanoeologie.de

Conference contributions and discussions revealed the diversity and depth of the problems of global change: *Impact of Climate Change, Agenda 2030, War and Politics, Transdisciplinarity, STEM Education, Digitalization, Systems Theory, Environmental Education, Environmental Justice, Food Security, Meal Culture*. Cross-cutting topics were brought up also: renewal of the *Studium Generale* and *Social Innovation, Art of Living, Harmony with Nature* and *Radical Human Ecology*, which bridged the gap to human ecology as a social movement.

A new start in Europe

Three major panel discussions on developments on the various continents (figure 1) highlighted the debates and showed great progress in some cases. For example, the non-European regions stand out for their combination of research and teaching in often practice-oriented projects, which focus on the participation of social groups and non-university organizations. Indigenous and everyday knowledge plays an important role here. Real World Laboratories, in Germany more a method of research than of higher education, are part of the everyday life of human ecology students in the Philippines. In

this way, the tradition of the Humboldtian ideal continues to be developed into the future.

European universities are in need of “assistance in development” here. The idea is that a European network of human ecology, targeting the young generation, would be helpful for a revival of human ecology at universities. Young scientists, who have studied human ecology in the Pacific-Atlantic region and now teach and/or do research at universities and scientific institutions in Europe, could play an important role here. The conference in Potsdam was an international kick-off for this and an encouragement to the organizers to support such initiatives.

The conference program and most of the presentations and discussions are now available online.² The organizers will publish a selection of papers from the conference, and further virtual meetings at the European level are being planned with the support of the international partner organizations.

Reference

fok (Silke Fokken) 2022: Deutsche Hochschulen sind bei Studium und Lehre nicht mal Mittelmaß. *Spiegel Online*, 21.06.2022, 4:57 pm. www.spiegel.de/panorama/bildung/deutsche-hochschulen-schneiden-bei-studium-und-lehre-maessig-ab-a-1196b883-f23e-465b-b479-cfb2daca4f00?sara_ecid=soci_upd_wbMbjhOSvVilSjc8RPU89NcCvtlFjVon (accessed March 26, 2023).

FIGURE 1: Participants of the final panel.

² www.coh-europe.de/index.php/en/conference-2022/conference-records