Naturalizing culture—time for an ecological understanding of "culture" in international culture and sustainability policies

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The current hegemonic understanding of culture and sustainability leans strongly on the conceptualization of 'culture' as profoundly anthropocentric. 'Sustainability' in cultural policies again means often the potential of creative industries in contributing to economic growth. This approach can be seen as very problematic in the era of extending the environmental crisis, which urgently calls for not only new kinds of policies on sustainability but also new thinking on the relationship between culture and nature. The main purpose of this article is to analyze how recent theories and concepts concerning the rethinking of nature−culture relationship and ecological citizen-subjectivity could challenge the hegemonic economist sustainability discourse of cultural policies. The article presents the results of discourse analysis on how the economic side of sustainability has recently become the mainstream signification in international cultural policies and what are the major documents and institutions maintaining and strengthening this approach. The discourse analysis focuses on the questions: how is cultural sustainability systematically signified, and what are the arguments and justifications for the main significations the documents make? The data consist of the conventions, declarations, and program papers of the G20, OECD, UN, UNCTAD, UNESCO, and WTO from "Brundtland report" (1987) until now. Theoretically, I go through the recent ideas of social theories on the ecologization of economy, society, culture, and citizenship/subjectivity as proposed by Tim Jackson, Bruno Latour, Andreas Malm, and the Planetary Wellbeing Research Group. I consider how the hegemony of economism and anthropocentrism in cultural policies could be changed with their help.

Introduction

Neither culture nor cultural policy have been at the forefront of sustainability policies during the last two decades, when sustainability has become a keyword in global politics (e.g., UN, 2018). When the development of international policies on the "pillars of sustainability" was at its most intense at the turn of the millennium, culture was mostly left out of the pillarization or vaguely embedded in the social sustainability pillar (UN, 1992; WCCD, 1995; Purvis et al., 2019). Until very recently, when influential international organizations have spoken about sustainability in their key sustainability documents, references to culture have been minuscule (OECD, 2001; WTO, 2001; EC, 2009). No explicit mention is also made of

culture in the titles of the United Nations' original sustainable development goals (UN, 2018).

As a key international organization concentrating on cultural matters, UNESCO has naturally spoken a lot about culture's relation to sustainability along with other international organizations with a cultural focus (e.g., UNESCO, 2005, 2023; IFACCA and IFCCD, 2013; UCLG, 2021). However, culture's relationship to the ecological dimension of sustainability has been difficult to phrase practically, plausibly, and effectively. This is partly because of the overall challenges in defining culture as a strict policy matter due to its multidimensional nature (culture as education, the arts, heritage, a way of life, etc.), and partly because it seems to have been difficult to define and understand what sustainability means in culture (Blanc and Soini, 2015). These challenges have led to the still persisting vagueness in perceiving what culture and cultural policies can do to enhance the ecological sustainability of people, societies, and nature.

All in all, if one observes general international sustainability policies, it might be said that there is no consensus about the definition and position of culture, but they are rather confusing and marginal in the conventions and declarations guiding the actions of nation-states. Historically, this vagueness and non-positioning can be traced to the so-called Bruntland Report (UN, 1987), in which sustainability and sustainable development were powerfully brought onto the agenda of international policies for the first time, but culture was practically ignored.

Some researchers argue that the vagueness of what culture means in sustainability policies (whether it only concerns the arts or heritage and is its own pillar, or whether it is a way of life and therefore frames all the other pillars), and what sustainability means in international cultural policy (which dimension of sustainability cultural policies and expressions should contribute to) is the reason why culture and ecological sustainability in particular have remained a vague pragmatic policy combo, and, again, why culture has remained at the margins of international sustainability policies (e.g., Kagan, 2011; Soini and Dessein, 2016; Sabatini, 2019). In this article, I claim that this vagueness and repulsion can be explained to a great degree by the inability of cultural policies to understand and conceptualize culture in a radically different way at the interface of the green transition.

Very recently, however, UNESCO has sharpened its focus on the relationship between culture and ecology in sustainable development (UNESCO, 2022, call to action 11 and 15), but it has not become the prevailing framework for understanding culture in sustainability, and it does not suggest systemic changes. Instead of adopting a policy approach combining ecology and culture, UNESCO and other key international cultural policy players, especially UNCTAD, have economized culture as a more or less acknowledged reaction to the above-mentioned vagueness and marginalization of culture in global sustainability policies (Pyykkönen, 2012; De Beukelaer and Spence, 2019; Garner and O'Connor, 2019; see also Alasuutari, 2016). "Sustainability," then, very often means the potential of creative

industries to contribute to economic growth (De Beukelaer and Spence, 2019, 157–179; Garner and O'Connor, 2019; Pyykkönen and De Beukelaer, 2022). This current economic growth-oriented understanding of culture and sustainability in cultural policies leans strongly on the conceptualization of "culture" as profoundly anthropocentric (Seghezzo, 2009; Koensler and Papa, 2013; Latour, 2017).

I argue that this economic and anthropocentric approach is very problematic in the era of an expanding environmental crisis, which urgently calls for not only new and more influential policies for ecologically sustainable development but also a different way of thinking about the relationship between humans/culture and nature than the still very hegemonic dualist—or even binary—understanding derived from modernism. We need theories, concepts, and policies that profoundly challenge the modernist understanding of humans and *their* cultures as superior, as well as related approaches and ways of operating, and are brave enough to suggest radical changes to systems, cultures, and narratives based on "the deadly story" (Haraway, 2016).

First, the analysis of this article exposes how culture and sustainability are mainly perceived in key international cultural policy documents. *Second*, this article analyzes how recent concepts, theories, and approaches that rethink the nature–culture relationship and ecocultural subjectivity—and suggest new ontologies, ethics, and practices of politics and policies—could plausibly challenge the hegemonic economistic and anthropocentric sustainability discourse of cultural policies (e.g., Jackson, 2009, 2021; Malm and Horborg, 2014; Malm, 2017; Latour, 2018; Walsh et al., 2021; for a cultural perspective, e.g., Clammer, 2016).

The article contributes to "meta-debates" about the nature, subjectivity, and meaning of cultural policy in times of acute environmental crisis when, however, no fast shortcuts or unanimous solutions are in sight. The article also participates in the intensifying debates about the role of culture and cultural policy in ecological sustainability and the green transition. My purpose is not to suggest an original or new approach but to create a kind of synthesis of recent critical theories on the "Anthropocene" or "Capitalocene" (Moore, 2016), which could be used to rethink and change the hegemonic international cultural policy discourses and paradigms of our times and—from an ecological point of view—the destructive cultural practices partly leaning on them.

Next, I will briefly introduce the mainstream way of perceiving culture in cultural policies for sustainable development in light of recent studies and policy documents. After this, I will outline the key visions of the new theories on the ecologization of economy, society, culture, and subjectivity, and how the hegemony of economism and anthropocentrism in cultural policies could potentially be changed with the help of these theories. The third part of the article will present the results of my discourse analysis concerning the way the economic side of sustainability has recently become the mainstream signification in international cultural policies and the major documents and institutions that maintain and strengthen this position. The discourse analysis focuses on the following questions: *how is cultural sustainability systematically signified,* and *what are the arguments and justifications for the main significations made in the documents?* The final data used in the article consist of 26 concentions, declarations, and program papers of the EC, the EU, the OECD, the UCCN, the UN, UNCTAD, UNESCO, and the WTO from 2000 until

now. In my critical analysis that aims to find ways to counter existing discourses and paradigms, I have chosen to use these international policy documents as the data due to their guiding nature: they are the "edge" of regional and national policies that policymakers and politicians must follow—at least to a certain extent—in making decisions that frame the actual practices of sustainable development. To conclude, I will suggest an epistemological basis for new kinds of ecologically bound cultural and sustainability policies that better resonate with the urgent requirements of the climate crisis and a just green transition.

The culture of international cultural policies

"Culture and sustainable development," "sustainable culture," and "cultural sustainability" are key phrases that have been discussed from various perspectives in the cultural policy mainstream over the past 20 years. A common perspective has been "culture *in* sustainability": to think about what culture is beside the other pillars of sustainable development (ecological, social, and economic); in other words, how and why culture should be considered *when* talking about sustainable development and its different aspects. Culture is usually understood as a way of life in this approach, but some also consider it from the point of view of the arts and cultural expressions when "pillarizing" it. Another common way is to approach culture *for* sustainable development: here one considers what culture can do for sustainable development in general or for one or some of its other pillars, and how it should be defined, articulated, and put into use for this purpose. In this article, I argue that the latter is currently the hegemonic way of perceiving culture and sustainability in international cultural policies. A third way is to understand culture *as* sustainable development: we need to define culture and work in and for culture in a way that it promotes and creates an ecologically sustainable culture(s), societies, and world. This last perspective is becoming increasingly popular as environmental concerns grow and multiply and the ecological side of sustainable development hegemonizes in policymaking. However, due to the diversity of interests, intentions, expectations, discourses, and related practices, sustainability has not yet acquired any singular form, but the aforementioned considerations and approaches crisscross in cultural policies, making the position of culture vague and even weak from the perspective of broader ecological sustainability policies (Soini and Birkeland, 2014; Dessein et al., 2015; Duxbury et al., 2017).

Among others, Clammer (2016), Garner and O'Connor (2019), and Pyykkönen and De Beukelaer (2022) argue that, as a kind of countermove to this vagueness, international organizations such as UNESCO and UNCTAD have turned their gaze toward the economic side of culture and sustainability. Their policies tackle questions such as: How can policies and creative actors enhance the economic sustainability and productivity of creative industries? How can the arts and culture benefit national or regional economies? In the case of UNESCO, this means the culmination of its long effort to offer legitimacy and significance to culture and cultural diversity. UNCTAD, on the other hand, has been in favor of economizing culture from its very beginning, as its goal has been to raise the prosperity and wealth of the poorest countries by enhancing the global markets of their productions (e.g., UNESCO, 2005; UNCTAD, 2020).

The economy pillar has gained a lot of weight in culture and sustainability policies during the last decade. 10 years ago Soini and Birkeland (2014, 213) described the situation like this: "Economic sustainability, as an aspect of its own, is relatively seldom discussed explicitly, but it is an essential part of discussions on ecological modernization, green economy, and bio-economy, which aim to combine ecological and social goals of sustainability through economic means." This perspective still prevails (Sachs, 2015; Bish, 2021; OECD, 2021), but economic sustainability refers increasingly to the sustainability of national economies, business profits, and labor productivity in certain industries or larger economic entities, and "economic growth" has in many cases become parallel to "economic sustainability" (Bansal and Des Jardine, 2014; Beattie, 2021). Critics argue that this economy-oriented cultural approach to sustainability is contradictory with or even harmful to ecological sustainability, which is the foundation of the whole sustainability discourse (e.g., Clammer, 2016).

This "economization" of culture and sustainability has also entered national cultural policies, which is, of course, one of the key purposes of international policies. In Europe, the EU has functioned as a mediator as well as a proactive player in this, and it has published a variety of documents for the union itself and its member states (e.g., EC, 2010; EU, 2021). The EU's message is principally very similar to UNESCO's and UNCTAD's:

> Harnessing the full potential of CCS (*Cultural and Creative Sector, MP*) can make a major contribution to growth and jobs and accelerate the shift towards a knowledge-based innovation society. To realise this potential, action is needed, at national, regional and local level, and at EU level, to support the implementation of the multi-layered strategy delineated above, focusing in the short and longer terms in particular on the five key policy drivers: developing skills; improving access to finance; promoting new business models and enlarging audiences; facilitating cooperation with other sectors and policies; and expanding international reach (EC, 2012, Article 5).

This lack of recognizing ecology in cultural policies and the current awareness of the ecological crisis at hand calls for (a) an update of what culture means in cultural and sustainability policies, (b) the acknowledgment of the interlinkedness of culture and ecology, and, hence, (c) the adoption of a perspective of culture *as* sustainability. In addition to praxis and policies, this concerns a theoretical conceptualization of culture as well. The current theoretical approaches in cultural policy research on sustainability mainly focus on (a) conceptualizing culture and creativity in ways that make them comfortable to use in promoting the sustainability and growth of economies (Throsby, 1995; Roy and Goll, 2014); (b) culture as its own "autopoetic system," "field," or "pillar" whose rights, autonomy, and sustainability need to be guaranteed so that it can also reflexively influence the other systems, pillars, and so on (Kagan and Hahn, 2011; Auclair and Fairclough, 2015); or (c) culture as a framework for ecologically sustainable human actions and policies, also integrating the features of ecological and human ecosystems under the umbrella of culture (Dessein et al., 2015; Clammer, 2016; Zheng et al., 2021; Stephenson, 2023; Koistinen et al., 2024). The last framework—especially when it is discussed using concepts such as "bio-cultural

diversity" or "sustainable culture"—is close to what I think should be the definition of culture in the age of the green transition. However, my view is that due to the urgency and pervasiveness of the necessary transition—and even transformation—at hand, we need a more comprehensive conceptual change and a new kind of understanding about the nature/culture synthesis, which must also be linked to the ideas and suggestions concerning the more or less radical changes in political systems (incl. economies).

Challenging the culture of international cultural policy

There are several current critical theoretical approaches to the Anthropocene that can be used when building a counterargument to the prevailing economism determining the relationship between culture and sustainability, as well as new conceptualizations of culture and a new base for cultural policies. Most of the theories and theorists I mention here come from outside "official" cultural policy research, but their ideas are fundamental when thinking about a new conceptualization of culture for the use of cultural policies. "Official" cultural policy research, which has traditionally mostly concentrated on the arts, cultural heritage, and different kinds of cultural expressions instead of culture as a way of life, has not been very keen to theorize nature/culture relations or even critically rethink the creative economy discourse, at least when it comes to international cultural policies. However, there are a few exceptions, such as Clammer (2016) and Stephenson (2023), who both have recently argued that culture—as a way of life—is at the heart of our current ecological crisis, and it should also be a core issue when we aim to change our circumstances, lifestyles and ways of thinking in the direction of surviving the ecological crisis. There is also quite a lot of culture and sustainability research concentrating on the potential of indigenous cultures and their "biocentric" cultural knowledge and perspectives. These are surely an important research topic in the context of culture and sustainability, teaching us "Westerners" valuable and different ways of approaching culture/nature relations, and these traditional ideas even receive some attention in some of UNESCO's latest sustainability documents (e.g., UNESCO, 2022). Nevertheless, I will not pay attention to them here because I concentrate on academic theorizations that critically reflect on Western societies, global political systems and their policies, and economy-oriented and anthropocentric discourses.

First, Professor of Sustainable Development (University of Surrey), Jackson (2009, 2021) has built a strong and convincing argument for criticizing the economic growth imperative from the perspective of an ecologically sustainable future. Jackson claims that "the relentless pursuit of eternal growth has delivered ecological destruction, financial fragility and social instability" (Jackson, 2021, 13). With calculations on economic growth, population numbers, and emissions, he has shown that if we want to guarantee that life remains possible on our planet for both humans and nature and its species, we need to give up the destructive idea of economic growth by reducing all kinds of consumption (also "cultural") and concentrate on the immaterial, environmental, psychological, and communal sides of prosperity and wellbeing (Jackson, 2009; see also Jackson and Victor, 2020). According to Jackson, the fundamental question is how

to make deep sociocultural, political, and economic change. The change requires that we also understand the term "culture" in a new way. It cannot stand only for human ideas, actions, and interaction but must include nature and its systems and their elements as part of culture, and, vice versa, humans and "their culture" as part of nature. He also sees this as part of a development toward a higher-level humanity (Jackson, 2021, xvi):

> Post Growth is an invitation to learn from history. An opportunity to free ourselves from the failed creed of the past. […] Its job right now is to help us reflect honestly on the situation we find ourselves in. Its deeper task is to lift our eyes from the ground of a polluted economics and glimpse a new way of seeing what human progress might mean. Soon it will not be needed. Its power for today is to free our lips from the mantra of yesterday and allow us to articulate a different kind of tomorrow.

Associate Professor of Human Ecology (Lund University) Malm (2017) goes somewhat further in his critical rethinking of the economics and culture of consumption. Malm offers an openly radical anticapitalist approach, but also one that includes more ontological observations than Jackson's. Like Jackson, Malm thinks that we should abandon monster capitalism with its dinosaurian ideas and practices of continuous economic expansion and growth, but Malm adds that we should get rid of the whole "capitalist bourgeoise culture" that tends to disguise the fact that our "social and economic world" depends fundamentally on the "natural world" and its condition. According to Malm (2017), we should not blend nature and society/culture completely with each other (which he accuses Latour of doing with his ideas of "hybridism") because it would be a mistake to assume that nature and culture follow the same laws or work based on the same universal logic. Instead, we need to understand their relation in a new way and approach the relation of these two partly autonomous entities contextually and in a multilayered fashion. Understanding the relationship between nature and culture through this "autonomy framework" means respecting and recognizing the interests and common good of both sides, says Malm, and argues:

> The power of the sun, wind, and waves can be harnessed, […] but unlike fossil fuels, those forces can never be fully possessed, and so a turn to them would usher in a fundamental shift in power *relations* between humanity and the natural world on which we depend. Such relations are entirely compatible with the autonomy of nature; one does not respect someone's autonomy by withdrawing from all contact and suspending all claims to collaboration (Malm, 2017, 172).

Malm's implicit argument is that we need a new culture that sees nature as an autonomous partner in mutual existence, on whose aspirations humans and their existence are dependent. Unlike Latour (see below), Malm (2017) understands culture/society and nature not as one or unified but as an interconnected pair. To treat this "unity in difference" right, Malm suggests a kind of mutualist understanding of their relation, which is comparable to Jackson's analysis of the positive sides of a sustainable culture and economic degrowth; we need interaction between nature and culture (i.e., humans) that results in positive and beneficial effects on the wellbeing of both sides.

> Now we can specify four tenets of our property dualism: (1) Natural and social properties are distinct types of properties. (2) Natural and social properties attach to material entities of one and the same substance. (3) An entity can have both natural and social properties, so that it is a combination of the two. (4) Social properties ultimately depend on natural properties, but not the other way around. It happens *right at the interface between society and nature*. We may then treat property dualism as a special case or subdivision of a wider pluralism, as long as we keep in mind that each of the two supertotalities contains many series of totalities nested within them, like Russian dolls (Malm, 2017, 56).

Culture, power, and politics intersect in a novel way in Malm's approach. The question is, above all, about power and politics in the relationship between culture and nature. How can we include nature and its sustainability in all politics and policies? And how can we politicize such issues related to the environment and its crisis that have not been politicized before and make politics with and for them? Malm (2017) calls for a new kind of ecological political responsibility that is not only of the systems, administrators, and professional politicians but of every human agent.

When interpreting Malm's points concerning the policy field of culture, we must pay attention to how nature is considered in cultural policies and cultural practices and politics related to them, how the environment and its autonomous processes are signified in policies, and how the actions in the arts and cultural fields reflecting those significations influence—or may influence—nature. In terms of policy principles, policymakers urgently need to think about the discourses and practices through which the mutualism and pairness of culture and nature are stretched to guide policies and actions at all levels. But first, cultural policymakers—like all policymakers—must adopt a new "metaconceptualization" of culture, which builds on this pairness and mutualism and takes the culture's footprint on nature as its decisive concern and point of departure. Malm does not specify the concrete ways to achieve this "top-level" political mutualism more closely, but one can recognize from many of his examples on international agreements and conventions that his ideas are not very far from Serres' (1995) thoughts on a "natural contract" between culture and nature: a binding contract that would bring peace and order for the ecosystem as a whole. This is where international policies—including cultural policies—play a crucial role, and the latest climate agreements (e.g., UN, 2023a) are good examples of this, although they do not call for direct large-scale and deep systemic (also cultural) changes, which Jackson and Malm (and many others) deem necessary.

Malm represents a clearly "differentiated relational ontology" (Walsh et al., 2021, 75–76) when it comes to rethinking sustainable culture with nature connected to it. Bruno Latour, for his part, represents a more "undifferentiated relational ontology" (Walsh et al., 2021). Although Malm strongly criticizes the ontology of Latour's ideas on the interconnectedness, networkedness, and hybridity of humans/culture and nature, I suggest that we do not discard the possibility of trying to construct some kind of synthesis of them as an ontological basis for the "new" culture we need in the age of climate crisis. Latour's (2004, 2017, 2018) core idea in rethinking and deconstructing the human–nature relation is based on the dissolvement of the dualist categories of culture and nature. According to him, "nature" and "society" (or "culture") do not exist as separate categories or entities because they are so deeply intertwined *per se*. In

fact, claims Latour, they have never existed separately claims Latour (1993). They must be studied together following the principle of *generalized symmetry*, which means that one should not start by thinking about the entities or elements of the same network as different: "we must *start* by considering all entities in exactly the same way" (Harman, 2014, viii, author's italics). It is then the task of the empirical study of networks to reveal not only the contextual differences of the entities but also their contextual intertwinements, or hybrids.

Malm ignores this principle in his critique of Latour. "Being as one" does not mean that the elements are not separable—and in fact separate—contextually and analytically, but that the separation should not follow automatically from the modernist categories and boundaries between humans and natural actors. Latour does not deny that there might exist separations between human and natural actors, but there might also be separations, disputes, and struggles between hybrids of human and non-human agents ("actants" in Latour's vocabulary) and their compounds and congregations when networks are formulated or transformed, or when their outcomes are negotiated and pursued. The contextual differentiations, asymmetries, and unifications—and the politics concerning them—take place at all levels and stages of the construction of networks and their structures, relations, practices, agencies, and shared meanings. Therefore, it does not seem—and this is what Malm (2017, 42, 69) also claims—that Latour tries to universally dissolve all distinctions between culture and nature once and for all; instead, he claims that hybridizations and their discharges must be studied contextually. And this does not mean that structures and historicized categories, positions, and meanings (such as "nature" and "society") do not have impacts on the contexts and that these impacts should not be studied, quite the contrary.

Unlike what Malm critically suggests, it therefore seems that Latour does not argue that understanding a new citizenship of the hybridized world as *terrestrial*—a conceptual combination of nature and territory that is fundamentally political because all political territorial questions are also questions of nature/soil—means giving up the recognition and analysis of the politics and power positions/imbalances of networks, categories, hybrid subjectivities, or practical solutions to acute environmental problems, be they local or global. Rather, it means that politics take place and must be observed contextually in networks in which interactive practices take place, including the formation of hybrids and their agencies, and which are also influenced by more general (power) structures, social conditions, and institutional arrangements (Latour, 2004).

In his most recent works, Latour also puts emphasis on the more general and abstract politicization of concepts, subjectivities, and agencies regarding human/nature "hybridism." He sees the ecological crisis as so fundamental and existential to all forms of life on the planet that we need *global-scale terrestrial thinking* and conceptualizations concerning the challenges and problems we are facing—ones that are grounded in territorial soil and the whole globe at the same time. The terrestrial of the crisis era always operates in "global-plus politics in the Critical Zone" (earth, which exists as such through all its species). This thinking, which is actually close to Beck's (2006, 2016) ideas on cosmopolitics as a new kind of political vision and strategy in the era of global (environmental) risks, guides us to rethink the concept of culture and politics. If we want to bring the concept of culture to the forefront of sustainability policies, we need to refigure it in such a way that it includes nature/soil as a subject,

actor, and stakeholder *in* it. Politics, then, must build fundamentally on this new hybrid culture, and policies must regard it and its elements (Latour, 2018; see also Latour, 2004).

Using the approaches to cultural policy and fundamental understandings of "culture" that Malm and Jackson, for instance, offer (see also Beck, 2016), allows us to approach culture in ways that can support a near-future ecologically sustainable cultural policy—or bio-cultural policy, if you will—reaching beyond the bleak, vague, or uninspiring dead-end horizons of this crisis era. Synthetizing them with Latour's (2018) *down to earth/terrestrial* approach, which combines ecological, social, cultural, and economic perspectives, allows us to transcend the dualisms of culture/nature and humans/animals even further. In my analysis below, I will also combine the novel concept of *planetary wellbeing* (Kortetmäki et al., 2021) with the above approaches. It addresses the earth system and its ecosystems by reconsidering human actions and culture(s) as part of nature and the planetary whole, and hence takes the deconstruction of the normative anthropocentric orientation and destructive nature of the current Anthropocene/Capitalocene as its point of departure. Its normative aim is to pave the way for a more equal distribution of wellbeing between the species of the earth system in the upcoming era of post-growth (*cf.* Jackson, 2009; Latour, 2017; Jackson, 2021).

In the chapters below, I analyze international cultural policy documents from the perspective that we need a new kind of non-anthropocentric definition of culture, wellbeing, and prosperity. I will also use Clammer's (2016) and Stephenson's (2023) recent works on culture and sustainability to glue the pieces from Malm's, Jackson's, and Latour's explicitly non-cultural thinking together within the framework of culture and cultural policies. In this way, I try to avoid mere criticism of current cultural sustainability policies and their lack of an ecological perspective and suggest ways, points, and contexts to change the conceptualization of culture in international cultural policies as well as discursive foundations for new policies.

Analyzing the anthropocentric cultural policy discourse

The data in the article consist of 26 international cultural policy documents that tackle culture and sustainability in a way that is problematic for ecological sustainability. Based on the research task of this article, the documents were selected from a total of 31 reviewed international policy documents in which the relationship between culture and sustainability is at stake. The selected documents were produced and published by key organizations in international cultural policy, such as the UN, UNESCO, and their suborganizations. However, G20's, the OECD's and WTO's policy documents on culture and creativity in sustainability were also used to examine the economy-oriented and anthropocentric understanding of culture outside the explicitly cultural intergovernmental organizations. From the perspective of the importance, contexts, and meanings given to culture, the statements in these documents of different kinds of organizations are surprisingly similar.

I used rhetorical discourse analysis as the method for analyzing these documents. It meant that I concentrated on "textual practices" (Fairclough, 1995, 185): how certain kinds of words and expressions are used to construct certain kinds of definitions of culture and sustainability and convince and persuade the reader of their validity

(*cf.* Johnstone and Eisenhart, 2008). I also paid attention to other levels of discursive formation. To do this, I studied the organizational histories, roles, and practices influencing the messages of the documents and their position and value in international and national cultural policies (*cf.* Pyykkönen, 2012). It also meant that I looked beyond the single exponents of the discourse(s) by engaging with international organizations' other recent documents to describe more comprehensively what the hegemonic discourse on cultural sustainability is at the moment, and how it has been constructed over time in the field of international cultural policies. Before the actual discourse analysis, I conducted a theoretically driven content analysis of the documents to initially clarify the key ways and categories of speaking about culture and sustainability in them.

As already referred, the theoretical framework I use here is mainly built on theories concerning a new kind of understanding of the culture–nature relation as well as sociocultural, economic, and political subjectivity, which many see as compulsory in the current crisis conditions of our planetary existence. The concepts and perspectives used in the analysis—both in categorizing the content and interpreting the findings—are those described in the previous chapter: *terrestrial* (Latour, 2018), *ecologically sustainable prosperity* and *post-growth* (Jackson, 2009, 2021), *relational mutualism* (Malm, 2017), and *planetary wellbeing* (Kortetmäki et al., 2021; Koistinen et al., 2024). On the one hand, they indicate how the current cultural policy definitions of culture and sustainability—under the umbrella of international cultural policy discourses—tend to be growth-centered and anthropocentric, and on the other hand, they pave the way for a new kind of "culture" and "cultural subjectivity" in international cultural policy on sustainability. Based on these theoretical and conceptual foundations, and their synthesis, I suggest the research and policy concept of *sustainable culture*. It refers to ecologically sustainable ways of life with a new understanding of paired, intertwined, or merged nature and culture, as well as the material and immaterial cultural expressions supporting and speaking for these ways of life. As pathfinders for national policies, international cultural policy organizations are in a key position when formulating definitions, policy models, and implementation solutions for sustainable culture. They are the ones that should be the first to talk about culture and sustainability, primarily from the point of view of ecological sustainability, and abandon the old-fashioned economic growth ideals.

International organizations' culture and sustainability discourse

As already stated, the position of culture has been difficult in international organizations' sustainability policies, especially those that are not directly devoted to cultural issues, such as the UN, WTO, G20, World Bank, or OECD. Culture has either been more or less neglected or absorbed into the other pillars of sustainability. It was completely missing from the original version of the UN's sustainable development goals (UN, 2018). Even currently, culture is only rarely explicated in the UN's sustainability speech: "For sustainable development to be achieved, it is crucial to harmonize three core elements: economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. These elements are interconnected and all are crucial for the well-being of individuals and societies" (UN, 2023b).

The same holds with most of the other aforementioned major influential intergovernmental organizations. Nevertheless, quite recently, some of these organizations have published reports and policies that deal with sustainability and culture's role in it. However, their speech about culture and sustainability is very economy-centered (e.g., WTO, 2023). To them, "culture" – or "creative industries/economy" as they tend to call it – serves mostly economic sustainability and growth. The relationship between nature and culture is rarely articulated, as the following excerpts show:

> Before COVID-19 hit, the global creative economy was growing rapidly in many regions. This momentum should not be lost in the wake of the pandemic; rather, greater investment needs to flow to the creative industries that have the potential to make localised and high impact, and help us shift to a new sustainable economy (G20, 2021, 9–10).

> Cultural and creative industries are key drivers of the creative economy and represent important sources of employment, economic growth, and innovation, thus contributing to city competitiveness and sustainability (World Bank and UNESCO, 2021, 2).

However, some exceptions exist. Despite the fact that the OECD's *Note for Italy G20 Presidency Culture Working Group* (OECD, 2021) openly emphasizes culture's role in and for economic growth, it also pays attention to the creative economy's potential for environmental sustainability (*culture for sustainability*) through some general notes as well as a number of concrete examples:

> There is an opportunity for culture to play an even greater role in driving economic, social and indeed environmental outcomes. […] Mainstreaming culture as an integral part of wider policy agendas, such as social cohesion, innovation, health and well-being, the environment and sustainable local development. […] Culture and heritage can help promote more responsible, pro-social, and pro-environmental behaviours. For example, cultural participation favours better waste recycling. Artists in India are pioneering new approaches to the circular economy and sustainability by turning waste into artworks, as a way to invite both the industry and civil society to take a different stance toward environmental issues and social responsibility. In Brazil, artist collectives are engaged in art-based sustainability projects, which involve the civil society in transformational social actions, often with a strong focus on the Amazon. […] Cultural and creative sectors also contribute to environmentally friendly planning, infrastructure and mobility. The EU's New European Bauhaus is one such example of how these links are gaining visibility. Indigenous practices for land preservation are another example (OECD, 2021, 1, 2, 12, 13).

As also referred, even UNESCO and UNCTAD struggle with the notion of "culture" in the context of sustainability. UNESCO has naturally been the *primus motor* in producing new significations for culture in relation to sustainability (*cf.* Dessein et al., 2015, 45, 51). When culture was first explicated as a factor in/of sustainability during UNESCO's Decade of Culture and Development (1988–1997), it was

connected to socioeconomic dimensions. Vibrant arts and culture are a *sine qua non* of economic development and social improvement, especially in the so-called developing countries (WCCD, 1995). This perspective is still dominant in UNCTAD's and UNESCO's recent policies on culture and sustainability, but it is supplemented by the sustainability of the arts and heritage, and lately, there has been a strong focus on the economic impacts of culture. Such UNESCO documents as *Our Creative Diversity* (WCCD, 1995), the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage (UNESCO, 2001), and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO, 2005) outline UNESCO's arguments on the need to secure a sustainable future and apply culture. In the Diversity Convention, especially, the organization's rationale on culture and sustainability stresses the economic significance of cultural expressions and the construction of strong cultural industries (Pyykkönen, 2012; De Beukelaer et al., 2015; Garner and O'Connor, 2019).

The best-known UNCTAD action on this topic is the Creative Economy Programme, which was established in 2004 (UNCTAD, 2022a). The main purpose of the program is to generate "economic information through a trade lens, to understand past trends and project into the future and to promote data-led understanding of trade in creative goods and services, intellectual property, ideas and imagination" (UNCTAD, 2022a). An essential part of the programme are the Creative Economy Mandates, consisting of suggestions of principles, goals, and tasks that UNCTAD and its partners and stakeholders should realize when they act upon the creative economy. The mandates are based on the research and policy analyses UNCTAD produces with its partners. Core documents in UNCTAD's work for the creative economy include the creative industry reports. For instance, *Creative Industry 4.0: Towards a New Globalized Creative Economy* (UNCTAD, 2022b) argues that the creative economy is a crucial driver for national and global economies and their growth in the near future: "The creative economy is one of the world's fastest-growing sectors. Creative industries create employment and income, promote innovation and contribute to societies' well-being."

One important document that has recently defined culture and sustainability is the UN's International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development 2021 resolution, which was also one of the UNCTAD's Creative Economy Mandates. It is a declaration made at the UN General Assembly in November 2019. UNCTAD led the implementation of the theme year policies and activities in consultation with UNESCO and other relevant UN entities.

The key argument of the resolution is, again, that creative industries should promote sustainable and innovation-based economic growth. Hence, the resolution considers culture *in* and *for* sustainability by defining it above all in and through an economic frame of reference:

> [The resolution] encourages all to observe the year in accordance with *national priorities* to raise awareness, promote cooperation and networking, encourage sharing best practices and experiences, enhance *human resource capacity*, promote an enabling environment at all levels as well as tackle the challenges of the *creative economy*. […] Recognizing the […] need to support […] economies […] in diversifying production and exports, including in new sustainable growth areas, including creative industries. Emphasizing the resilient growth in international trade in creative

industries, including the trade of creative goods and services, and its contribution to the global economy, and recognizing the economic and cultural values of the creative economy (UN, 2019).

Although this economism is the most visible challenge in mainstream international cultural policy that hinders possibilities to rethink and deconstruct the concept of culture in a way that would benefit a "terrestrial" approach to nature/culture, the fundamental *raison d'être* of the challenge is the anthropocentrism of cultural policy. Thus far, mainstream international policy documents on culture and sustainability have paid very little attention to the position and role of nature or natural/non-human agents; instead, "current mainstream cultural policy understands culture as merely a human issue and makes humans the subject of and to cultural policy and its share of rights, actorships, beneficiaries and, in the end, the *bios* itself" (Pyykkönen and De Beukelaer, 2022).

For instance, when UNESCO, based on the Mondiacult 2022 conference, talks on its website about how culture should be integrated into sustainable development processes, it openly declares that "culture should not be considered as a policy domain in isolation, but rather as a cross-cutting dimension that may foster a paradigm shift to renew policymaking toward an inclusive, *people-centered* and context-relevant approach" (UNESCO, 2023, *italics by the author*). This anthropocentrism is the backbone that permeates all of UNESCO's and UNCTAD's documents on culture and the creative economy:

Cultural diversity can be protected and promoted only if human rights and fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, information and communication, as well as the ability of individuals to choose cultural expressions, are guaranteed (UNESCO, 2005, 7).

In general, these organizations' discourse on culture and sustainability is grounded in human-centered statements and words when they speak about the subjectivity of suggested actions: humans are the subject of and subject to culture *in* and *for* sustainability (e.g., human wellbeing, humans decide, humans act, humans benefit from).

The aforementioned resolution also highlights the centrality of humans within its proposed approach to linking culture and sustainability. In the resolution, culture is a human thing to an overemphasized degree; humans perform the necessary actions and benefit from them. Although anthropocentrism is not expressed explicitly, the discussion about sustainability is limited to human needs and wellbeing, especially in terms of prosperity and economic growth. The more moral and principle-inspired sections are also human-centered: when important values and goals (human rights, human creativity and ideas, gender equality, peace) are listed, no reference is made to environmental issues, except for loosely mentioning a sustainable lifestyle. What emphasizes the anthropocentrism of the approach even more is that there is no explicit recognition of the needs of nature, not even the term "ecological sustainability."

In the resolution, anthropocentrism is defined in a logical relation to economic goals. Creative economic practices serve humans and human development without reflecting the ecological limits of these actions. Superficially, it seems that everything is in order: when the functioning of the creative economy is secured and supported, it improves the wellbeing and agency of humans. However, if we want to strive for true sustainability. If we want to strive for true sustainability—with the pace necessary to prevent the major environmental crisis we are facing at the moment—we should acknowledge that all cultural and human actions have ecological and ecosystemic consequences and effects in the planetary future (Malm, 2017; Latour, 2018; Kortetmäki et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, if we analyze the most recent discursive twists of international cultural policy organizations, we may observe at least a slight change in the conceptualization of culture and sustainability. The recent Mondiacult 40-year anniversary meeting in Mexico pays more actual attention to nature as the operational environment of cultures than all the previous UNESCO declarations and documents (UNESCO, 2022; see also O'Connor, 2022). Although a clear new overall vision of culture—in which nature is either an elementary part of culture or its intertwined pair—is still missing, and the contradiction between economic growth and ecological sustainability is only vaguely recognized, the discursive change is still remarkable. Official post-SDG explanations have also emerged about how culture nonetheless is "at the heart of SDGs" (Hosagrahar, 2017), and what nations and local advocates should do to pay attention to culture when trying to follow the SDGs (UCLG, 2021). At a regional level, the New European Bauhaus initiative serves as an example of this potential change to come as it attempts—quite strongly, in fact—to unite the sustainability pillars with an emphasis on ecological sustainability in the name of a fair green transition ("reconnecting with nature"). This also means that the relationship between culture and nature/ecology is represented in a new light. Nevertheless, economic growth is still among the leading goals of the initiative, and anthropocentrism is visible when tackling culture:

The New European Bauhaus (NEB) is a project of hope and perspectives. It brings a cultural and creative dimension to the European Green Deal to enhance sustainable innovation, technology and economy. It brings out the benefits of the environmental transition through tangible experiences at the local level. It improves our daily life (EC, 2021, 2).

Although cultural policy is going in the right direction under NEB and similar policies, the steps are too small and unambitious, especially if international policymakers keep on striving for continuous economic growth and lean on anthropocentrism at the same time. As Jackson (2009), for instance, has argued with a lot of scientific evidence, economic growth is incompatible with ecologically sustainable development with the number of people currently inhabiting the earth, and it will also evidently lead—through expanding and accelerating ecocatastrophes—to an uncontrollable deterioration of equality and prosperity. What we need at the moment is, in fact, a completely new kind of (international) cultural policy that profoundly takes an ecological "sustainable culture" as its overall guideline. This means that it should combine culture—in all its forms and meanings—and nature/environment. When it sets rules, principles, goals, and means for itself and national cultural policies, environmental/ecological issues should always be part of them, as, according to this ecological understanding of culture (e.g., Clammer, 2016; Latour, 2018), natural things are always part of our cultures and should be acknowledged in our "cultural doing." This new "ecosystemic consolidation" of culture–nature is also about prosperity and wellbeing

in the post-growth era waiting behind the door. Wellbeing is not about the economic wealth, material or immaterial property, or even social or cultural capital of humans or individuals but about the wellbeing of the whole (earth system) and its interlinked ecosystems. Ultimately this point of departure is also the key to individual wellbeing and prosperity now and especially in future when we must live with scarcer material resources and try to maintain democracy and socioeconomic equality (Jackson, 2009, 2021; Kortetmäki et al., 2021; Koistinen et al., 2024).

Conclusion: difficult but necessary steps toward sustainable culture

As argued at the beginning, culture and cultural policy have not been at the forefront of international policies for green transition or sustainable development. There are many reasons for this: Partly, it is a matter of a general explicit and implicit underevaluation of culture and cultural policy among the main actors of sustainability policy. But I argue—based on the analysis done for this article—that it is mostly due to 'internal reasons' of international cultural policy. One of the key reasons is the conciseness of the concept of culture. If it is understood mainly as arts and heritage or creative expressions in general, as it is mostly done in international cultural policy documents, it is difficult to approach it as something that has a major value in the green transition of societies and the globe. The second reason lies in the problematic vagueness of the broader definition of culture. When culture is approached as a way of life in sustainability policies, the challenge is fragmentation. On the one hand, culture then fragments into small pieces that affect a whole bunch of different aspects of life without necessarily being explicitly linked to each other. On the other hand, the way of life belongs to all policy areas and to none of them specifically at the same time, and then 'culture' easily becomes a politically useless empty signifier (e.g., Pirnes, 2008).

The response of the key actors in international cultural policy, such as UNESCO and UNCTAD, to this 'invalidity of culture' in sustainability policies has been the economization of culture (Garner and O'Connor, 2019; Pyykkönen and De Beukelaer, 2022; see also Clammer, 2016; Hallonstein, 2023, 29–46). If we look at virtually any recent international cultural policy document on the subject (e.g., UN, 2019; UNESCO, 2022; UNCTAD, 2022a), we can see that their discourses of culture *in*, *as*, and *for* sustainability are intertwined above all with capitalist economic rationality and its ideational manifestations such as continuous economic growth. The role of culture, arts, and heritage, understood as creative industries or economy, is primarily to lubricate general economic development and growth, and only secondarily—and then also through this economic emission—other values and forms of sustainability. In my view, the above-mentioned economism is not the fundamental flaw in international cultural policy when viewed from the perspective of ecological sustainability. The anthropocentrism is even more critical. It prevents researchers, experts, policymakers, administrators, activists, and cultural workers from thinking about the subjectivities and effects of culture beyond their current conceptualizations.

This dominant approach is an obstacle to the *real* consideration of the ecological dimension in cultural policies for sustainability, which requires not only the elevation of ecology to the position of the main

pair of culture in sustainability policies but also a kind of anti-modern understanding of culture, where it does not mean supremacy over nature but its equal fusion (*cf.* Jackson, 2009; Malm, 2017; Latour, 2018; Jackson, 2021). I predict that without this radical move, the role of culture and cultural policy in sustainable development will remain on the margins or as part of the cultural greenwash of capitalism (Miller, 2018; Stephenson, 2023).

I argue that we need a comprehensive change of culture in cultural policy. It consists of a few necessary, but certainly difficult steps. *First*, we need to discursively abandon the idea that culture and cultural expressions have to contribute to economic growth (*cf.* Jackson, 2021). Instead, culture has to be approached *as* sustainability, and nature and ecological sustainability must replace economic growth. *Second*, the change must be based on the kind of definition of culture, which recognizes that no culture—meaning its 'way of life', 'education', 'heritage', or 'arts'—can survive without nature because culture is part of nature; culture is and must understand itself as *terrestrial* (Latour, 2018). We need to define nature as an elementary part of us, or—using Malm's terminology—our "inseparable pair," whose wellbeing also determines our existence and wellbeing (Malm, 2017; see also Kortetmäki et al., 2021). We must abandon the destructive culture of continuous economic growth and the unfair capitalist share of wellbeing (Jackson, 2009, 2021; Haraway, 2016; Malm, 2017). As culture works for an equal share of human wellbeing, as is the cultural policy ethos of UNESCO, for example, this 'new' sustainable culture must also work for an equal share of the wellbeing of nature and its subjects:

> Therefore, instead of focusing on needs themselves, we propose a focus on the systems and processes that are necessary for the satisfaction of the needs of diverse life forms on Earth. The focus on life-supporting systems and processes enables the integration of human and nonhuman well-being into a single framework. […] life on Earth can be understood as a set of interlinked, interdependent systems, and well-being at any level as the integrity of that particular system (be it an individual organism, population, or ecosystem). Crucially, the functional integrity of any system (i.e. its well-being) is dependent on the satisfaction of its needs. Need satisfiers are usually products of, or comprise, interactions between other systems. In other words, the well-being of any particular system depends on inputs provided by other systems (Kortetmäki et al., 2021, 3).

The previous two steps take mostly place at programmatic policy-writing and discursive regulation-making. *Third step* is the most practical but also the most complex and difficult. It consists of the invention and implementation of policy mechanisms that manifest and promote 'sustainable culture', such as cross-sectoral policy bodies and funding programs that promote sustainable culture in work/economy, education, and culture. Down to the grassroots level, these policy mechanisms can

- promote cultural production and work as an exemplary economic sector of a sustainable future because of the labor intensity (it can employ a lot of people in the post-growth economy), its immateriality and minimal waste and emissions, and its potential to increase equal wellbeing (Jackson, 2009);

- enhance 'eco-social education' (Pulkki et al., 2021) throughout education, from primary school to adult education, and through cultural planning and community work in cities and rural communities (Luonila et al., 2023);
- guide arts institutions and artists to pay continuous attention to ecological issues (e.g., the ecological footprint of their work) and environmental awareness that their work can raise (e.g., Manacorda, 2010).

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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