



Call for papers for Nordic Summer University summer session 2012 – kreds 2

Learning from the future – towards cultures of sustainability

*This year's summer session of the Nordic Summer University will take place on July 28th – August 2nd, in Denmark, at Brandtbjerg Højskole near Vejle. The NSU is organized in “study/reflection circles”, working with a theme for 3 years. This is the last session of circle/kreds 2 around the theme of transculturality. The work of the circle has led to a published anthology in 2010, Learning from the Other, and upcoming, the anthology Learning from nowhere – the becoming of culture. This last session will prepare the field to a possible new circle, moving from taking the perspective of “Learning from the future” (2013-2015). This shift will focus then on the theme of **cultures of sustainability or transculturality from an uncertain future**. At the summer session, we will try to draw the connection to a greater degree between the role of culture related to uncertain futures, and to issues of (un)sustainability. and the issue of cultures of sustainability. The proposal for the new circle will be presented and discussed as part of our program. However, this call for abstracts is open to anyone who finds interest in the theme and wishes to participate.*

Short version of the call – see extended version below!

Culture will play a decisive role in defining the way humanity approaches the meta- or mega-issue of sustainability. It is often said that we actually possess the technological knowledge to come out of the critical situation that the world is heading into. Innumerable alliances are forming that acknowledge the urgency of the problem, from all thinkable angles of societies. But there are crucial obstacles that cloud this positive picture. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, we know that the impossible has become not only possible, but real. But it seems we are not ready yet to believe it to be really happening (Žižek, 2010). Interpretations vary according to cultures, to disciplines, to ideologies, and to local realities that meet the conditions of climate change and crises very differently. We invite all interested in the themes (and crossing of themes) of culture, interculturality, transculturality, sustainability, climate change, civic participation, education, and philosophy, to contribute to our last session in circle 2 (and maybe the pre-launch of a new circle). Abstracts can be proposed along the themes of

- 1) Theoretical/epistemological/ontological investigations and reflections;
- 2) Empirical studies – past and future;
- 3) Methodological considerations;
- 4) Discussions of issues of policy and political implications of the field.
- 5) ..or whatever creative cross-fertilization you may be working with.



Practicalities

The summer session is coordinated by Johannes Servan, University of Bergen (Johannes.Servan@fof.uib.no), and Oleg Koefoed, Cultura21 Nordic and Roskilde University (oleg@cultura21.dk). **Please send your abstract (no more than 200 words) by June 1st** at the latest, to one of the coordinators.

We accept abstracts in all Nordic languages, (or in English, French, Italian, Spanish, and German); presentations can be held in English, as well as in Nordic languages (although some languages might call more for translation than others). One or more authors can hand in an abstract and/or present together.

Preliminary program is expected around June 8th. If you want to participate without presenting, registration is possible until June 15th. Whether presenting or not, you must register your participation via the NSU-website. Registration for the Summer Session is done via the form at the web page. Registration is open from April 1st to June 15th. You will receive an email with a receipt after registration. You are not fully registered before payment has been accepted. Visit www.nsuweb.net for more information and for the story around the Nordic Summer University and Brandtbjerg Højskole. The preliminary program will be published on www.nsuweb.net. Sign up for the newsletter to get the necessary information and deadlines.

Arrival: 27th of July during the day.

Departure: the 3rd August in the morning

Long version of the call:

Learning from the Future – towards cultures of sustainability

"The very nature of sustainability is its interconnectedness. Therefore small changes in behaviour, use of materials and habits are crucially important. These smaller changes can add up to the radical shift which is needed and can complement and feed into the research conducted by interdisciplinary teams as they seek overarching solutions to an on-going dilemma. Real solutions will be those that not only reflect the complexity of our current situation, but also create new ways of thinking." (Mary Ann De Vlieg in "[How can Culture Make a Difference](#)", 2011)

Culture into sustainability

Since the concept of sustainability was made a major issue in international politics with the UN issued report [Our Common Future](#) (1987), its perspectives have been criticized



from many sides. One point of particular relevance here is that the report does not give sufficient credit to the importance of culture as keystone in human societies. Since 1995, UNESCO and other international partner organisations have been instrumental in addressing culture as a "[fourth pillar of sustainability](#)" (the three other pillars being the social, economic and environmental sustainability). In the official draft to a declaration for the Rio+20 summit in June 2012, culture is included as a parameter in several aspects of the way that sustainability is understood. Of course, accepting a fourth pillar of focus on sustainability does not in itself lead to an understanding of the connections across the four pillars, even to the extent of making the idea of the pillars damaging to a deeper understanding of sustainability. However, culture is being gradually accepted as an important aspect of sustainability, through the expressions of diversity and of sustainability in itself, but also as a precondition for the possibility of imagining sustainable futures (Bakkeslet, Ernstman). Another element of the criticism of the Brundtland approach to sustainability is the focus on securing the needs of future generations. With the dominance of the ideal of creativity in e.g. Urban development management, lies not only an ideal image of a system based on (economic) growth, but also a sign of the times of the need to expand and transcend the boundaries human societies have installed around themselves. These and many other points have made it more and more clear that there is a need for new concepts, for new frameworks, and for new ways of understanding the systems we live. And certainly for new ways to understand and frame the notion of sustainability and notions surrounding it, such as change, transformation, resilience, emergence, collapse, tipping point, crisis, power, suspension, potentiality, etc.

Sustainability into culture

So far, this was mainly about what happens when we introduce the notion of culture into the issue of sustainability, and how this influences the ways in which we understand the latter. But there is also another question: how does the concept of culture, and the ways in which we might engage with the world in which culture takes place, change when we introduce reflections about sustainability into the ideas of culture (or into cultural practices)? This is no more of a simple question than the previous one, and there is not more consensus around this question than there is around the importance of culture for understanding sustainability. One way in which this has happened long ago is through evolutionary approaches to culture (or to history) (e.g. Braudel, 1986; deLanda, 2006; and to some extent present in Spengler, in Ibn Khaldoun, or in Toynbee). An important shift in the latter decades is the opening towards other ways of understanding cultures as expressing real diversity, not only different stages of one evolution (in which one's own culture would rate as the most advanced stage). Today, this goes along with a growing recognition of the importance of different cultural perceptions of sustainability, introducing not only other constructions, but even the idea of different Natures – and thus of different sustainabilities (Latour 1996; de Viera). If this is taken as the macro level of culture as it is influenced by a certain perception of evolution, connectedness,



alterity/diversity, and systems theory/complexity, then there is also a question of the influence on how we look at what we might call the micro-level. In this case, sustainability can help us to gain new ways to look at dynamics and systemic processes of cultures/culturalities (Kagan & Kirchberg, 2008).

To make a long story short, the encounters between culture and sustainability in some ways go a long way back. But at the same time, the recent decades have changed the overall frame in which the game is being played, so to say, as well as leading to new games, in the sense of creating new ontological, political, theoretical, artistic, philosophical, and many more perceptions and practices in research, activism, art and politics. The crises that we are facing across the world are phenomena that can not be explained or addressed in isolation, but call for transdisciplinarity (Kagan, 2011 and transculturality. This is happening in practice (such as the Transition Towns or eco-villages, solidary resource and sharing movements, etc), and it is happening in reflection. We would like to invite you to bring in your experiences and knowledge, and to come and tap from the very diverse experiences of others (see e.g. the programme of the [Ecocultures](#) network).

Trans- disciplinary / cultural

(As these issues have been discussed in the circle at numerous occasions, we invite you to consult the archives and address coordinators to retrieve interesting papers)

This leads us to the two aspects of trans- that we invite you to do work with. One is the issue of transdisciplinarity (e.g. Nicolescu), that can very briefly be defined through fields or themes that in their very nature resist the compartmentalization of monodisciplinary approaches. Sustainability is, arguably, such a field, for several reasons. One is more empirical, as the effects of working from mono-disciplinary perspectives on socio-ecological systems can be devastating (Resilience thinking, 2006). Another is more philosophical or cultural, in that the compartmentalized, modern line of thought creates disconnected mindsets that are incapable or have great difficulties regaining understanding that crosses borders between disciplines and recognizes each others' values of knowledge. The difference then between the trans- and the interdisciplinary can be discussed, but can be understood along the lines of the same notions in culture: the transdisciplinary approach is more of an emerging field, where the interdisciplinary is a collaboration between existing disciplines (see also Kagan, 2009)

Our circle has been discussing/exploring issues of transculturality. The concept can be understood in terms of intercultural approaches (along a Habermasian or a Dusselian line) to dialogue among cultures. In this case the transcultural can be expressed as the transformed culture, or as the horizon that stretches out as a Messianic possibility across cultural difference (Paulsen, Kromann et al, 2010). The transcultural may also be seen more along the lines of originary technicity or incompleteness, according to which all cultures are basically permeable and where technicity operates as a connectedness to



other cultures and to nature if this divide is acknowledged at all). In the first case, sustainability becomes the field of negotiation between cultures or world views, in the second case it becomes the field of interplay between complex actant networks or materialities with culture as one dimension among others (Bennett, 2010; Stiegler, 1995;

The issue at stake here is not a reduction of culture to sustainability, nor of sustainability to culture. It is an invitation to take part in exploration and reflection about what happens when we are at a stage where it has become increasingly difficult to take sustainability into account without a cultural dimension, and vice versa. To reflect on how this demand can be met when most of academic research and policy or management are at loss of proper, sufficiently recognized tools or approaches to meet this challenge (there are certainly suggestions, but none that fully address the challenges across disciplines and cultures). There has been a call from various angles for decades: Abrams and the rediscovering of a lost ability to feel the animated character of nature (e.g. *The Spell of the sensuous*); Bennett's idea of the vibrancy of matter, drawing on Deleuze, Bergson, Adorno, Stiegler, Latour and more (*Vibrant Matter*); Bateson's ideas of sensibility to the patterns that connect (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind*), and many more.

A theme we should mention is the one of educating (and leading) for sustainability. This of course refers to the vast field of educating for sustainability as exemplified by e.g. The Schumacher College or The Centre for Eco-literacy, or even Balanceakten, striving directly to leading their students to lead in the pursuit of sustainability. However, the topic might also cover the more open issue of sustainability in education, sustainable teaching, e.g. related to issues of gender, ethnicity, class, power relations in general. The circle has been working previously with the concept of the mono- and the inter-cultural, which might go into the pot here along with the transcultural. Is it possible at all (and it is practised anywhere) to 'educate sustainably', to assist students in gaining more sustainable or sustensive (Koefoed, 2008, 2010, 2012) capacities/competencies. This comes close to the issue of leadership for sustainability and leading sustainably/sustensively, as well as the vast issue of sustainability in organization and organizing sustainably or sustensively. Especially in a context such as the Danish one where the call has been made for managing of leadership competencies with teachers. These issues are very relevant and indicate the great openness of the field of transculturality/sustainability.

The four lines

We invite potential participants to submit abstracts along four lines, all related to the connections of culture and sustainability. The abstracts may remain more within one of the frames, or cross across them - or reject them altogether to rephrase the whole complex. We also welcome abstracts that deal with one or more of these threads but drawing other aspects, fields, and disciplines.



1. Theoretical/epistemological/ontological investigations and reflections

There is a strong philosophical discussion to be carried out here. But as indicated above, the problems that face reflection, research and dialogues are greater than any one field, including philosophy. Thus, these reflections might very well go beyond the limits of what we would normally think of as theory, and take other issues into account that have played a role previously in the history of the circle: spiritual thinking (e.g. Sufi philosophy or the metaphysics of indigenous people), artistic/creative reflections, etc. There is also the overall discussion here of the emergence of a potentially new regime of knowledge or episteme and how it related to tradition, modernity and post-modernity. The impact of new practices on philosophy is a crucial question that we would like to address.

2. Empirical studies – past and future

Some fields lend themselves very easily here, such as urban studies after the impact of the creative cities approach; the cases of cultural capitals or other cities attempting to address the issues of sustainability; the struggles of indigenous cultures meeting and attempting dialogue with globalization; or the exploration of new ways to work, live and negotiate sustainability in communities or other practice collectivities; the development of new forms of life that break more or less out of the unsustainable frameworks of modern science, economy, politics, urbanity, etc.; the re-mapping of new eco-cultural geographies through the connections made by the pressure of climate change and the calls to new forms and networks of knowledge; changes in the role and function of culture in relation to the broader challenge of sustainability, but also in more or less direct opposition to the hegemony of cultural industry, etc.

3. Methodological considerations

How can these very complex issues be addressed in ways that still allow for conclusions to be drawn and knowledge to be shared? Is a new science emerging out of this field – is a new form of art growing? The discussion around trans- can be seen also under this point of view, folding back on the approaches and tools of researchers, artists, activists, policy makers and other practitioners. The issues of complexity as addressed by e.g. Edgar Morin can be seen as an ontological or epistemological issue, but would also need to include more strictly methodological discussions, experiments, and inventions, such as action-philosophy, artistic research, systems games, and many more. Please feel invited to make fresh and daunting suggestions that take up the infinite challenges!

4. Discussions of issues of policy and political implications of the field

There is a growing concern (see ASEF's publications from the Connect to culture program and the paper written for the Nordic Council of Ministers by Cultura21 Nordic which is an answer to an invitation from the council, Rio+20, etc) in public bodies and to some extent in corporate-research-activist-public networks like Sustainia, the Global Presencing Institute a.o., about how to work with these issues from a point of view of policy. Some of these attempts are clearly either some degree of green-washing, others are more open



attempts to address the challenges without changing the basic conditions of the system, others yet are more daring attempts to seek out ways of thinking, creating and working that would lead to or preclude a deeper systemic release process or total change of regime. Practices that transcend academic research, artistic methods/approaches, community activism, education for sustainability, and many other methods are moving the boundaries for how we might develop knowledge and policy around and through possibilities of sustainability (Kuecker, 2011). We need more reflection about these issues of resilience vs transformation, new policy forms, engagement, and other relevant questions.

PRELIMINARY REFERENCE LIST . MORE WILL BE ADDED!

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