

## **TOWARDS A NEW CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABILITY?**

### **The role of culturalization and traditional knowledge.**

di *Gianluca Senatore e Lucia Groe\**

---

#### **Abstract**

This work contributes to animate the scientific debate on sustainability in a double sense: a) by placing the need of stripping the term of ambiguous concepts wrongly attributed by the interpretative processes of modernity; b) to start a process of cultural construction of sustainability based on the redefinition of the roles of knowledge and on the man-nature relationship read in terms of interconnectedness. The authors will present a new term: *Mitakuyeability*, a reinforcing form of the concept of sustainability rather than its reinterpretation, understood as the ability to interconnect with all the possibilities of the universe that stimulates the ability to take care and the definition of sustainable strategies of 2030 Agenda.

---

#### **Keywords**

Sustainability; modernity; cultural construction; (inter)connection; man-nature partition; mitakuyeability.

\* GIANLUCA SENATORE è afferente al Dipartimento Coris dell'Università "Sapienza" di Roma.  
Email: [gianluca.senatore@uniroma1.it](mailto:gianluca.senatore@uniroma1.it)

LUCIA GROE, è afferente al Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali dell'Università della Calabria. Email: [lucia.groe@unical.it](mailto:lucia.groe@unical.it).

The work is structured as follows: The Introduction, paragraphs 4 and 5 are by Lucia Groe, while paragraphs 2 and 3 and the Conclusions by Gianluca Senatore.

Doi: [10.13131/1724-451x/hs1q-vj28](https://doi.org/10.13131/1724-451x/hs1q-vj28)

## 1. INTRODUZIONE

The debate on the environmental issue and sustainability is open and full of continuous reinterpretations. The aim of this work is to share (With this work<sup>1</sup> we want to share) our reflection which is still being studied. Our reflection re-reads sustainability in a critical key starting from modernity and the role of Traditional Knowledge (TK). We believe that sustainability has been mistakenly constructed as a response to the fear of the environmental crisis and that for this reason the environmental question is put aside whenever a new (economic, environmental) crisis affects recent geological times and spaces. Our belief is to conceptualize the idea of sustainability through a work of theoretical analysis since we live in a historical moment in which this term seems vaguer and more indefinite. Our reflection places side by side to very recent studies, such as in particular that Gare (2017) who highlights the need to correct sustainability and intervene in the loss of effectiveness of its notion, encouraging to change strategy in the fight against survival. Through a micro-historical approach and literature review we propose elements for discussion that allow: a) to make a critical reading of the contribution of modernity to the notion of sustainability and, b) to re-discuss the relationship man-nature through the Lakota cultural concept of interconnection: a vision opposed to the separation of the two systems.

The environmental crisis shows that modern society lives a paradox: it continues to show its inability to change. Until recently, our political and economic systems have been driven by the need for short-term gains, without addressing the long-term consequences (Espinosa and Walker 2011). That is why it was necessary to change the way of thinking and relating to others and to the natural world. Initially, in the absence of a correct way of thinking the awareness of environmental issues was accelerated (erroneously) by the concept of fear of the environmental crisis' effects. As if the drama of an event could induce society to become aware of its inability to relate to nature and grasp its limits. Suddenly it was realized that global problems were local problems and the political-economic reaction was a clear securitization process in which there was no dialogue with the community. The consequence is that scientific knowledge and that one political remain anchored to their laboratories and palaces of ideas creating a communication gap with society. There is a misunderstanding due to different

<sup>1</sup> The work is structured as follows: The Introduction, paragraphs 4 and 5 are by Lucia Groe, while paragraphs 2 and 3 and the Conclusions by Gianluca Senatore.

knowledge which does not adopt a common language.

The analysis of modernity partly clarifies the diffusion of the concept of crisis and security, of the inability of the community to give adequate individual and collective responses. The reason is it's based on: a) the *here and now*, b) the removal of the past since the ancient does not have much to teach, c) about a scientific vision that dominates and depersonalizes habits and emotions, d) about individualization. What makes the debate on environmental issues and sustainability difficult is that the relationship between the natural and social systems became entangled in a dichotomous vision of separate entities and produced crucial and serious effects, because culturalization did not go beyond the naturalistic conception of development: environment was a mere basket of unlimited resources to be introduced into the production process.

The opposite systemic and holistic vision, especially read in the context of the *Anthropocene* society, leads to reflect on humanity as a species inserted in the web of life that co-evolves with the natural system and that reciprocally feel the effects that fall on each element. In this new interval in geological history we are witnessing a wider impact that includes the transformations of the environment that James Syvitski (2012) calls the *cumulative impact of civilization*.

Over the past two decades, different approaches have been suggested for managing sustainability issues, here we present a new approach close, but with its own characteristics, to the conceptual paradigm of *integral ecology* and the Gare's approach (2017) which proposes the utopian *ecological civilization*.

From a purely economic analysis plan, from a dichotomous dimension representative of the relationship between man and nature, the environmental question reaches a new analysis plan that assumes human significance. The social, ethical, spiritual and cultural dimension of the individual enters the conceptualization of the environment, shifting attention from the impact to the well-being of civil society.

In this work, we try to answer the question: *What is missing from sustainability today?* We address the analysis starting from the idea that TK plays an important role in the culturalization of modern society. The TK analyzed here is based on the concept of Lakota interconnectedness. We believe that in the transition from fear to culturalization, sustainability stops being ambiguous and that a transversal knowledge becomes the right tool to help institutions and communities to orient policies, practices and attitudes.

In this regard we propose a term coined by Groe<sup>2</sup> that can contribute to the discussion about the culturalization process of society and that indicates the ability to (inter)connect with all the possibilities of the universe, recovering historical memory and the lost sense of unity and harmony with all forms of life: *Mitakuyeability*.

## 2. SUSTAINABILITY AND MODERNITY

The concept of sustainability taken up by international institutions in recent years refers to the environmental awareness of the 70s and 80s of the last century, a period in which, as Beato (1998) argues, the set of ecosystemic alterations are configured as a threat and, therefore, assumes relevance in the public debate. Underlying the approach used by institutions and recent environmental movements (Colombo 2020) is the concept of fear or threat, which determines the drive towards change in our economic, political and social systems (Beck 2000, 67), and which is characterizing the attempts to break the current economic growth model. Yet this approach has already suffered many setbacks. Even though we can hope for a great and continuous awareness of public opinion towards environmental crises, this will only be convincing and actionable at times: everything will cease at the next global economic crisis (Senatore and Sterpone 2019) or, as it is happening today, to the next health crisis, which will inevitably lead to a systematic disappearance of the various environmental problems to give space (legitimately) to the consequences of the pandemic. Is it enough to consider sustainability as an effect induced only by environmental crises?

The fear is that once the fright of a possible environmental threat returns, also the old model of exploitation of resources will be immediately re-established, until the evidence of a new environmental threat crosses the information doors (Colombo 2020). Therefore it is clear that the strategy that we are carrying out with a lot of effort at the moment, could prove ineffective. The problem is that this strategy is based on occasional and improvised sustainable models by institutions, which

<sup>2</sup> The term does not stand as absolute innovation. The indigenous literature and that one of the sectors refer to similar concepts even if with different terminology, but they have not been used with the intent of re-discussing sustainability, but rather to reinforce some concepts aimed at highlighting elements of environmental enhancement and protection. The use of the term *Mitakuyeability* is intended to facilitate scientific discussion and conceptually simplifies an explanation. The stimulus to use this term is to begin inserting references of traditional knowledge into academic and scientific debates.

produce laws and prescriptions built essentially on fear and potential risks that grow, in a latent way, with the exponential growth of the productive forces in the process of modernization and that are transformed only when the threat is evident and obvious.

Therefore the basic assumption of this work therefore starts from the conviction that sustainability must be understood as a model of culturalization of society, a key condition for the construction of a sustainable society, in other words based on the principle of imitation of nature as a process of evolution and development economic, but above all cultural. The realization of this model of culturalization of society can only take place through the redefinition of the roles of knowledge, which must, on the one hand, re-establish the task of modern science, and, on the other, reconsider the role of other sciences neglected up to now: the historical-humanistic ones, the philosophical and sociological ones. Furthermore, it is essential to reconstitute the relationship between ethics and technique, returning to favoring what was pure knowledge, the only one able to best serve the search for harmony with the whole (Bateson 1984) and not exclusively the human utility and technical-economic development as a push towards technological rationalization resulting from modernization (Eisenstadt 1979; Bauman 1991; Beck 2000).

Man must renounce his power, the achievements that have led him to a limited knowledge or better, a knowledge linked to know-how and to produce tools that can compromise his own life on Earth. Knowledge, oriented through *responsible freedom* (Benedetto XVI 2009), will allow mankind to interpret and shape the natural environment. This is a challenge that even Pope Francesco (2015) has well expressed in the encyclical letter *Laudato Si* where he denounces that «the human environment and the natural environment degrade together, and we will not be able to adequately address environmental degradation, if we don't pay attention to the causes that have to do with human and social degradation (Monti 2020). Knowledge has the task of re-establishing the balance between the laws of nature and the laws of man.

This need is given not only because natural systems that have maintained their physiological characteristics unchanged for millennia are at risk, but, above all, because man as a living being is an integral part of nature itself. Only through this semantic reconstruction could we really understand that sustainability is a complex process that absolutely cannot be based on the feeling of fear. This does not mean that it is not possible to build a sustainable society following the evolution of technical and technological progress, but what must be taken into consideration with respect to the past is that the alterations of the economic, industrial and

productive systems, resulting from the modernization process can unleash destructive forces, in front of which man's capacity for imagination appears inadequate (Beck 2000).

This evolutionary process that began at the time of industrialization and which continues following the path of modernization provides for the implementation of a transition towards an increasingly global *risk distributor* (Beck 2000) society, with which to deal with and prepare the necessary antibodies, essential for a social transformation that will have to respond to potentially irreversible threats. It is difficult to predict how this transition will take place, but certainly, as Beck himself (2000, 29) states, «the Weberian concept of *rationalization* is no longer sufficient to understand the reality of this late modernity produced by the success of rationalization. With the growth of the potential of rationality aimed at the purpose (Zweckrationalität), the incalculability of its consequences also grows». All this indicates the need to develop new methodological systems that can include the different specialist components of each individual discipline and that are able to combine the different scientific rationalities, focusing on the *banal*, *not current* and *mistreated* authentic knowledge.

### 3. AN ALTERNATIVE STUDY ON SUSTAINABILITY

The theory on the culturalization of society, as a basis for the construction of sustainable economic, social and environmental models, is strengthened by recent research, which starting from a historical inconsistency, the Soviet experience and the first movement for the protection of nature (Senatore 2016; 2014; Weiner 1988) trace the origins of sustainability far from the West and western modernity. Not only is a distance topographical, but it is also theoretical. A clear departure from the complex elaboration that has led us so far. Such research starts from the crisis and the rethinking of modernity. Since the second half of the twentieth century, numerous theories concerning modernity have opposed each other, attributing to it new terms such as: *postmodernity*, *late modernity*, *second modernity* or *liquid modernity*.

The contemporary debate relies on the one hand on the concept of *late modernity* which is interpreted by Giddens (1994) as a passage to the radicalization of modernity without ever having emerged from it, on the other hand, starting from 1979, the year in which Lyotard (2014) published: *The postmodern condition*, the term *postmodern* begins to experience a certain success in the social sciences. Lyotard's hypothesis is that

one of the most evident transformations of postmodern society is the change in the condition of knowledge in more developed societies. The postmodern condition expresses the perception of an inadequacy of the categories with which we have described the social world up to now and has within it the claim to define the current phase of world history as a *post-modernity*. In the last phase of his work, Bauman (2000) intended to compare the transition from modernity to postmodernity to the transition from the solid to the liquid state of society, developing an expression known to most as *liquid modernity*. Late modernity maintains «a partial continuity with modernity» unlike postmodernity, which «is understood as a substantial leap that no longer allows a direct link with modernity», and «to a large extent, it is anti-modernity» (Giacomantonio 2007, 31-32).

The analyzes just presented are certainly not negligible, but for many sociologists they are not entirely convincing. In this sense, in the context of the attempts to re-elaborate the representations that we have, at least in sociology, a notion that seems to have acquired increasing importance lately is that of Eisenstadt's *multiple modernities*. Central author in the history of social sciences of the last sixty years, his intellectual enterprise has modified the classical theory of modernization and constitutes an essential point of reference (Jedlowski 2013). As Jedlowski states (Crespi, Jedlowski and Rauty 2000, 86) «if on the one hand it allows us to criticize certain too one-sided visions of modernity (to which the idea of the *post-modern* actually reacts), on the other too hastily to the idea that we are in a *postmodernity* with vague characters». Sociology, for a long time, has been the victim of theoretical constructions that saw in modernization a predetermined path, in modernity a normative model and which rested on «a model of convergent and gradual development, based on trust in the universal characteristics of progress that West knows» (Jedlowski 2013).

The limit was therefore to consider modernity as homogeneous, that is, not plural. And it is precisely from this limit that Eisenstadt (1998) takes inspiration for his analysis «starting from the original vision of modernity as a set of multiple processes and the product of factors that are often contradictory to each other, therefore multiple and ambivalent, in themselves reacting to those that they are the American theories of modernization» (Affuso 2016, 17). The Israeli sociologist will thus come to develop the now well-known paradigm of multiple modernities according to which «modernity does not give rise to a single civilization, [...] but rather to the development of numerous models of civilization, that is, of societies or civilizations that share common characteristics and which also tend to develop different yet similar ideological and institutional

dynamics» (Eisenstadt 2006, 15-16). Modernity is therefore plural because it is animated by social groups that interpret it in different ways and are in competition with each other.

As Eisenstadt writes, «practically from the beginning of the spread of modernity, multiple modernities developed» (2006). According to the author, therefore, it is clear how, following a socio-comparative analysis of various countries, including Russia, we cannot speak of a lack of modernity, but rather of failures that are an integral part of modernization and of modernity itself. However anti-Western or anti-capitalistic, they cannot be called totally anti-modern. The attempt of the study proposed by Eisenstadt (1964) is to de-westernize the notion of modernity: «One of the most important implications of the term *multiple modernities* is that modernity and westernization are not the same thing; Western models of modernity are not the only authentic modernities, although they enjoy a historical precedence and continue to be a basic reference point for others» (Eisenstadt 2006, 10).

The thought of Eisenstadt not only gives us a new concept of modernity, but allows us to include the Russian experience, pre and post revolutionary, in its peculiarity, within a broader sociological framework, a framework that allows a different and perhaps more complete reading of what has happened in the last century from an environmental point of view. In the early 20's in Russia a movement for the protection of nature develops which will express in political, economic and scientific-environmental terms a series of studies, cultural and applicative contaminations (Senatore 2014; Gare 1996; Weiner 1988) that will anticipate all the characteristics of what, only in the 1980s, will take the name of sustainability.

Having acknowledged that the path of Western modernity is not the only model that represents the universal characteristics of progress, there are intrinsic consequences of modernity, which in places other than those attributable to Western culture, may have given rise to the concept of sustainability. In particular, the Russian experience - from 1905 to 1928 - has given way to question the sociological theoretical assumptions that see sustainability as a new conflictual semantics, replacing the old linguistic modes, which takes shape as a secondary intrinsic consequence of modernity, and which sees it as dependent on the essential characteristics of capitalist formations (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1999, 23).

For these reasons, sociological theories have not deemed it necessary to investigate the cultural phenomenon linked to environmental issues in Russia in the 1920s, with the exception of some authors such as Arran Gare (1996; 2000), an important philosopher and scholar of social



behavior and environmental movements. The delineation of this precise link between modernity and the environmental question (Gare 2006) has conditioned the theoretical studies to the point of making inexplicable, and therefore negligible, experiences such as those of the environmental movement present in Russia, experiences distant in time and space from coordinated assumptions for the birth of the concept of sustainability. Yet, in the early years of the twentieth century, before the Bolshevik revolution, modernity brought about a cultural and institutional progress quite different from that present in the Western panorama, a context that gave rise to an extraordinary scientific ferment of the highest level, strongly influenced by the classics of late 19th century literature.

In this context, the environmental problem was addressed as a potential threat to the future of humanity in the absence of real industrialization and any environmental crisis as a direct or indirect consequence. Before, during and after the years of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, therefore, an environmental movement was born that contributed to social, political and economic planning, promoting a process of integral development of a sustainable type. It is important for our work to distinguish this Bolshevik period from the Stalin one (Cohen 1978). Without entering into the historical debate, it is important to emphasize how the period immediately after the revolution emphasized the role of science and academia and at the same time also that in favor of the protection of nature and the study of the behavior of natural organizations (Weiner 1988). What happened after the mid-1930s can be defined as a slow and constant darkening of ecological policies, certainly not in continuity with the Bolshevik period.

In Russia between 1918 and 1921 a series of laws were promulgated for the protection of parks and forests which led in 1924 to the creation of one of the most important and oldest associations called VOOP (Soviet Society for the Protection of Nature). Russian scientists and scholars succeeded in influencing Lenin's political choices in the promotion of environmental policies (Gare 1996) and in the conservation of nature, allowing the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic to obtain appreciable results in the protection and in the theoretical and applied environmental sciences: Daniil Kashkarov, Stanchinskii, the studies on the ecological harmony of the pioneers of ecology, Borodin and Semenov-tian-shanskii, Lunacharsky, the first nature reserves of 1919 to reach the 4 million hectares of nature reserves (*zapovednik*) of 1929, entrusted to the commissariat of education to avoid any agricultural or industrial exploitation, the first university courses on ecology and environmental sciences, Vladimir Vernadskii and many other scholars and academics.

The environmental issue in Russia was one of the most debated and

widespread topics in the scientific and academic fields, but also in the political and economic one. Aleksandr Bogdanov (1989) in 1906 wrote *Red Star*, a Novel-Utopia which describes in a precise way the environmental crises, the problem of deforestation, the danger of the scarcity of resources and recommends a rational use of the same.

One wonders, therefore, how is it possible that in a place far enough from the West, if only from a temporal point of view, which has not experienced a profoundly industrial phase, which has not seen the pollution of large cities, rivers, lakes and coasts, which has never suffered the problem of the scarcity of resources and has never faced the problem of the uncontrolled evolution of science and technology, such an indisputable interest in economic development could be manifested, social and above all cultural of a sustainable type?

The only plausible answer is that knowledge, understood as universal knowledge, has had the fundamental task of transmitting, in a transversal way, throughout Russian society, the awareness of the role that man plays in the ecosystem.

A fertile ground where this awareness is already present at the end of the nineteenth century and crosses the entire society through the dissemination of literary works, theatrical performances, tales and stories that have as their central element respect for nature and its imitation in the daily behaviors and in the cyclicity of life. All this stems from a profound culturalization of society that has generated economic, political and cultural processes very similar to those that we will theorize in the West only since the 1970s, but which still have no real application today.

#### **4. TERMINOLOGY AND ITS USE IN THE MAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP**

The culturalization of society as a promoter of a new model of sustainability must be analyzed in the light of two fundamental elements and of the effects they have in the man-nature relationship: the improper use (and abuse) of terminology, in particular in political-economic contexts, and the Traditional Knowledge (TK).

The weight of terminology (and language) and the conceptualization of terms have greatly influenced the agendas of policymakers and the acceptance of sustainable policies by the community. Between institutions and science there is a dialogue that intertwines technical knowledge and socio-political knowledge and the product of this dialogue is in turn intertwined with the knowledge of common sense. In this double passage we are witnessing changes in the language that it is enriched by extraneous concepts (elaborated before in the scientific field and then in that one

institutional) in elements that are assimilated in the world of common experience, through what Moscovici (1961) calls *social representations*, that is, those forms of knowledge, socially elaborated and shared and having a practical and concurrent to the construction of a reality common to a social whole.

It's important to highlight another aspect of the environmental question: scientific and TK collided. Scientific knowledge has always been considered of a global nature, rational, reductionist, supposedly value-free and synchronic, while TK of a local nature, intuitive, holistic, spiritual and diachronic. The prevalence of the scientific scepticism over the TK, the last one intended as *folklore*, has influenced the terminology of the sector by dividing scholars, thus creating, over time, complex concepts not universally accepted that bring about a double reflection:

1. The numerous terminologies, intended as bearer of the new, but also as modifier and integrator of previous concepts, is strongly stimulated by the fact that in absence of an universally recognized definition, the complexity of the concept has lent itself to various interpretations;

2. The improper use and/or continuous abuse of the terms sustainable development and sustainability has produced a loss of effectiveness in political-environmental practices because the community has ceased to reflect itself in their high value in the face of continuous and repetitive environmental crises never resolved. It has therefore created confusion, affecting the reachability of a culturalization of society aimed not so much at understanding environmental issues, but rather the processes of planning, programming and implementation of practices capable of mitigating the effects and improving the quality of life.

Therefore, terminology plays a fundamental role in the processes of culturalization, negatively affecting the same number of processes of transmission and consolidation of pro-environmental knowledge.

In this analysis, a point to clarify is that sustainability and sustainable development, although used interchangeably as synonyms to refer to the same principles and practices, are two concepts that present some profound differences.

Sustainability is rather a socio-ecological process characterized by the desire to pursue a common ideal; it refers to actions centered on people and based on conservation (Surampalli *et al.*, 2020; O'Riordan 1988) which find their guiding principle in sustainable development. Sustainable development is a normative concept and, referring to the well-known definition contained in the Brundtland Report (1987), it establishes the principles that societies must not only be inspired by, but

also respect, in order to guarantee both well being and survival.

Gare (2017), eg, talks about the loss of effectiveness of the notion of sustainable development. She considers sustainable development as a slogan for not seeing the gravity of the situation considering that the struggle for survival is being lost.

Sustainability is a process in continuous evolution, sustainable development seems to have stopped, this explains why sustainability faces new (heterogeneous) challenges, the latest in chronological order is climate change, while sustainable development has established itself and stopped at articulating itself in a plurality of dimensions aimed at the cultural and ecological critique of the economy.

The conceptual and definition complexity is reflected in the literature which, on the basis of the different contributions, presents non-unanimous analyzes on the two concepts considered complex and which do not lend themselves to applicability in practice, White (2013) is one of those authors who criticize the substance of the two terms, asking the question: *How can something be sustainable and develop?* Similar questions can be found in Costanza and Patten (1995) and Hediger (2000). An interesting question mark is instead that one of Gare (2017) who asks: «So, what alternatives are there to sustainable development?» A question that shifts the reflection on the necessity to mobilize people into action.

Although, conceptually, sustainability can be traced back to the Brundtland Report of 1987, its modern conception has its roots in economic forestry thanks to Von Carlowitz<sup>3</sup> (2013), who faced the most insidious challenge of the time: managing and preserving the mountain economy, and meeting the demands for timber from a rapidly growing population in ever-expanding cities. His goal was to allow future generations the same possibilities in terms of forest exploitation. In the future of the woods there was written what would become the definition par excellence of sustainability, and we find its essence, eg, in the processes of nature protection (in academic contexts) in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. (See paragraph 3).

The idea of sustainable use of resources from forestry then moved, in the context of ecology as a principle of respecting nature's ability to regenerate itself, and before arriving in the Brundtland Report as a fundamental principle, it launches the environmental question of the 60s and then materializing with the oil crisis of the 70s in which the world oil fuel-based economy is measured against the scarcity of resources.

The abuse of the use of the term sustainable development over time has produced a real paradox, emptying the term of power and

<sup>3</sup> He was a mining superintendent of the Electoral Principality of Saxony.

effectiveness as well as of guidance and failing to take root in policy purposes. The communities have witnessed a process of intensification of the classical economic model unable to orient the attitude of companies towards sustainability. The history of renewable energy, placed on the sidelines of policies, is a clear example of this. The ineffectiveness of the term sustainable development leads to a reworking and integration of the concept by borrowing a tool from marketing belonging to the sphere of Corporate Social Responsibility: *The Triple bottom line* (Elkington 1997) which permits measuring corporate sustainability.

The relaunch of the concept as an orientation of attitudes (both of businesses and citizens) then passes through the specific term green that seeks to combine necessity and desirability (Campiglio 2013) trying to build a less impactful and more based on low greenhouse gas emissions. The green economy, in fact, is more oriented to the market than to the human dimension. Behind every need to change the term there is an economic reason, the passage from sustainable to green is because of the economic crisis and the subsequent wave of recession in the years 2007-2009. The new demands of sustainability could no longer be brought forward by a concept that was only biased towards the ecological dimension. It no longer made sense to talk about sustainable development, but about green growth, a concept capable of combining the environmental dimension with that of economic and employment recovery.

But green growth gives way to the new concept: smart that bases the idea of development on knowledge and innovation, a term that lends itself to another concept of sustainability: transition. But towards what? Smart is a constantly evolving concept and seems to be loaded with excessive weight: as if it must necessarily be adaptable to every occasion and every problem (Riva Sanseverino *et al.* 2014). Cities become smarter thanks to innovation and technology that lend themselves to redirecting their goals towards the sphere of least impact. Once again, a concept very steeped in technology and economics. For some authors of the Restore Action of the Global Scenario Group (GSG) we are witnessing a progressive transition of a paradigm built on environmental thinking that goes towards restorative and regenerative sustainability, in which a new era of sustainability is strengthened that moves away from simple (and reductive) impact and it moves towards increasing well-being. A new concept that acquires greater weight in the Anthropocene era, in which the division between man and nature is based on the interconnection of the two elements.

The transition to the new paradigm of sustainability is a real ecological and humanistic reform that will change global civilization. (see also Gare, 2017)

To reaffirm and strengthen the role of the human dimension there is a term of pure invention by Calvani (2020): the *trivabilità* that actually takes up the English term thriving (Smitsman 2019; Laszlo 2019; Russell 2013). For Calvani *trivabilità* is the description in one word of the exceptional experience of happy and regenerative sustainability that has been taking place for decades in the mountain communities of the Golden Triangle, on the border between Thailand, Myanmar and Laos, it is a neologism that indicates the path of a group of people who move away from unsustainable socio-economic practices towards a world where everyone has a high quality of life. It represents a final destination for global humanism aiming at sustainability.

While for Smitsman (2019) it is an ecosystemic evolutionary learning process, for Laszlo (2019) it is the human capacity to lead a thriving, joyful and loving life in coexistence with one's living environment, Russell's (2013) idea instead, embraces the flow of growth as a source of life, joy and meaning.

What emerges is that it is certainly evident that at the center of the current scientific debate there is a change of system, there is the role of humanity and civil society and less and less an economic point of view, but once again there is we are faced with the reworking of concepts that do not translate into practical arrangements because there is no evidence that they can actually allow that expected change. They require a work of Change of Self in the face of a goal that cannot be grasped immediately because the individuals of the liquid society (Bauman 2000) have lost the ability to appeal to values and forms of certainty.

Therefore, we observe and believe that the human dimension brings back in the public and scientific debate the fundamental role of TK as a deep knowledge of the environment and as a factor that will enable knowledge of land use planning and will determine whether humanity will be able to carry out a project aimed at creating a sustainable future on this planet.

## **5. TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AS SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITION PROCESS**

TK, simplifying its definition, is the accumulation of empirical observation and interaction with the environment. In other words, it is based on the cumulative collective experience tested over the centuries and is an integral part of indigenous peoples ethical beliefs and worldviews.

Indigenous people and their communities demonstrated in fact, thanks to the *kosmos-corpus-praxis* model, that their approach is more suitable and sustainable to contribute to the growth of a community.

Already in the early 1990s the eco-centricity of native populations was recognized, believing that their ability to actively participate in sustainable development practices had to be recognized, welcomed and translated into national and international efforts to implement an ecologically sound and sustainable development, how it was stated in Agenda 21 - Chapter 26 (1992).

TK systems exist in fields such as medicine, food and agriculture, environmental management and biodiversity conservation, nutrition. But to date, their knowledge has only been resorted to on sporadic occasions, modernizing it. TK can be represented by 5 different but interconnected forms (Shelton and Katrinka 1993) and can favor the construction of an environmental Self which is decisive in the adaptation and mitigation of the effects of the environmental crisis:

1. TK is *culture*, because it is part of a more complex picture of «indigenous voices» that is increasingly gaining ground within the institutions;
2. the idea of *development*: it can create forms of development adequate or appropriate to sustainability.
3. *participation* of native populations in thematic tables and planning processes;
4. *Rights*, the recognition of their traditional knowledges must place native populations in an area of social justice and reduce and / or eliminate processes of exploitation and poverty.
5. *Partnership*, it implies the need for a new type of relationship between indigenous peoples, the national government and Western science.

TK is intimately linked to cultural identity and spirituality and generally distinguishes a community from other native people. In this work we refer to the Lakota culture of the Great Plains of South Dakota. Lakota people<sup>4</sup> doesn't has a term to refer to the concept of sustainability, because it does not exist in their language, rather their culture is enriched with ceremonies and prayers handed down orally based on sacredness of nature and one of these is the Mitakuye Oyasin (*we are all related*) which is the maximum expression of the concept of connection, between men and between men and the entire universe.

Lakota culture can be represented as a perfect circle at the center of which there is no dominant man, as instead it is represented by the

<sup>4</sup> Lakota tribes are one of the three prominent subcultures of the Sioux people. Their current lands are in North and South Dakota. Following the treaties with the American government, were deceitfully reallocated in marginal and disadvantaged areas called reservations. The political strategies inspired first by Manifest Destiny and then by the institution of the Boarding Schools were aimed, as a well-known motto said, to save man and to kill the Indian.

anthropocentric dimension, rather it favors an earth-centric dimension. According to this last conception, man is nothing more than a small point of the circle and exists because he interacts with every other point that determines the opportunities of the universe. He exists because he is related. The life of every Lakota is inscribed in the land, with which a relationship of respect and gratitude is established, lived not through the *when*, but through the *where*. Place (land) is what determines a Lakota, a place, an area to strengthen the sacred bond with Mother Earth. (see also: Groe 2017)

Colonialism and the linear economic paradigm have denaturalized the subsistence approach with the land of the native populations to replace it with one of pure dependence. In the Lakota idea of sustainability, you can take from nature what is not superfluous. They recognize the holiness of nature in all its forms while respecting limits and circularity. For them land is a source of life not a resource. It cannot be owned, it is not inherited from the ancestors; you borrow it from your children. It is their duty to return it.

Thanks to their culture they are activating transition processes towards a multiform independence, and towards the (re) construction of *nation* (Groe 2016). As part of their vision of energy sustainability, eg, TK has allowed a process of building an indigenized energy capable of satisfying both the needs of their own region and that ones of America. Cultural values, life-styles combined with new technologies have allowed them to build a better future for their community and for future generations. The community becomes self-sufficient, capable of taking care of mother earth and keeping its cultural identity strong.

It is starting from these considerations that we believe it is useful to summarize all our reasoning in a term that enhances its essence and can be more easily absorbed and disseminated: *Mitakuyeability*.

The term is given by the union of two words *Mitakuye* which in the Lakota language means connected and *ability* understood as that innate or acquired ability over time with experience or through other forms of learning. We believe that a process of culturalization of society in which the TK of native populations occupies the role of guide and orientation can contribute to developing skills of individuals and societies of translating the ecological, geographical and ancestral history in cleaner, safer social and economic forms. *Mitakuyeability* is a form of dialogue (connection) between three dimensions (intended as We are all one): *themselves, otherness and the natural world*, building processes inspired by nature and not processes in which nature must adapt to them.

Referring to Shelton and Katrinka's work (1993) we can say that *Mitakuyeability* must be read in a cultural process that tends to



empowerment in which: *I am who with whom I relate and my ability to act*. This scenario of empowerment will be possible only if development strategies policy are knowledge-centered.

If fully understood and appreciated, *Mitakuyeability*, it is felt, will foster a sense of environmental accountability. Once a sense of accountability towards the natural environment has been nurtured, a sense of personal responsibility is likely to follow.

Although perceived as a theoretical rather than a practical concept, the term *Mitakuyeability* refers to the narration of concepts and stories. Telling stories means communicating experiences, they allow the community to be involved and when stories of practices, identities and territories are told with stories we act, and we authors through Lakota narratives want to act. The expected and hoped-for result is that the term *Mitakuyeability* may be useful:

- To the stimulation of a sharing of a common vision based on the reciprocal relationship between man and nature;
- To the creation of networks and collaboration to promote sustainability planning capable of making the idea of interconnection practical.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Our intention is to animate the debate on sustainability through two analysis processes: a) to read sustainability not in terms of fear as a response to the environmental and economic crisis but in terms of culturalization of the society in which the environmental vision prevails as harmony and relationship, and b) traditional knowledge. In particular, in this work, the latter is considered as a cultural tool capable of directing policies towards alternative and sustainable forms of development.

About the discourse on sustainability, what has been done so far is that technological and economic tools have been used to remedy conditions of threat and fear that have led to the threat itself. In fact, the diffusion of technology and the idea of economy-progress have characterized the separation from the environment, but they are used as a solution. This is why it is necessary to rethink sustainability through a transversal knowledge, that is, knowledge that gives value to the social and cultural dimension, as much as the technological and economic one. In other words, to remedy the problems caused by purely techno-economic knowledge, it is necessary to spread what we call culturalization, otherwise faced with a new threat, a new fear, such a, eg, that of the covid-19 pandemic, the environmental question will once again be set aside to face the new crisis.

Gare (2017) faces a similar argument and introduces, as an alternative to the ineffective idea of sustainable development, the aspect of civilization, or rather civilized progress able to create a new world order. Always the same author highlights another new and important concept: transculturalism. This last one formulated in Russia and Eastern Europe serves to allow members of particular cultures to re-evaluate the different traditions within their own cultures.

On the basis of the arguments made so far, thanks to the analysis of the literature and the reading of the latest events that are affecting our communities, our term Mitakuyeability, still being studied, contributes: a) a passage of analysis that goes from the technological and economic dimension to the human and social one, and b) to the interpretation of sustainability in terms of a culturalization process based on the redefinition of knowledge and the circular relationship between man and nature. The term, moreover, is part of a necessary change of language, thought and approach in the practical treatment of sustainability since it translates a process of building of empowerment. The adoption of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda opens up a unique opportunity to align TK with national strategies and Mitakuyeability could liven up planning processes. For this reason, we believe that the term must be further explored.

If Gare (2017) speaks of the transformation of humanity through the utopian notion of ecological civilization, we discuss about Mitakuyeability which it presents itself as a practical answer to the call for Gare's humanity culture. Mitakuyeability allows: a governance based on natural times and historical memory, mitigation between exploitation and enhancement, a language richer of tradition making the practices easier.

## RIFERIMENTI BIBLIOGRAFICI

- AFFUSO O. (2016). *Modernizzazione in pezzi. Torsioni strutturali della modernità in uno studio di Shmuel Eisenstadt*. In ID. (a cura di), *Shmuel N. Eisenstadt. Modernizzazione in pezzi*. Milano: Mimesis.
- AGENDA 21 (1992). Chapter 26, *Recognizing and Strengthening the Role of Indigenous People and Their Communities*. Conference on Environment & Development Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. <https://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/Agenda%2021.pdf>
- BATESON G. (1984). *Verso un'ecologia della mente*. Milano: Adelphi.
- BAUMAN Z. (1991). A Sociological Theory of Postmodernity. *Thesis Eleven*, 29(1): 33-46.

- BAUMAN Z. (2000). *Modernità liquida*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- BEATO F. (1998). I quadri teorici della sociologia dell'ambiente tra costruzionismo sociale e oggettivismo strutturale. *Quaderni di sociologia*, 42(16): 41-46.
- BECK U. (2000). *La società del rischio*. Roma: Carocci.
- BECK U., GIDDENS A., LASH S. (1999). *Modernizzazione riflessiva. Politica, tradizione ed estetica nell'ordine sociale della modernità*. Trieste: Asterios.
- BENEDETTO XVI (2009). Lettera enciclica *Caritas in Veritate*. Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- BOGDANOV A. (1989). *La stella rossa*. Palermo: Sellerio Editore.
- BRUNDTLAND G.H. (1987). *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*. Geneva, UN-Document A/42/427. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>
- CAMPIGLIO E. (2013). *Green economy*. Milano-Torino: Pearson Italia.
- COHEN S. (1978). Bolscevismo e Stalinismo. *Studi Storici*, 19(4): 685-715.
- COLOMBO F. (2020). *Ecologia dei media. Manifesto per una comunicazione gentile*. Milano: Vita & Pensiero.
- COSTANZA R., PATTEN B.C. (1995). Defending and predicting sustainability. *Ecological Economics*, 15: 193-196.
- CRESPI F., JEDLOWSKI, P., RAUTY R. (2000). *La sociologia. Contesti storici e modelli culturali*. Roma: Laterza.
- SHELTON H.D., KATRINKA E. (1993). Introduction. In Shelton H.D., Katrinka E. (a cura di) *Traditional Knowledge and Sustainable Development*. Environmentally Sustainable Development Proceedings, Series No. 4. Washington D.C.: The World Bank.
- EISENSTADT S.N. (2006). *Sulla Modernità*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino.
- EISENSTADT S.N. (1998). Comparative studies and sociological theory: autobiographical notes. *The American Sociologist*, 29(1): 38-58.
- EISENSTADT S.N. (1979). *Tradition, Wandel und Modernität*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- ESPINOSA A., WALKER J. (2011). *A Complexity Approach to Sustainability: Theory and Application*. Londra: Imperial College Press.
- FRANCESCO (2015). Lettera enciclica *Laudato si'*. Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana
- GARE A. (1996). Soviet Environmentalism: The Path not Taken. In Benton T. (ed.) *The Greening of Marxism*, New York – London: Guilford Publications.

- GARE A. (2000). Aleksandr Bogdanov's history, sociology and philosophy of science. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, Part A, 31(2): 231-248.
- GARE A. (2006). *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*. London-New York: Routledge.
- GARE A. (2017). From sustainable development to ecological civilization: winning the war for survival. *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 13(3): 130-153.
- GIACOMANTONIO F. (2007). *Il discorso sociologico della tarda modernità. Individui, identità, democrazia*. Genova: Il Nuovo Melangolo.
- GIDDENS A. (1994). *Le conseguenze della modernità. Fiducia e rischio, sicurezza e pericolo*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- GROE L. (2016). Tentativi di indipendenza energetica e di sovranità tribale nella riserva di Rosebud. Un approccio etnografico. In G. Catalano (a cura di), *Fuoco, Acqua, Terra e Aria Scritti in memoria di Osvaldo Pironi*. Roma: Aracne Editrice.
- GROE L. (2017). *Trauma (storico) culturale intergenerazionale. Analisi psico-sociale degli effetti prodotti nelle comunità native americane a seguito dell'istituzione dei collegi*. Roma: Aracne Editrice.
- HEDIGER W. (2000). Sustainable development and social welfare. *Ecological Economics*, 32(3): 481-492.
- JEDLOWSKI P. (2013). La modernità in molte forme. In Grossbölting T., Livi M., Spagnolo C., (a cura di), *L'avvio della società liquida? Il passaggio degli anni Settanta come tema per la storiografia tedesca e italiana*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- LASZLO A. (2019). *Syntony sense: Evolutionary Intuition for World Changers*. <https://nourished.farm/>
- LONG J. (2016). Constructing the narrative of the sustainability fix: Sustainability, social justice and representation in Austin, TX. *Urban Studies*, 53(1): 149-172.
- LYOTARD J.F. (2014). *La condizione postmoderna. Rapporto sul sapere*. Roma: Feltrinelli.
- MONTIL. (2020). Generations and New Technologies between Utopia and Dystopia. *Teoria E Critica Della Regolazione Sociale / Theory and Criticism of Social Regulation*, 1(18): 41-54. Retrieved from <https://www.mimesisjournals.com/ojs/index.php/tcrs/article/view/50>
- O'RIORDAN T. (1988). The politics of sustainability. In Turner R.K. (a cura di), *Sustainable Environmental Management: Principles and Practice*. Boulder: Westview Press.

- RIVA SANSEVERINO E., RIVA SANSEVERINO R., VACCARO V. (2014). *Atlante delle smart city. Modelli di sviluppo sostenibili per città e territori*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- RUSSELL J.M. (2013). *Thrivability: Breaking Through to a World That Works*. Londra: Triarchy Press Ltd.
- SENATORE G., STERPONE V. (2019). La sostenibilità come modello di culturalizzazione politico-istituzionale. *Rivista Trimestrale di Scienza dell'Amministrazione. Studi di Teoria e Ricerca Sociale*. 2, 4.
- SENATORE G. (2016). *Modernità e sostenibilità in Russia: Alle origini dell'ambientalismo scientifico*. Roma: Edizioni Nuova Cultura.
- SENATORE G. (2014). Sostenibilità e conflitti ambientali in Russia tra il 1918 e 1973. *Sociologia, Rivista quadrimestrale di Scienze Storiche e Sociali*, 48(2): 63-75.
- SMITSMAN A. (2019). *Into the Heart of Systems Change*. Phd Thesis ICIS, <https://cris.maastrichtuniversity.nl/en/publications/into-the-heart-of-systems-change>.
- SURAMPALLI R.Y., ZHANG T.C., GOYAL K.M., BRAR S.K., TYAGI R.D. (2020). *Sustainability: Fundamentals and Applications*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- SYVITSKI J.P.M. (2012). Anthropocene: An epoch of our making. *Global Change. International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme*, Issue 78, March (2012): 12.
- VON CARLOWITZ H.C. (1713). *Sylvicultura Oeconomica: oder Haußwirthliche Nachricht und Naturmäßige Anweisung zur Wilden Baum-Zucht*. München: Oekom Verlag, 2013.
- WEINER D.R. (1988). *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*. Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- White M.A. (2013). Sustainability: I know it when I see it. *Ecological Economics*, 86: 213-217.