

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are very pleased to get the opportunity to report about our research project “**Blocked Transition? – Spaces for Thinking and Action in Sustainable Regional Development**”

This research project is supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research within the programme “Social-Ecological Research”. The programme focuses on the ecological crisis as a crisis of the societal relations to nature.¹

Our project association understands space as societal relation between wo/man, society and nature. The connection and tension between nature and society can never be resolved. On the other side they are of course two poles and have to be distinguished to be able to analyze natural and societal phenomena. Our project is based on the hypothesis, that the dichotomies – not only between the abstracts of nature and culture but also between production and reproduction, knowledge and feeling, male and female, public and private etc. – are used to separate the poles instead of discovering their multiple relationships. This is based on the fact, that the poles are hierarchic and gender co notated (gender biased), which can be proved in the humanities from the Bible with its: “and replenish the earth, and subdue it”², via John Locke’s right to private property. His notion of work is well understood as work subduing nature and cultivating land but does not include family and household. In this way family and household including the woman within are looked at as “nature”. The division is carried on by Adam Smith. He doesn’t consider the productive activities of women in the household at all. Women don’t exist in his theory. He designs the male housekeeper with paid servants without mentioning any woman at all! And it is not yet finished with today’s way of defining which nature is for protection and which is to be used.³

The dichotomic pattern can also be found in science: the relation between scientific disciplines is hierarchic too. To overcome it our research association unites scientists from economics, ecology, education and planning theories, biology, sociology and political sciences. To cooperate interdisciplinarily offers the chance to trace hierarchies in theory and methodology of our home-sciences and their relationship to each other, compare the use and understanding of categories and reflect upon the disciplinary self-images. Furthermore we try to overcome the hierarchy between scientific and non-scientific knowledge by cooperating with regional activists and experts in their fields of action.

¹ Thomas Jahn, Peter Wehling (1998): Gesellschaftliche Naturverhältnisse – Konturen eines theoretischen Konzepts. In: Karl-Werner Brand (Hg.): Soziologie und Natur. Theoretische Perspektiven, Opladen, S. 75-93
Egon Becker, Thomas Jahn (2003): Umriss einer kritischen Theorie gesellschaftlicher Naturverhältnisse, in: Gernot Böhme, Alexandra Manzei (Hg.): Kritische Theorie der Technik und der Natur, München, S. 91-112

² The Holy Bible, Genesis, Chapter 1, Verse 28

³ Adelheid Biesecker, Uta von Winterfeld (2004): Wertlos? Zur Ausgrenzung natürlicher Produktivität und weiblicher Arbeit bei John Locke und Adam Smith, in: Adelheid Biesecker, Wolfram Elsner (Hg.): Bremer Diskussionspapiere zur Institutionellen Ökonomie und Sozial-Ökonomie, Nr. 58, Bremen, Wuppertal, Dessau.

The project is based on feminist theories⁴ which enable us to perceive and analyze predominance in dichotomic patterns; not only in questions of sex and gender but also in all fields of societal relations to nature.

The association works in six project components:

1. Spatial Relations of Activities and Labour – focussing on production and reproduction, public and private spaces.
2. Environmental Spaces – focussing on distribution and participation in water management.
3. Spaces of Learning and Action – focussing on the transformation of knowledge to action and vice versa.
4. Nature-Culture-Spaces – focussing on division of nature and culture in connection with the protection and use of nature.
5. Normative Spaces – focussing on normative patterns exemplified in flood management and protection.
6. Spaces of Implementation – focussing on transdisciplinary cooperation.

Subsequently we report on the work packages 3, 4 and 6 and their way of looking at the research region where the river Mulde flows into the river Elbe. You probably heard about this region during the floods of summer 2002. This region is part of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve “River Landscape Middle Elbe” and a site of the World Cultural Heritage named “Dessau-Wörlitzer Garden Realm”. The region has been heavily influenced by decades of extreme environmental pollution through industries and by the rapid socio-economic changes in the 1990’s.

Within the component Nature-Culture-Spaces, I’m looking at the Biosphere Reserve and ask who speaks on what background (experience, science, politics, laws and administrative regulation) about nature and which activities of using and protecting nature follow from this. This is of special interest, because the concept of biosphere reserves tries to overcome the dichotomic pattern of nature and culture, its protection and use.

The interest within the component Spaces of Learning and Action is to analyse the preconditions and proceedings, the obstacles and judgements for learning and action to overcome the crisis of societal relations to nature.

Why do we continuously find a high discrepancy between environmental knowledge and human behaviour and what is the role of body experience, its social patterns and cognitive development in this? Why is some knowledge of higher value than other?

Why does the information about reasons of ecological crisis not lead to their extinction? How does individual activity turn into politics? How can abilities from a caring economy be transferred to market economy? How do we overcome the dichotomic patterns that coin our perception and learning processes?

⁴ Feminist theories offer a critical perspective on science and allow to deconstruct historically und culturally connotated hierarchical structures (overview in: Regina Becker-Schmidt, Gudrun-Axeli Knapp (2001): *Feministische Theorien zur Einführung*, Hamburg).

One of the tasks of the Biosphere Reserve is environmental education. The instruments are supposed to be: booklets, guided tours, lectures for instance in school classes and nature trails. Environmental education in this way is always tightly connected with activities for information and public relation. Nevertheless our questions are not thoroughly answered. Because: Which nature is presented on the nature trail and why and how should a schoolchild understand that it shall not search for beavers in their lodges.

We name the beaver here, because it is the symbol of the Biosphere Reserve “Middle Elbe” and we want to report now about our experiences during excursions into the biosphere reserve and the knowledge we gathered during interviews and talks with people working there.

One first aspect:

Why we protect nature is seldom asked. The people taking part in the excursion didn't ask either and our question “Why do you protect the beaver?” surprised and was answered by the guide with the arguments: “it is a rare species, has always lived here and is protected by law” – one woman from the group intervening “It lived here long before us!” But these answers lead only to more questions: Why do we have to protect rare species? Why must the beaver keep on living here? Why is it protected by law?

Obviously somebody had once the power to decide, what a species is, when it is rare and that we then have to protect it. Somebody, who had the power to make a law accordingly. Further on it is obviously not one person, but there must have been processes of decision, which are not reflected upon and not reported in a way, that one can understand it. This way people are excluded from the decision, cannot relate themselves to it and contribute their experience, knowledge, position and wishes. Giving reasons often relies on natural sciences as for instance in an interview with a person from the environmental administration. She spoke about a conflict between the protection of beavers and river trouts in a flora-fauna-habitat. In this special area the river trout has to be protected more urgently than the beaver. Asked, who decided that it was of higher value to protect the trout, she answered that it was not a question of decision but of facts based on natural science results.

Hence, natural sciences have the power to define which nature to protect where, how and when. Scientific knowledge in this way forms a factual logic, force of circumstance which seems to be unquestionable, unconveyable and unchangeable.

Despite all our knowledge about discursive science from the social sciences we cannot overcome this paradigm of natural sciences, although so far they did not show a way out of the environmental crisis.

If you ask educationalists, to convey environmental knowledge and ecological values they get into trouble. If nature is not anymore connected to people who are supposed to learn, knowledge about nature cannot be imparted to them.

So far we spoke about nature without considering its relationship to culture and society although we introduced you to these categories as an inseparable pair. We do not find any “pure” nature, but cyborgs everywhere. For instance the Kühnauer Lake which we visited on a guided tour within an accidentally mixed group of interested people: We learned that the lake is a backwater from the river Elbe naturally originated in the 14th century. The natural silting up was accelerated by eutrophication by intensive agriculture and a causeway built across. This is why the silting up can be described as a natural-cultural process.

Before people intervened in the Elbe with levees and bank reinforcements, the river often shifted its bed during flooding events. As these processes don't occur anymore a backwater was here artificially kept as such. This is called "restoration of nature", although it is rather "a modification of nature" because the original state can never be brought back. Yet it was not only nature that was restored but culture too.

The lake as part of the landscape design of the Wörlitz Garden Realm was modified according to the plans of garden designers from the early 19th century. This is called "recultivation". The same process depending on the viewpoint of the observer is denominated differently either as nature or as culture.

But again, this is not the whole story of the Kühnauer Lake: Participants of the visiting group, who live or lived there, connected the lake and its water meadows with their biography: games of their childhood, community, activities of their grandparents, sensual and body experience and social inclusion. They joined in the guide's explanations turning the speech into a conversation, adding their own views and stories about the lake and its history. Out of this "situated knowledge"⁵ originated and perpetuated a responsible treatment, emotional ties and knowledge handed down by oral tradition, enriched with the sensual experience of the narrator and the situation of narration. Their relationship towards the lake is continuously being fed by further activity in the area. At the time they were carefully observing measures which they connected to dyke building, not yet publicly announced. Whilst the local administration appreciated this informal knowledge of the inhabitants during the floods in 2002, there is no institutional political way to continuously include this knowledge into common activities for community development.

Which rating is given to this knowledge in comparison to the knowledge usually expected from the guide? We realized that neither the guide's speech nor the people's stories alone would have given us a "complete" impression. Only together they perfectly match each other. May be, this is a way "to take complexity seriously"⁶.

Speaking about the beaver as a protected animal and about the lake as a recultivated restored landscape let both items occur as excluded from the usual surroundings, treated specially in a way which cannot be extended to everything and everywhere. In opposite to this perception we would like to ask: How do we have to live and to keep nature's and society's house so that we do not need any special protection. Sustainable economy in the biosphere reserve is usually connected to compensation payments for nature protection. But what would an economy have to look like which includes the value of care and guarantees the reproduction of wo/man, society and nature? And how can we learn to install such a system of a caring economy instead of an economy which destroys its natural and social preconditions?⁷

⁵ Donna Haraway (1991): *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in: Donna Haraway: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, New York, pp. 183-201

⁶ Donna Haraway (1995): „Wir sind immer mittendrin“. Ein Interview mit Donna Haraway. Übersetzung Anne Scheidhauer und Carmen Hammer, in: Donna Haraway: *Die Neuerfindung der Natur. Primaten, Cyborgs und Frauen*. Herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Carmen Hammer und Immanuel Stieß, Frankfurt a. M. / New York, S. 98-122

⁷ Adelheid Biesecker, Maite Mathes, Susanne Schön, Babette Scurrall (Hg., 2000): *Vorsorgendes Wirtschaften. Auf dem Weg zu einer Ökonomie des Guten Lebens*, Bielefeld

A farmer whose meadows were threatened to be flooded after a beaver had built a dam told the person from the environmental administration responsible for removing the beaver that he would not need the meadow and its hay. But as he had a compensation contract for protecting this meadow via a certain hay harvesting regime, it was not possible to keep the beaver where it was, let the meadow be flooded and refrain from the hay. Hence the people from the biosphere reserve moved the beaver – although they are meant to protect him. The farmer harvested the hay – which he did not need. And the administration was happy, because the contract was kept. The beaver was moved without any harm done to him but society had a high expense for a purpose which could have been reached more perfectly with much less cost.

In this example all features, we mentioned and criticized culminate:

Administration's action based on scientific results and legal regulation does not even achieve its aim whilst the local population would find much better solutions of self-regulation if they were allowed. The contract is a private matter between the farmer and the environmental administration. There is no political space to publicly negotiate another solution for a special case not foreseeable when the contract was signed.

The occurrence of such a situation is not even used to learn from because everybody had a clear guideline how to act and nobody had the elbowroom or free hand for negotiation and action.

Project component 6 aims at experimenting with new solutions to these findings. Scientists and regional activists cooperate to find out how the rules of the game have to be changed, how long established patterns of perception can be opened to change, new chances of negotiating and agreement can be found. These experiments consist of very different things: for instance questioning the habits and routines of each other and common working groups to create new arrangements for a caring economy, which can be established in the region. Together they overcome the perspective of looking at and treating the planet as if we would no longer live on it.⁸

Science and practice cannot any longer pretend to act outside politics in a neutral space. They always involve political decision – ruled by interests and embedded in a space structured by power and predomination in which decision makers are positioned. Our research shall make these spaces and the process of decision transparent and negotiable. This is why we need to involve regional activists in answering our questions. Asking “What do we want?” must be given priority over “How do we achieve it?” The latter question being asked first usually is based on the assumption that “we” would know what “we” consensually want. This is mostly not the case and its replacement by a scientifically defined goal did so far not help to manage crisis and sustainability.

Thank you for your attention and we will gladly answer your questions and hear your comments.

⁸ Hannah Arendt (1996): *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, München, Zürich, S. 411 f.