

Making Sense of the World: Why Education Is Key to Change

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A precondition to creating a different world is the capacity to imagine it. But many education systems continue to bear the imprint of the industrial, nation-state societies they emerged from. What would be required to empower people to first envision and then build a more sustainable and just society? A conversation with economist Maja Göpel on how education could spark the shift.

Green European Journal: The world we live in is organised in fundamentally unsustainable ways, from its economic structures to how we lead our daily lives. We're headed down a dangerous path. How is this unsustainability linked to the way we think about the world?

Maja Göpel: There is a long-standing tradition in Western countries of seeing a divide between humans and nature. We conceive ourselves as the species that can subordinate everything else. This influences our way of receiving and experiencing the world, including our mindsets and the ways we think.

The Enlightenment idea was meant to be about developing the ability to think for ourselves so we could act as stewards of our fate, but the individualism that emerged from it was taken too far. We lost all humility and set out to reshape everything according to our desires. Furthermore, at least in the last century, we've lost a certain connectedness to the systems we are embedded in. We understand the world in parts on which we try to put price tags, but we're losing sight of the networks of life that sustain us and thrive on their connections as much as their parts.

Some treat the transition to a more sustainable world as a technical, largely regulatory, matter, while others view it as a simple question of taking political power. What about shaping how we see the world? How important are new concepts, narratives, and language to social change?

The essence of liberal societies – at least as the idea was originally coined – involves deliberation over where we want to go and how best to get there. Assuming they are not simply pushed through by decree, the legitimacy of the resulting proposals comes from how people view the world and how the proposals are explained and put forward.

How we view the world has been fundamentally changed before, one of the most notable shifts being the Copernican Revolution. When you read the [1987 Brundtland Report](#),^[1] it refers to a more recent moment of humility for humanity: the photo of Earth shimmering green, blue, and white – the Blue Marble – taken by the crew of the Apollo 17 in 1972. This image brought home the realisation that we need to understand the workings of our planet

if we want it to stay habitable for us. Subordination metamorphosed into co-stewardship. Of course, if we change our outlook on life to this degree, it will shape the way in which we organise our goals and institutions. This is why our education systems need to be at the forefront of empowering people to make sense of their existence in the world and how it is changing over time.

School is all about preparing people for the world. What is the role of school and education more broadly in transforming how we think?

School is so important because it is in our younger years that we are moulded most dramatically. And it has a strong cultural aspect. Next to the knowing, there is the being, the interacting, and the shaping of what you feel responsible for. What we've seen in our societies – I know Germany best, but this is true for many Western countries – is that education focuses more on comparative performance, metrics, and demonstrating your familiarity with canonised knowledge. It doesn't push you to find your own way, to understand how your existence is influenced by the setting you are growing up in, or to work out how to achieve a good balance between co-creation and competition. Grading is just one example of education's very industrialised way of looking at things, as if norming and ranking young people could help them develop freely and happily.

As a result, students care mainly for their position within the system and how they can improve it; they give less thought to the system itself and how they could improve that instead. Today's elite schools promise parents certain marks and networks so that their children can go on to hold influential positions, when what we really need is for education to focus on understanding society as a whole and the challenges it faces in the 21st century. Organisations such as UNESCO are pushing for this, with outlines for education in sustainable development, global citizenship, and future skills. But it seems to be painfully difficult to spread this agenda.

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The teaching of future skills is based on the idea that empowering people to imagine different futures is a means to open up new horizons. In Germany, there is a growing interest in future skills within different social contexts and life stages, also in the Volkshochschule system, the adult education system that offers affordable courses in a range of subjects – including languages, yoga, maths, and computer programming – that are open to everyone.

Technology has many positive uses, including in education, but is there a risk that being glued to our screens will undermine our capacity to think for ourselves?

There has been a lot of focus on digitalisation in German schools recently. We have a Digital Pact for Schools with a lot of money attached to it, but this focuses on putting hardware in schools, not training teachers to educate pupils in digital resilience. We don't

just want to train everyone to become “users” of apps designed by other people that manipulate us. We should be developing an understanding of how digital and hybrid environments shape our societies, forms of communication, and interactions, so we can engage in real dialogue about what all of this is for.

Many researchers distinguish human creativity from artificial intelligence, which primarily learns from the patterns of the past. To create something entirely new is still a capacity unique to humans, just like empathy. But we have lost our fascination with the potential of our species and the living world. Instead, people are getting excited about robots that look like humans. Hey, we’re already here! Invent something that helps support life, not replace it.

Should we be designing our education systems to encourage people’s capacity to imagine and dream?

I think it’s crucial to get more into the imaginary space again, and the movements that connect science, art, and policymaking are doing just that. In some ways, it is a matter of selection. The people who want to be imaginative have been pushed into the sphere of art and culture, while everyone else has to stay “realistic”. We should allow more people to take a step back, to question the deeper purpose of their undertakings, and imagine them taking a completely different form without being labelled utopian. In the end, it has always been the big ideas that galvanise energy and focus to reshape the present that, step by step, truly change the world.

Cracking open the status quo is crucial for innovation. As children that is exactly how we are. Why is it this way? Why does it have to be that way? There is an inquisitory mindset that asks whether things can be done differently. Looking at the world through a child’s eyes can create that imaginary space and also bring out the joy of discovery rather than the fear of a loss of control.

Opening up to desirable future states can have so much motivating power; then we can talk about what we need to do to make this possible. We need to stop dismissing imagination and dreams and confining them to the private sphere, to arts, and to religion.

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What about schools themselves? You attended an alternative school. How do you think it shaped you? Are there any principles that you would like to see more of in all schools?

What I found to be important in the way my school was run was that it had clear selection criteria, designed to mix people from different walks of life. We weren’t allowed to have too many kids from academic backgrounds in the group, for example. It was supposed to be representative of the local community. There was also an emphasis on being a co-teacher. There are always students who find it easier to understand whatever is being taught and

those who find it trickier. So sometimes you'd be teaching and at other times you'd be taught. It meant that you grasped the content better, but you were also forced to try to understand other people's brains and recognise that we all learn differently.

The other aspect was the broad variety of things that we learned. We had a school garden and workshops for wood- and metalwork, we made jam, we had a disco, our playgrounds were very adventurous. We experienced a lot of things, and no one was judged to be more or less important. From Year 8 on, we developed projects of our own and were encouraged to engage with a particular subject that we found intriguing. I ended up doing telescopic observations of the moon and developing the photos myself. This whole alternative process of finding my own way to grasp and explore the world was judged to be just as valuable as writing something academic with loads of footnotes. The emphasis was on recognising that there is a wide variety of ways to make sense of the world. What is your way of learning and train of reasoning? How can you bring the most out of yourself? It's why we didn't get marks until the last two years: as a signal that there are many ways to meaningfully engage with the world.

It sounds like a good mix of autonomy and cooperation.

Yes, and also going with what is fun. My daughter has been to two schools. The first was a conventional one that put students under a lot of pressure and encouraged peer competition through grading and judgment. Students were told off in front of the whole class, adding shame and pride into the mix. Now she is at a school that capitalises on students' excitement about exploring the world to help them learn. She and her classmates were fascinated by the Greek gods, so the teacher decided to extend that thematic block and fit other learning goals into it. They invented their own gods and goddesses, wrote stories about what they protected and why, and created comic strips describing why they felt these characters could complete the pantheon.

This flexibility - sensing enthusiasm about something and then adapting the teaching plan or method to combine this with the requirements of the curriculum - is the true art of teaching. It creates a different energy. I notice such a difference in my daughter's approach to learning and its purpose. I think it's crucial.

We've been talking about education as a tool to help people see the world differently and hopefully change it. Does the Green movement engage enough with education? Is there too much focus on technical solutions and not enough on the cultural battle to define the society we want to see?

That's a difficult question. Following the pushback and fights that resulted from the publication of the 1972 report *The Limits to Growth*, I remember co-author Dennis Meadows saying that he felt we had forgotten to include culture as a core aspect alongside the social, environmental, and economic. I've noticed this in two ways. Firstly, our understanding of what we consider a successful life and appropriate behaviour. How can we find it okay to treat animals the way we do just to have cheap meat on our plates every single day, for example? Is it really an encroachment on our freedom if this is challenged politically in order to curb carbon emissions?

The Green movement has been accused of moralising so often that it now tends to argue

from an economic or technical point of view, for instance, by stating that its policies will help to control health expenditure. Obviously, there is room for a more technical approach, but if we shy away from ethical considerations, we completely lose touch with what we're talking about. Moral revolution, as Kwame Anthony Appiah and others would say, is fuelled by feelings and reputation, not by economic considerations. In the same way, every single business should be capable of presenting the social and ecological impacts of its operations. This would marry the two and make economic calculations support moral judgments. For this to happen, we need a different narrative about where we want to end up and a reference framework that supports it.

The second aspect is the way we conceive of culture as a framework for action and experience. Shared common values that help us to define what we consider to be acceptable or unacceptable behaviour are fundamental to any society that wants to avoid too much surveillance and control. Such values are the basis of any social contract, and are manifested in legal systems.

Today there is a widespread sense that we are living through an extended, multifaceted crisis and that the narratives underpinning our institutions no longer hold. Gramsci's famous words "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" are often quoted to capture a sense of this. Why do you think these words are so relevant today?

As with every thinker, it's crucial to talk about Gramsci's concepts while bearing in mind what he was attempting to get a grip on. What was the question he was trying to answer? The concept of hegemony explained how power can be maintained with the least resistance, even under circumstances of inequality. For Gramsci, it was the narratives that explain why things are the way they are that serve as the cultural glue, structuring public discourse and legitimising different roles in society.

When there is a close match between the dominant narrative and people's everyday lived experiences, it is difficult to change things. But the status quo becomes shaky when the dominant narrative no longer gives convincing answers to society's problems. Right now, three of the major narratives of the last 40 years are imploding. First, the idea that we can decouple economic growth from environmental harm in absolute terms. There's just no evidence for this, though it has been the supposed goal for decades. Second, the idea of trickle-down economics. Cutting taxes for the rich does not encourage them to invest in the productive economy unless they think they can profit from it, and currently their priorities lie with rent-seeking and speculation. The third narrative is that what is good for finance will benefit the real economy. The way that the world of finance, totally cut off from the real world, is enriching itself while hiding its wealth from the tax authorities is now obvious to all.

The collapse of these three narratives has broken the hegemony of the Washington Consensus. Politically, this means that we're experiencing structural crises for which the typical explanations no longer work. As a result, the window is open for transformative change. This will need to be guided by new narratives that bring together different actors under a shared agenda. Ideally, we should have as many people as possible educated – and encouraged – to participate in shaping these new visions, narratives, and activities. This would be the ideal situation for liberal societies and for democratic renewal.

So we need to build that new narrative, and education can be a means to get there?

Absolutely!

[1] Published in 1987 by an international group of politicians, civil servants, and experts on the environment and development, the Brundtland Report, also known as *Our Common Future*, draws attention to the importance of sustainable development and articulates a commonly accepted definition of this concept.



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