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BUSINESS IN A STRONGLY SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY?

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1 Introduction

The current historic moment is characterised by unsustainability, manifested in the unfolding global ecological collapse and overall societal degradation. For many decades, various scholars have been questioning the socio-economic foundations of this dire state of affairs, i.e., the constant, unrestricted pursuit of economic growth (Daly, 1968; Georgescu-Roegen, 1975; Bonnedahl and Heikkurinen, 2019). In recent times, approaches critiquing economic growth as the goal of the economy and society have become even more frequent. An ever-increasing number of scholars see the imperative of economic growth as the driver of ecological and societal degradation (see, e.g., Foster et al., 2010; Jackson, 2017). Such scholars maintain that to achieve a sustainable society, economies need to undergo a substantial transformation and abandon the pursuit of economic growth.

Despite the call for a fundamental transformation, the dominant approach to addressing the issue of degradation remains merely reformative, i.e., aligned with weak sustainability. Theories of weak sustainability are exemplified in the way in which natural and human-made ‘capital’ is seen as substitutable and the default orientation towards economic growth is maintained (Goodland and Daly, 1996). The main issue of this approach is that it does not go far enough, i.e., it does not question the very foundations of unsustainability. It aims to adjust the economy by incorporating environmental and social considerations while continuing to rely on mainstream economic practice and theorising (Eskelinen and Wilén, 2019). Such environmental adjustment is evident in, for instance, the focus on efficiency (Hopwood et al., 2005), i.e., aiming to reduce the resources and energy used per unit produced (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002) while failing to address the need to reduce production overall, including the use of resources and

energy (Bonnedahl and Heikkurinen, 2019). Moreover, the weak sustainability discourse does not reflect on the means and ends of societies' existence.

Economic growth remains not only unquestioned by the weak sustainability discourse; it is also viewed as the solution to both ecological and societal problems. For instance, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals simultaneously promote economic growth and social and environmental sustainability (Robra and Heikkurinen, 2019; UN, 2020; see also Chapter 2 in this book). It appears absurd that severe ecological and societal problems would be solved using the means by which they were originally created. Ketola et al. (2019, p. 24) appropriately maintain that weak sustainability is 'unsustainability in progressive disguise'. Rather than addressing the underlying mechanisms of the unfolding crises, weak sustainability represents a continuation of business as usual.

Advocates of strong sustainability have challenged and criticised the foundations of the weak sustainability approach (Bonnedahl and Heikkurinen, 2019). The strong sustainability discourse argues that the substitutability of natural and human-made 'capital' is at best very limited (Goodland and Daly, 1996). It acknowledges the inevitable openness of an economic system that derives resources from its environment, while the waste produced by economies returns to the environment (Boulding, 1966; Melgar-Melgar and Hall, 2020). As the capacity of the planet to provide resources and to absorb waste is limited, the imposing of restrictions on economic activities and their growth is unavoidable. Thus, strong sustainability requires adopting a position beyond economic growth, beyond endless increases in production and consumption. One such position is degrowth. Degrowth is a comprehensive vision that imagines a society that is radically different to the current norm. Such a vision is useful for strong sustainability to become a reality, as it represents an ideal towards which societies can strive. To achieve a strongly sustainable society, degrowth proposes intentionally making economies simultaneously smaller and better (Nesterova, 2020a). The smaller size of economies refers to reduced production and consumption and thus reduced matter-energy throughput and returning the scale of economies to within the planet's boundaries. The betterment of economies means reorientating away from the current culture that revolves around material wealth (Fromm, 2002a) towards pursuing wellbeing in a broader sense; that of humans, non-humans, and nature. To pursue wellbeing, degrowth implies shifting away from capitalism and its focus on capital accumulation and expansion (Foster, 2011; Koch and Buch-Hansen, 2020; Buch-Hansen and Carstensen, 2021). Capitalism is a complex phenomenon that includes various agents, the relationships between them, structures, and the dictatorship of a particular class (see, e.g., Lefebvre, 1991, p. 10). Capitalism exploits nature and society (Foster et al., 2010; Surak, 2016) and does not benefit the majority of people (Russell, 1994), whereas degrowth aims for a good life for all.

To enable a strongly sustainable, degrowth society and economy, structures and agents need to undergo a substantial transformation (Nesterova, 2020a, 2021b). This would have implications for everything in the economy, including

businesses, as businesses reproduce capitalism via profit-seeking and capital accumulation. By intentionally transforming themselves and participating in making the current socio-economic system more strongly sustainable, businesses can become part of the societal efforts to achieve a strongly sustainable society rather than continue working against this goal by reproducing existing capitalist structures.

Investigating the role of businesses in achieving a strongly sustainable society is a complex matter. It involves theorising about the approaches that should be avoided and those that should be welcomed. It also involves envisioning what change should entail on the level of business and how moving towards a strongly sustainable society could be enacted. To show the contrast between an unhelpful and a desirable approach, this chapter compares a mere reformation (Section 2) and a radical transformation of business (Section 3), while equating weak sustainability with a reformative and strong sustainability with a transformative approach to sustainability. It emphasises how, as part of the socio-economic transformation, businesses need to be transformed rather than merely reformed, thus creating space for more adventurous theorising (Section 4). Section 5 outlines the significant challenges encountered when transforming a business, and Section 6 summarises the arguments and offers a way forward.

2 Why Does the Reformation of Business Not Suffice?

Social structures can be reproduced or transformed by agents (Bhaskar, 1998). Reformation largely falls within the premise of the reproduction of structures while making an improvement. Transformation, on the other hand, signifies a complete change. The weak sustainability approach is that of reformation. Central to weak sustainability are the inter-related notions of decoupling, efficiency, and technicism. Weak sustainability aims to maintain economic growth while maintaining belief in and pursuing decoupling. Decoupling postulates that economic growth can continue while resource use is declining and ecological impact diminishing (Jackson, 2017). In other words, economic activity is aimed to be separated from its ecological foundations and impacts. Decoupling is problematic as a concept, as the kind of decoupling that is required (absolute, global, permanent, fast, and large) has not been evidenced (Jackson, 2017; Parrique et al., 2019). The impossibility of absolute decoupling arises from the realisation that something cannot be produced from nothing. Producing anything, either goods or services, presupposes a transformation of nature. Economic growth signifies and increases in the production of goods and services, thus more transformation of nature, even if such production is carried out more efficiently by using better technology.

Improvements in efficiency via the utilisation of technology are the focus of the weak sustainability approach in its attempt to address environmental degradation in practice (Bonnedahl and Heikkurinen, 2019). The pursuit of efficiency is not bad in itself. However, on its own, this approach is problematic, as although

rightly focusing on qualitative improvement, it ignores the question of quantity (Heikkurinen and Bonnedahl, 2019). Moreover, it can be counter-productive and lead to increased rather than decreased (as would be expected) use of resources and a higher ecological impact through the rebound effect (Alcott, 2005; Parrique et al., 2019). The rebound effect arises when savings gained from the use of a seemingly more efficient product are negated by even larger expenditure elsewhere or increased use of the given product or resource. This is particularly true in the context of capitalism, in which firms reinvest savings in pursuit of further capital accumulation and consumers spend such savings on the seemingly unlimited products constantly offered via the mechanism of wants creation.

Another issue associated with the focus on efficiency is related to technology. Since efficiency gains are hoped for through technological innovations (see Chapter 11), weak sustainability encourages solutions to the ecological crisis that are based on techno-optimism. Like efficiency, technology is not necessarily bad. However, the problem lies in blind, uncritical and unrestricted techno-optimism (see Heikkurinen and Ruuska, 2021). Such techno-optimism does not account for, or acknowledge, the validity of other alternatives (Grunwald, 2018; Nesterova, 2021a) and leaves very little space for other ways of being in and relating to the world.

Examples of reformative approaches to business are business models that are in line with economic visions based on weak sustainability, such as green growth economy and circular economy (Zink and Geyer, 2017; Spash, 2020). A green growth economy focuses on decoupling economic growth from environmental impact through an increase in efficiency. Likewise, the currently popular in sustainability circles concept of a circular economy focuses on technological advancements to enable decoupling and the continuation of economic growth (Ellen MacArthtur Foundation, 2015; Kirchherr et al., 2017; Schröder et al., 2019). Such conceptualisations of the circular economy fail to take the real, biophysical limits of the planet into account (Giampietro, 2019). Moreover, the circular economy can in fact increase overall production, which partially or even fully counteracts the benefits gained from its implementation (see Zink and Geyer, 2017). This does not mean that the circular economy concept has nothing to offer the sustainability discourse. Indeed, closing material loops as much as possible is compatible with degrowth. However, this aspiration should recognise the irreversibility of the degradation of materials and the necessity of seeing better processes as part of producing enough rather than more. The same major pitfalls of relying solely on improving processes, technological innovation, and the rebound effect affect the visions of the economy when a larger socio-economic transformation and reconsideration of humanity's goals are not pursued. For instance, efficiency can only help achieve sustainability if the rebound effect is counteracted by supplementing efficiency with sufficiency (Robra et al., 2020) and when the overall goal of production is reflected upon. In this case, production processes become qualitatively better and quantitatively in line with

the limits imposed by the planet and are carried out with the worthwhile goal of providing a good life for all.

The reformation of business fails because it remains largely superficial. It fails to question the *raison d'être* of business itself and the guiding principle of business, i.e., profit maximisation stemming from the pursuit to accumulate capital. This is exemplified in various attempts to supplement profit with other considerations, as is done in accreditation schemes such as B Corp and Future-Fit. For instance, B Lab, which designed the B Corp certification scheme, aims to 'balance profit and purpose' (B Lab, 2020a), thus leaving the profit motive itself unquestioned. It states that 'B Corps use profits and growth as a means to a greater end: positive impact for their employees, communities, and the environment' (B Lab, 2020a). This attempts to achieve greater ends, precisely via the means that ultimately destroy these ends. Likewise, the Future-Fit scheme attempts to balance 'environmental, social and financial success' (Future-Fit Foundation, 2020). The weak sustainability approach can also be exemplified in the attempt to balance profit with people and the planet, as made by Elkington (1998). Such balancing is counterproductive, as striving for increasing profits, albeit supplemented with social and environmental considerations, leads inevitably to the exploitation of people and the destruction of nature (Foster et al., 2010). If profit remains the goal, which it inevitably does in a capitalist economy, business activity will aim for the valorisation of capital, i.e., constantly increasing its value. This is achieved by seeing human labour and nature as mere inputs into the process of production (Gorz, 1989, 2012).

While such powerful mechanisms as the need and drive to accumulate capital exist and dictate the manner in which businesses operate, initiatives such as recycling should be viewed as insufficient and potentially as greenwashing and distraction from the significant change needed. Such radical change requires leaving whole sectors behind. For instance, B Lab (2020b) states that any company, including an oil company, can obtain their certification, thus become a B Corp, if it is able to demonstrate its commitment to making a social and environmental impact. Considering the urgent need to change to renewable energy for a truly sustainable economy and society (Melgar-Melgar and Hall, 2020), it becomes evident that the ambiguous positive actions that accompany the core, destructive activity of an oil company will not replace the concrete need for such companies to cease to exist in a strongly sustainable society.

3 What Does Transformation of Business Mean and Entail?

The weak sustainability approach causes our attention and effort to deviate from much-needed radical alternatives that fundamentally question the *status quo*. Considering the ever-deteriorating state of the environment and of society, time should be considered. A much more radical approach needs to be outlined and adopted (Trainer, 2020). The practices and values at the core of weak sustainability are only relatively enduring. They are not laws of nature, but a result of

historical development, and can thus be challenged and changed (Ketola et al., 2019). Hence, transformation is possible.

Contrary to weak sustainability, which remains within the remit of economic activities, strong sustainability goes as far as questioning not only the economic domain itself but also the prevailing capitalist structures and our ways of being in the world and relating to it. It acknowledges the need to move from materialistic wealth to wellbeing in co-existence (Bonnedahl and Heikkurinen, 2019). In this case, sustainability does not refer to sustaining economic growth (Foster et al., 2010). Rather, it has a deeper and more philosophical connotation and contemplates sustaining the life of humans and non-humans into the future. While weak sustainability remains reformative towards *economies* and the processes within them, strong sustainability signifies a transformative approach to *societies*.

The need for transformation starts with the obvious desirability of flourishing rather than the suffering (Sayer, 2011) of many (Russell, 1994 [1935]), and the recognition of the value of the non-human world, independent of humans (Collier, 1999; Ketola et al., 2019). It aims to achieve a strongly sustainable society, a society that maintains ecological sustainability via producing and consuming less and that can provide a good life for all (Jackson, 2017; Maxton, 2018; Trainer, 2020). Aiming to reduce production and consumption as well as the required transformation has fundamental implications on all levels and in all aspects of the economy, which are inter-related. These go from rethinking the economy as a whole (e.g., limits to resource use, the means and ends of economic activities, desirable sectors, vital needs), to the producers themselves (e.g., organisational forms, motives for production), which includes businesses.

The required transformation of business is best seen and understood as part of the transformation of the socio-economic system. It involves asking deep questions about the nature and the aims of business and allows us to escape the premises, convictions, and neoliberal ideology of business and mainstream organisational studies. Such mainstream studies rely on neoclassical economic theorising, which maintains that business is a profit-maximising entity. Transdisciplinary and heterodox approaches such as social-ecological economics (Spash, 2012) and philosophy (Bhaskar, 2012; Ruuska et al., 2020) are used instead. The transformation of business is a radical and adventurous approach, which sees business as a social entity and asks a retroductive question about what business should be for a strongly sustainable society to be possible (Nesterova, 2020a), starting from the inevitability and primacy of the acceptance of the necessary change in society as a whole.

In a strongly sustainable society, production activities need to put as little strain on the earth's limited resources as possible; thus, emphasis is placed on reducing production in a way that is conducive to good life. Production must satisfy genuine, but not excessive or hedonic human needs (Spash, 2012). This becomes the ultimate aim of production in a strongly sustainable society. In other words, producing for use-value needs to replace production for exchange-value (Eskelinen and Wilén, 2019). It signifies a fundamental rethinking of production,

which in a strongly sustainable society completely deviates from the pursuit of capital accumulation through profit maximisation. The transformation of business goes far beyond the improvement of processes and entails a radically different approach altogether. An *overall* reduction in businesses' use of resources is needed, not merely their efficient use or a reduction in use *per unit* (Heikkurinen and Bonnedahl, 2019). Sufficient satisfaction of needs concerns all members of society; thus beyond efficiency, production should be characterised by effectiveness (i.e., satisfying the needs of all) and sufficiency (so that everyone has enough) (Heikkurinen and Bonnedahl, 2019).

The concept of degrowth has direct implications for businesses and can be used to outline how business can be transformed, i.e., the direction in which businesses need to move to become suitable for a strongly sustainable society. This can be done by translating the key premises of degrowth, i.e., matter-energy throughput reduction, consideration of people and non-humans, and deviation from the profit maximisation imperative, to the microeconomic level of businesses (Nesterova, 2020a, 2021b). Such considerations concern all business operations, the reasons of production, and the ends to which production is carried out. The implications of degrowth for business are comprehensive because they relate to all levels of reality, including physical (e.g., matter-energy throughput reduction) and social (i.e., consideration of people, including the self) reality. Moreover, they include ethical arguments, such as considering non-humans and deviation from the self-serving profit maximisation imperative. The implications of degrowth are that the balancing of profit, people, and the planet is replaced by the pursuit of the wellbeing of people and non-humans, while respecting the limits of the planet. In other words, in a strongly sustainable society, the centrality of profit should be replaced with the centrality of ethics, which implies satisfaction of everyone's genuine needs, and the need to eventually abandon the profit motive altogether (Nesterova, 2020a). Clearly, such abandonment of the profit motive is not an easy undertaking. Neither is it immediately possible, considering the need in the capitalist system to make a profit to survive. Thus, abandonment of the profit motive can be seen not as a step or an event, but as an intentional journey from making profits sufficient (rather than maximising profit) to deviating from the idea of profit completely in a society that has left capitalism and its mechanisms behind. However, the question arises of whether the transformation of business that needs to occur is so profound that it means the end of business itself.

4 From Business to Strongly Sustainable Organisations and Beyond

The required transformation of business as part of societal transformation towards a strongly sustainable society is profound. Businesses need to actively participate in reshaping the socio-economic system and subsequently sustaining it in its new form. As a strongly sustainable society does not aim for growth in the

number of businesses or growth in their turnover and other quantitative indicators, this offers new opportunities to abandon the focus on business in its common forms of corporation and limited company (Lawson, 2014). This, in turn, means directing human creative efforts towards alternatives, considering a much wider variety of alternative organisational forms (Parker et al., 2014), and highlighting the validity of other possible ways of organising production rather than viewing other organisational forms and ways of production as radical, marginal, or niche. Thinking in terms of economic organisations rather than in terms of business does not mean that businesses will disappear as social entities. Viewed as communities of people (Lawson, 2014), businesses can change their forms, i.e., intentionally *trans*-form themselves and continue to use their capacities in terms of existing equipment, materials, and skills to produce, albeit radically differently and for altogether different ends.

Various alternative organisational forms can co-exist in the same economy and include a multitude of options. Such new forms should be more conducive to aims that transcend profit maximisation and the mechanisms associated with this, such as the creation of wants. In terms of the principles of operation, such organisations may include the principles of anarchism and democracy. In terms of ownership, alternative organisations may include community- and worker-owned organisations and independently owned small-scale artisanal and craft producers. Community energy projects, community-supported agriculture, hobby and amateur production, and peer production are but a few examples of possibilities that can be considered. Moreover, some production may be organised informally, and likewise include a variety of options, from foraging to household production and production by communities for their own use or for sharing with others.

Thus, businesses can assume multiple forms on their journey to become suitable for a strongly sustainable society, but what should remain central despite the nature of the chosen organisational form is sufficient production to satisfy needs, not production for capital accumulation. Placing needs satisfaction rather than profit at the core of transformation requires a fundamental change in values (Nesterova, 2020a). This is an essential part of a larger cultural transformation towards non-material sources of life satisfaction and cooperation (Trainer, 2020), a different conception of productive life, and being in and relating to the world (Fromm, 2002b; Bhaskar, 2012). Thus, an important part of the transition towards a strongly sustainable society is indeed the required change in ourselves, which includes raising awareness of embodied energy, adjusting one's expectations, developing an ethic of respect for living beings (Melgar-Melgar and Hall, 2020), and nurturing love towards the self, others, and nature, which in turn implies care, concern, responsibility, and knowledge (Fromm, 2002b; Sayer, 2011; Bhaskar, 2012). In other words, it is not the discovery of ideal organisational forms, but the development of radically different worldviews and ways of relating with the world that is at the very core of transformation (Nesterova, 2021a). Without such profound psychological and philosophical changes,

changes in the choices of organisational forms will not occur; and even if they do occur, they would not be sustained.

The all-encompassing transformation of attitudes to business and of businesses that is required for a strongly sustainable society may indicate that a more fruitful and liberating pathway of theorising on production for such societies could go down the path of post-business or what we refer to as ‘beyond business’. If a business internalised strong sustainability, the nature of the transformed business would clash with the notion of business as an entity to which the mechanism of capital valorisation is inherent. This may indicate that such a transformed business can no longer be described as a business. Does this mean that private firms will cease to exist? Trainer (2020) and Nesterova (2020a, 2021a, 2021b) argue that *small* firms can still play a role in a transformed, strongly sustainable society. Thus, a firm’s existence may depend on the scale and degree to which it influences the socio-economic system. For instance, a small-scale firm specialising in artisanal production, using low technology, and serving the local market is more compatible with a strongly sustainable society than a multinational corporation (see Nesterova, 2021a). However, it should be noted that such small-scale firms will operate in markets, which play a much smaller role than the markets in modern society (Trainer, 2020) and which may disappear altogether as a strongly sustainable society advances on the emerging path of strong sustainability. It is also essential that such firms remain small and are not forced to borrow and repay interest, as is the case in the capitalist economy. Moreover, it is important not to romanticise small firms and see them uncritically as *the* business form for a strongly sustainable society. For instance, Russell (1994 [1935]) offered the example of innumerable and unnecessary small shops in London that operated for the leisure of the idle rich, not for the purpose of satisfying genuine needs. Although Russell’s example is from over 80 years ago, the critique still stands more than ever.

5 Transformation of Business: Systemic and Agential Constraints

The transformation of business is challenging, as businesses are not isolated from the world around them. They face both systemic constraints (constraining socio-economic structures) and agential constraints (those relating to individual humans, agents). Hence, the transformation of business should not be seen independently from the transformation of the socio-economic system or the change in individuals involved in business.

The transformation of businesses is constrained by the evident fact that businesses exist within the system of capitalism, which imposes its logics and rules on individual humans and businesses. Considering the inter-relation between agents and structures (Bhaskar, 1989, 1998), businesses exist as agents in the economy within structures that constrain their transformation. For instance, one of the key implications of thinking in terms of strong sustainability is the deviation from profit maximisation (Nesterova, 2020a). However, capitalism, with its inherent

drive for capital accumulation, necessitates and dictates profit-seeking, making, and maximisation (Foster et al., 2010). Thus, even businesses that attempt to operate differently cannot be regarded as operating fully in line with a strongly sustainable society as long as they remain embedded within capitalist structures. In a capitalist system, even starting an alternative economic organisation may be prohibitive without borrowing, which necessitates repayment with interest, ultimately awakening a profit motive and encouraging growth and participation in capitalism. This is not to say that businesses should stop striving for a better world. Firms should challenge capitalist structures by operating in a radically different manner. For instance, by sharing knowledge free of charge, a firm can provide others with the opportunity to not pay for knowledge elsewhere, thus allowing them to withdraw from participation in a capitalist system on a certain occasion (Nesterova, 2020b). Yet, a full transformative potential can be exercised only if businesses are liberated from capitalism, its culture, and its competitive environment, so they can transform into economic organisations that are fully compatible with a strongly sustainable society.

For a strongly sustainable society that allows businesses to exist as strongly sustainable, alternative economic organisations, a post-capitalist socio-economic system is essential. Such a system would take the biophysical basis of societies and economies into consideration, pursue a good life for all, and manifest an entirely different culture. Without envisioning and striving for the transformation of society as a whole, efforts to outline what businesses should be transformed into and what actions individual businesses should take would remain insufficient. This is because capitalist forces and tendencies such as competition operate at a systemic level (Wigger and Buch-Hansen, 2013). The actions of individual businesses, no matter how radical they may seem or indeed be, are not enough. Envisioning the new system should, however, not be the domain of experts, and participation should be encouraged. In the words of Bhaskar (2002, p. 70), '[w]e don't need mediators, or authorities, or political or any other kind of leaders'. This is because every human being has a capacity for freedom, imagination, and creativity (Tuan, 1998; Bhaskar, 2012), for thought and reflection (Tuan, 1976). Thus, while sharing knowledge is useful, no actors should be seen as 'key'.

Shifting the socio-economic system away from capitalism requires transforming culture towards cooperation and away from affluence, and our economies towards self-sufficiency and localised production where possible. It also involves creating cooperative and participatory governance systems (Trainer, 2020). Such governance and decision-making will have implications for production, as economic decisions regarding employment and needs satisfaction could become a more cooperative and democratic effort, not dictated by firms' pursuits to maximise profits. Communities should be able to decide what needs to be produced, when, how, by whom and to what ends, as well as how the end product could become accessible to everyone who needs it.

Agential constraints refer to the individuals involved in business and the prevailing values and beliefs that individual humans hold. Transformation

necessitates a fundamental change in values. At its core, strong sustainability holds the notion of harmonious and respectful co-existence between humans and nature. It recognises the value of nature in itself and, therefore, rejects the view that nature is subservient to human needs and wants (Collier, 1999; Ketola et al., 2019). Thus, strong sustainability thinking is grounded not only in evidence-based scepticism towards weak sustainability solutions, but also in philosophy, ethics, and morality (Ruuska et al., 2020). One implication of such thinking is the recognition that the purpose of nature and non-humans is not merely to be used by humans. Humans share the planet with other beings, which signifies the need to consider and respect them and to identify ways of relating to them (see e.g., Bhaskar, 2012). This applies to the socio-economic system as a whole, including the process of production and each organisation involved in this process, as well as to individual humans who hold certain worldviews and manifest them through their actions.

To facilitate such a change in values, we need to completely deviate from teaching neoclassical economics (Nesterova, 2021b). As heterodox economics (such as ecological economics) is increasingly being taught, the theoretical foundation of weak sustainability itself, i.e., neoclassical economics also continues to be taught while remaining oblivious towards human nature, co-existence with others (Nancy, 2000), and the way in which the economy is embedded within larger systems, i.e., society and the environment (Melgar-Melgar and Hall, 2020). Neoclassical economics justifies economic growth and capital accumulation, the possibility of which arises precisely due to its lack of recognition of the environment that houses society and hence the economy (Gills and Morgan, 2020). Moreover, neoclassical economics fails to include ethics in its theorising; thus, weak approaches to sustainability do not hold an axiological position, which would place value on nature and non-human life (Spash, 2020). This results in a situation in which the sustainability discourse is advised by the school of economics entirely unsuitable to advise on matters of nature, life, morality, and ethics.

The required transformation of education has profound implications for business education specifically, as well as for how business should be taught. We cannot expect that business education, based on neoclassical economics and its disregard for the inevitable embeddedness of economies in nature and society and its ignorance towards other relevant sciences (e.g., sociology, psychology, geography) and humanities (e.g., history, anthropology, philosophy), will produce business managers and employees with any attitudes other than those compliant with capitalism. A new kind of social-ecological microeconomics needs to be established (Nesterova, 2021b), which recognises not only the implications of biophysical and ecological economics on the microeconomic level, but also includes ethics, a realistic conception of human beings and their relationships and organisations; a deeper understanding of the space within which humans and their organisations exist and with which they interact (Lefebvre, 1991). Apart from business education, the importance of educating the wider population on

biophysical matters cannot be underestimated (Melgar–Melgar and Hall, 2020). This may have implications for consumers intentionally making choices in line with strong sustainability. However, it may also be the case that the flaws of the education system cannot be transformed until the economic system is transformed (Russell, 1994 [1935]). This is to say that the capitalist system itself has no incentive to educate the workforce and consumers on alternatives that would undermine it and provide tools for people to deviate from the very mechanisms and ideology that sustain it (Ruuska, 2019). The transformation of society and its multiple systems and the transformation of business should thus be seen as a complex, interrelated process. It is essential to highlight that better policies will not suffice to address the constraints discussed in this section. These constraints are structural, not legislative (Surak, 2016). Developing better policies is merely one aspect of the integrated vision of a desirable change.

6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have investigated the relationship between business and a strongly sustainable society. The relationship was framed as a question, because this connection is far from straightforward. Our answer to the question of whether these two aspects can coexist, in simple yes and no terms, is ‘no’. This is because business as a capitalist mode of production, existing for the purpose of capital accumulation is not compatible with a truly strongly sustainable society which opposes growth and capital accumulation. Thus, not only is business as usual impossible in a strongly sustainable society; a reformed business that retains the imperative of profit-making and maximisation while attempting to supplement it with considerations of the environment and people, is also impossible. Only after undergoing a radical, all-encompassing transformation will businesses become suitable for a strongly sustainable society. However, this leads us to propose that a more fruitful theoretical path should go beyond business and focus on alternative economic organisations instead. The end of business as we know it should be seen as liberating, as an opportunity for creativity and participation. It does not mean that economic organisations will cease to exist, or that production will stop altogether. Production in a strongly sustainable society will continue, without a doubt, but it will be carried out by individuals, households, and communities themselves, as well as organisations such as cooperatives, micro-agricultural initiatives, peer production organisations, and others. Businesses can become part of this process in a strongly sustainable society if they transform into degrowth-compatible organisations. Businesses are inherently social entities (Lawson, 2014; Nesterova, 2020a), and individuals involved in a business can intentionally work to transform business operations. A few small, private firms may remain. However, they will have to operate according to degrowth principles, and importantly, deviate from profit maximisation as an imperative. These businesses would become a niche in a strongly sustainable socio-economic system.

The transformation of business should be seen as a challenging undertaking. As businesses are embedded within powerful capitalist structures, these structures must be radically and intentionally transformed to provide ground for the existence of a patchwork of new economic organisations. The transformation of the existing socio-economic system and agents, including the transformation of business, signifies a transformation of the way in which we relate to the world. This concerns both culture and individual worldviews. A completely different way of being in the world becomes necessary, manifested by recognising that we share this planet with other beings, both human and non-human. Ultimately, this requires developing love, care, and deep respect towards them (Bhaskar, 2012; Nesterova, 2021b). Without such serious philosophical work on challenging our current ideologies, attitudes, values, beliefs, worldviews, and behaviours, which often result in utilitarianism and the exploitation of nature, humans, and non-humans, seemingly concrete proposals regarding business models, organisational forms, and practices remain insufficient.

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