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Straddling the fence: on the possibility of sustainability and democracy in advanced industrial nations

At the heart of this study of Sweden and its efforts to create structures and processes for ecologically rational governance has been the political dilemma posed by sustainable development. Taking as my point of departure the normative question of ‘How are we to govern ourselves so as to value democracy and individual autonomy and still retain the integrity of the commons?’ and by measuring the empirical evidence of Sweden’s ecological reforms against several criteria for rationally ecological governance, I have sought to answer the following question: To what extent do policy measures taken in Sweden to achieve ecologically sustainable development shape and/or rearrange the structures and processes of governance in such a way that the collective outcome is ecologically rational and democratically acceptable?

The choice of Sweden as the single case for an empirical study of the compatibility of democratic and ecological governance was made on mainly two grounds. One was consciously heuristic; Sweden is viewed in recent scholarly debate as a forerunner on matters of environmental and ecological policy, and its launching of the programme for ‘Sustainable Sweden’ seemed to corroborate that view. If any country has come anywhere near meeting the criteria for ecologically rational government, Sweden might be that country. Given the evidence laid out in the preceding chapters, what remains to be assessed here is whether this is actually the case. The other was concern for cumulativity; much has been written on how ecological governance or an ecological state should be designed and function, as well as on the pros and cons of the probability for such governance to emerge. However, there
is not a whole lot of empirical research on whether and how such governance is actually working. The question, then, is how the evidence from the empirical ‘front’ case of Sweden squares with recent scholarly statements on governance for sustainable development, and how this might influence the current discourse.

Clearly, much of the Swedish strategy for a ‘sustainable society’ is still in the making. Still, enough has been done to (a) warrant some conclusions as to the prospects for ecologically rational governance; (b) address some salient issues for democratic ecological governance, and (c) outline some crucial aspects of governance as a conceptual framework for studying how societies try to solve their relationships to the natural environment. This will be done in a two-pronged way. First, I summarise and evaluate the Swedish case by juxtaposing the empirical evidence presented in the previous chapters with the general criteria for ecologically rational governance presented in the first part of Chapter 1.

Second, I confront the Swedish case with arguments put forth in recent comparative studies of environmental politics and policies for sustainable development. One line of argument concerns the possibility for democracies in advanced industrial states to actually get over the fence to the greener side, i.e., to organise for sustainability. The editors of Governance and Environment in Western Europe argue that democratically elected politicians are locked into the logic of competition in global markets. The need to secure continued economic growth and social welfare for the citizen forces them to secure hegemony for the strategy of ecological modernisation. This fencing in of the discourse makes environmental policy fully compatible with the logic of global market competition, thus most probably blocking the move towards rational ecological governance (Jansen, Osland and Hanf 1998:292 ff., 313 ff.). Another view is found in Implementing Sustainable Development – Strategies and Initiatives in High Consumption Societies. Building on the different national reports, the editors of that volume conclude that the expanded normative conceptual scope of sustainable development has been taken seriously and that governments – at least among the ‘enthusiastic’ states – are committed to ‘carrying forward and deepening the quest for “sustainability”’, thus going beyond the strategy of ecological modernisation (Lafferty and Meadowcroft 2001b:454 ff.).
Another line of argument deals with the democratic aspect of ecological governance. In *Environmental Governance in Europe. An Ever Closer Ecological Union?* the authors argue that the models for achieving ecological governance within the European Union actually come a long way in bringing about such a union. At the same time, the procedures by which this is done – governmental negotiations to find contingent majorities, Commission initiatives, little input or participation from the European Parliament, etc. – point to a democratic deficit (Weale et al. 2000). Drawing on that discussion, I analyse whether such ‘EU-like’ elements of the Swedish strategy as the NEO implementation process can sustainably uphold the criteria for autonomy and democracy that we have here defined as part and parcel of ecologically rational governance.

*Straddling the fence; Sweden on the move towards ecologically rational governance*

As the logic of ecological rationality has been defined throughout this book, the pursuit of sustainability is normatively constrained by the value of democracy and individual freedom and autonomy. To enable conclusions about the extent to which Sweden is approaching ecologically rational governance, four normative, and ideal-type set of criteria for ecologically rational governance have guided the analysis:

- Ecologically rational governance is adapted to ecologically relevant boundaries.
- Ecologically rational governance is adapted to natural eco-cycles and to the safeguarding of inter-generational equality without sacrificing norms of socio-economic justice embraced by the present welfare state.
- Ecologically rational governance has institutional capacities to interpret and effectively transform scientific sustainability-directed arguments into integrated and collectively binding policies and decisions legitimised by representative democratic government.
- Ecologically rational governance effectively brings socio-economic activities within the scale of the ecological resource base with minimum coercion and maximum consent and without fettering initiatives conducive to efficient resource use.
As for **spatial** rationality, we have first of all found that there are changes occurring toward units based on nature-given rather than man-made borders. The remarkable thing here is that it is an external factor – the EU Water Directive – that seems to be the prime mover towards spatial reforms of the Swedish administration, on the basis of the catchment concept. However, there are also signs that such rationality is not easily implemented. Even in areas where such reforms are particularly called for, such as climate change, old administrative fences are still standing and directing the path. To take just one example, the 2002–04 national subsidy programme for local climate measures is primarily following municipal boundaries. Concerns for experience, expertise and effectiveness still speak very strongly in favour of minimal administrative changes and against dramatic societal reorganisation.

With respect to **temporal** ecological rationality, it is remarkable that the democratic political system in Sweden has managed to commit itself to a time frame for ecological governance that stretches as far as one generation into the future. Furthermore, there are precise timetables for most of the first decade in terms of what should be achieved when and by whom. Admittedly, many of the details are still to be worked out together with target groups and affected interests. This leaves room for compromises that could detract somewhat from the projected strategies and achievements. At the same time, the long process leading to these time tables may have created a sense of commitment among involved actors and interests that can not be broken without incurring considerable social costs in terms of trust and reciprocity. Future developments are furthermore dependent on a steady flow of reliable, complementary and yet critical knowledge on progress as well as on new or unsolved problems. The eternally uneasy relation between authority based on scientific knowledge and authority based on political legitimacy will thus continue to be a crucial issue for ecologically rational governance.

Governmental bureaucracies at all levels will in all likelihood continue to occupy a central position in ecological governance. It is thus vital that they can continuously watch and take care of the ecological dimension of sustainable development. The Swedish case provides valuable insight on how *integration* of ecological concern can reach all corners of the public sector. The ‘sectoral
responsibility’ mechanisms established over the last few years – above discussed as common ‘cause’, ‘yardstick’, ‘account’ and ‘purse’ – all impose on different bureaucratic units a duty to constantly observe and assess the ecological consequences of their actions, and act to protect ecological values under the Environmental Code and the NEO programme. It is important to note that this imposition is based on central government’s willingness to continuously use the means at its disposal to authoritatively enforce its strategies for sustainable development.

The question that emerges here is why this infusion of ecological concern into sectoral administrations seems to have been so relatively easy to achieve in Sweden. Earlier studies of environmental politics in developed countries contend that long-term strategies for sustainable development cannot be launched without highly developed systemic capacities for co-ordination and direction (see Jänicke 1997). As an advanced industrial nation, Sweden possesses both the economic as well as the scientific and organisational capacity necessary for pursuing innovative strategies for ecological governance. One should particularly emphasise the comparative advantage of a unitary political system in formulating and pursuing coherent policies; the number of possible veto points within such a system is low compared to federal systems.

However, structural systemic characteristics and capacities do not suffice as an explanation. They may bring innovation and effectiveness to strategies for sustainable development but at the same time score low on legitimacy. To achieve both effectiveness and legitimacy, explicit, orderly and continuous involvement of target groups in implementation is an important factor. Such involvement seems to warrant specific preconditions in terms of political culture (see Jänicke 1997). Both the introduction and the success of such involvement are dependent on collective memories on both sides of the public-private divide. In political systems where relations between government and target groups have historically developed through processes of consensus, the political culture is much more favourable to solutions building on high degrees of target group involvement.

Sweden’s political culture has traditionally built firmly on consensus and cooperation. The development of the post-war welfare state, metaphorically referred to as the ‘People’s Home’,
was in large measure achieved through neo-corporatist co-operation between the state and large organised interests (Rothstein 1992; see also Tilton 1990:125 ff.). The picture of the ‘Green People’s Home’ can be seen as instrumental in getting acceptance for the further ‘consensualisation’ of environmental politics that is in effect embedded in the involvement of well-organised target groups in implementation of the Swedish strategy for solving all major environmental problems ‘within one generation’. This involvement all the way from investigatory Commissions to the operationalisation of sectoral, regional and local environmental quality objectives no doubt helps in gaining acceptance and legitimacy for measures taken within ecological governance.

This brings us up close to the democratic aspects of ecological governance. We have found that while providing a comparatively generous enclosure of individual autonomy in terms of rights of access and information, the emerging Swedish system of ecological governance is more keen on organisational than on citizen participation. True enough, there are provisions for public hearings during the decision-making process, and there was at first quite lively public participation in Local Agenda 21 activities. However, other studies strongly suggest that in the formally very open process of policy-making, well-organised special interests tend to gain favoured positions thanks to their superior resources compared to individual citizens and loosely formed action groups (Uhrwing 2001). Furthermore, we have interpreted the envisioned ‘new environmental work’ of implementing ecologically sustainable development, e.g., through the NEOs, as treating members of the public more as members of interest organisations or market-based actors reacting to stimuli from industry and business than as citizens engaging in collective ecological management.

What we have here is a rather clear-cut example of path dependence. As was just said, the ‘Swedish model’ that developed when Sweden was building the social welfare state involved close co-operation between the democratic and administrative organs of the state on the one hand, and organised social and economic interests on the other. The post-war Swedish politics aiming at sustainable social welfare and economic growth is best characterised as a search for collectivist and corporatist rather than individualistic and pluralistic processes and solutions. When the Social-Democratic government evoked the vision of a ‘Green
People’s Home’ to gain acceptance for its LIP programme of ecological modernisation, it deliberately used this quite successful historic process to legitimise this way of organising the society-nature relationship. The historically developed organisation of social governance thus stakes out, but also fences in, the path for the broader future-oriented processes in ecological governance. It is part of a cluster of factors that bias a country ‘in a more supportive direction for sustainable development’ (see Lafferty and Meadowcroft 2000b:424).

On balance, then, how far has Sweden come towards ecologically rational governance? As for the spatial dimension, it is fair to say that there are moves to change man-made jurisdictional boundaries and adapt to scales compatible with the boundaries of natural ecosystems. In temporal terms, Sweden already scores high in adapting socio-economic processes to natural eco-cycles. The process of implementing the National Environmental Objectives is quite unique. It represents the so far most pronounced commitment of present and future generations to intergenerational equality, at the same time as it safeguards the norms of socio-economic justice of the present welfare state. Sweden has built up, and continues to develop institutional capacities for interpreting and transforming scientific sustainability-directed arguments into integrated measures for sustainable development. Those measures are legitimised and made collectively binding through decisions in democratically elected bodies.

One should not, however, hasten to conclude that Sweden is nearly over to the other greener side of the fence. There are still some hurdles in the way. We have seen that validated scientific and expert arguments are not always given attention in policy decisions and resource management. And the core problem of ecological governance is still there; do the steps taken so far provide for both autonomy and sustainability? The NEO strategy can be interpreted as an effort to bring about ecologically sustainable development with minimum coercion and maximum consent, and without fettering initiatives conducive to economically effective resource utilisation. It is important to note the path dependency of that strategy. The ‘corporatist’ governance through co-operation between national government and organised interests that helped build the social welfare state is now envisaged as the vehicle also for building the sustainable society.
The real test is whether this political strategy really could effectively bring socio-economic activities within the scales of the ecological resource base. As already said, this is too early to tell. But as a ‘forerunner’ and an ‘enthusiast’ with respect to issues of sustainable development, Sweden is now straddling the fence to get over to the greener side. The experience of Sweden can thus provide important stimuli to the scholarly debate on the problems and possibilities for ecological governance to achieve sustainability while upholding individual autonomy, public participation and democracy. To assess the usefulness of the Swedish case for future comparative studies, let us therefore confront it with some recent inputs into the comparative study of policies for environmental quality and ecologically sustainable development.

Forever fenced in? The prospects of governance for sustainability in advanced industrial countries

The editors of Governance and Environment in Western Europe present a grim view of the possibilities for democratically elected politicians in capitalist nations to opt for ecologically rational governance. In order to win elections, they have to establish a record of delivering the economic and social welfare citizens aspire to. Therefore, the political leadership has to make the national economy stable and competitive, so that tax income increases enough to pay for continued economic and social welfare for the citizenry. To take seriously the arguments made by biologists and ecologists for radical structural changes could seriously threaten the national economy and thus the deliverance capacity of the political leadership. In short, political leaders in democratic and industrialised nations are fenced in by the logic of competition in global markets.

Consequently, political leaders have to find ways of handling the ecological problematic in ways compatible with the market logic. The solution, argue the volume editors, is to secure discursive and political hegemony for the strategy of ecological modernisation. Policy-makers seek to convince key socio-economic interests that environmental protection can be turned into a ‘positive-sum game’ by providing incentives that help create new eco-technological markets. In this way, industry finds anticipatory development of green technology profitable, and the politicians can preach ‘green growth’. Indeed, the editors
conclude that the ‘strategy of ecological modernisation is not only compatible with, but may even be seen as part of the overriding project of the ruling policy elites to expand the logic of the institutional order of the market.’ (Jansen, Osland and Hanf 1998:313 ff.; quote from p. 318).

The editors of Implementing Sustainable Development – Strategies and Initiatives in High Consumption Societies disagree with ‘the triumph of this sort of eco-modernist perspective’. Instead, the globally expanded commitment to sustainable development functions as a normative external force that makes governments, particularly in the ‘enthusiastic’ states, incorporate sustainable development ‘as a high-profile, officially sanctioned standard, against which environment and development initiatives can be weighed.’ This is furthermore ‘associated with innovation in the environmental policy domain, and governments remain formally committed to carrying forward and deepening the quest for “sustainability”’ (Lafferty and Meadowcroft 2001b:454 f.).

This should not, however, be taken to mean that sustainable development is achieving the kind of unilateral discursive and policy hegemony ascribed to ecological modernisation by Jansen et al. First of all, the sustainable development discourse leaves more open the scope of institutional reform, such as internalisation and participation. The steps taken even by forerunner states are best seen as ‘pragmatic efforts at implementation … to match the ambitious’ language of the UNCED programme. Second, the engagement in sustainable development has had a more pluralist character. But the direction of the movement is clear: ‘True sustainable development has been broadly accepted as a legitimate goal – and this has a determinate normative and policy content’ to move the governance of the society-environment relationship beyond the strategy of ecological modernisation (Lafferty and Meadowcroft 2000b:452 f.).

To sum up: The ‘eco-modernist’ interpretation encloses nations within the parameters drawn up by the competitive market logic. It is politically impossible for the individual country to proceed beyond ecological modernisation. The ‘sustainabilist’ interpretation views nations as politically and morally committed to a globally acknowledged agenda to achieve economically, socially and ecologically sustainable development. This prods the individ-
Swedish country to proceed beyond present policies to bring about ecologically rational governance.

Sweden presents a critical case for testing the eco-modernist view. It is a highly industrialised state, heavily dependent on its competitiveness in international markets for economic stability and resource mobilisation for the social welfare state. At the same time, it has a record of being a forerunner and enthusiast in the global and regional search for sustainable development. In order to systematise this assessment, some core characteristics of ecological modernisation and sustainable development identified in recent discourse are outlined in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1 Ecological modernisation and sustainable developments: a comparison of core elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem/issue/dimension/relationship</th>
<th>Major approach/views of ecological modernisation</th>
<th>Major approach/views of sustainable development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographical dimension</td>
<td>Primarily national, ‘enclosure’ within traditional boundaries</td>
<td>Global and national, ‘commons’ define appropriate areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character of environmental problem</td>
<td>Sectoral, ‘medial’ problems possible to control and contain</td>
<td>Long-term, global, cross sectoral high-consequence-risk potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy/environment relationship</td>
<td>Growth can be ‘greened’ through technological development</td>
<td>Shifts in pros/cons patterns necessary, changes in quality of growth through decoupling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy instruments</td>
<td>Mainly economic, but also regulatory incentives for green technology, use of voluntary agreements</td>
<td>Regulatory action a necessary base for all other measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social dimension</td>
<td>Win-win solutions possible, thus implying harmony among interests</td>
<td>Conflicts unavoidable, distributive justice must be part of ecological measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional/Administrative dimension</td>
<td>Existing institutions can handle the problems through effective internalisation</td>
<td>Significant modifications are called for, and structural changes may be needed</td>
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Source: Builds on Jansen et al. 1998; Langhelle 2000; Lafferty and Meadowcroft 2000b

There are several aspects of the Swedish case that might first tempt us to conclude that what has actually been achieved is
nothing more than a ‘Swedish model’ of ecological modernisation. The very first speech of the newly elected leader of the governing Social Democratic Party in 1996 struck that note. Win-win solutions were seen as possible, growth could be greened, and the perspective of *national* gain from such a strategy was evident. The Local Investment Programmes introduced in 1997 certainly built on the possibilities to achieve green growth and greening of technology. The programmes for eco-cycling introduced in the early 1990s and later expanded, are in many cases built on utilising the commercial potentials of recycling and reusing goods and materials. These measures, as well as the quest for increased eco-efficiency, and the early introduction and subsequent expansion of green taxation could all be interpreted as fully within the logic of competitive markets.

However, the evidence indicating that Sweden has proceeded beyond ecological modernisation is strong. The use of sustainable development as both a valid concept and a long-term objective for environmental policy can be found as early as around 1990 in the major governmental bills. This was followed by a stream of governmental bills and parliamentary decisions establishing sustainable development as the overarching objective across traditional societal sectors from about 1996 on. The Cabinet’s reports to Parliament on the state of the environment shifted from discussing sectoral and/or medial pollution problems to outlining measures for sustainable development within and across such boundaries. There was a comprehensive integration of all resource-related legislation into one major code, building explicitly on the objectives and principles contained in sustainable development, thus providing strong legal ground for all other environmental measures. Sweden’s swift introduction and development of Agenda 21 activities after the Rio summit also points in the same direction.

Furthermore, the spatial, temporal and social justice aspects of sustainable development are in clear evidence in the Swedish case. Several of the opening arguments of the Cabinet Bill on National Environmental Objectives, passed by Parliament in 2001 imply that Sweden has indeed incorporated sustainable development as a high-profile, officially sanctioned standard against which environment and development initiatives can be weighed. After having quoted the Brundtland Commission’s definition of sustainable development, the Cabinet states that
Work for the environment must be seen in a dynamic and global perspective. Experience shows the difficulty in foreseeing future environmental problems. (Thus) the precautionary principle, as expressed in the Environmental Code, should have precedence... an ecologically sustainable development in one part of the world cannot be had at the expense of environmental and social welfare in some other part. (Cabinet Bill 2000/01:130, p. 11 f.)

Now, could not all this be dismissed as nothing but some rattling at the fences, ‘a rhetorical cover for a policy stance that in practice looks much more like “ecological modernisation”’ (Lafferty and Meadowcroft 2000b:451)? The most crucial part of assessing the Swedish case in this respect is the NEO process of management by objectives. Although founded on the principles and rules of the Environmental Code, and despite its long-term, cross-generational perspective on social justice and sustainable development, it depicts many of the trappings of ecological modernisation. The 15 National Environmental Objectives are very broad in character. Their operationalisation into sectoral, regional and local targets with specified deadlines for achievement is subjected to negotiations and agreements among authorities and important producer and consumer interests in various socio-economic sectors.

Evidently, there is a possibility that issues of market competitiveness might enter this process, and lead to a watering down of the NEOs to make them compatible with that logic. However, there are several nuts and bolts installed into the process to keep it on track towards solving the major environmental problems within one generation. The interim targets are formulated by Parliament, thus formally binding and committing agencies and actors further down the line that are involved in the process of developing goals and targets to carry forward and deepen the quest for ‘sustainability’. Having invested so much in the NEO process, it is most probable that agencies and authorities also come to feel morally bound to use sustainability as the common yardstick for their work.

My conclusion is that the direction of the Swedish movement is clear: ‘True sustainable development has been broadly accepted as a legitimate goal – and this has a determinate normative and policy content’. (see Lafferty and Meadowcroft 2000b:452 f.) The Swedish example shows beyond doubt that it is possible for...
advanced industrial nations to go beyond ecological modernisation and commit future policy-making and implementation to the full range of sustainability issues. At the same time, it shows that the ways and methods for getting further can be both varied and as yet indeterminate in terms of outcome. A most interesting aspect of Sweden’s movement towards sustainability is that so much of future ‘environmental work’ (the Cabinet’s term) is to be entrenched in the governmental bureaucracy and their negotiations with affected organised interests to further elaborate these objectives. Within the NEO process of management by objectives, present bureaucrats actually uphold the function as ‘ombudsmen’ for future generations. If it turns out that the sub-goals and targets come to reflect judgements of administrative feasibility and implementability as much as considerations of levels and conditions necessary for sustainable development, this would affect the autonomy of future generations. We then come up against the ultimate question guiding this study: What are the prospects for autonomy and democracy within multi-level and long-term binding ecologically rational governance aimed at saving the integrity of the commons?

Getting over in style? The prospects for democracy in ecological governance

We started out from the normative argument that ecologically rational governance for sustainability must be sought within the limits drawn by democracy and the value of individual autonomy. We assumed that ecologically sustainable development is not possible to achieve without conflicts over how to use or not use scarce resources. There will be winners and losers in that process. The necessary redistribution of resources, positions and power cannot gain political legitimacy if it is not decided upon and implemented through democratic procedures open to public scrutiny and participation.

Sweden’s progress towards sustainability has been achieved with a somewhat mixed record in terms of democracy and participation. True enough, there are comparatively generous rights of citizen access to information, policy-making and implementation of issues related to the management and quality of natural resources. Furthermore, Sweden has been at the leading edge in engaging citizens in Local Agenda 21 activities. It is equally true,
however, that much of the future ‘new environmental work’ seems to be copied from the corporatist arrangements evolving when building the social welfare state. A dominant strategy is for government to seek consensus and agreements with established and securely entrenched organised interests, while the role of individuals is to a considerable extent seen as that of customer and consumer reacting to carefully orchestrated policy incentives and market signals. It is furthermore true that the projected water management organisation to be introduced in order to implement the EU Framework Water Directive involves a centralisation of power and authority at levels above the present local and regional ones in Sweden.

Could it be that effective governance for sustainable development implies some basic problems or conflicts with democracy? As pointed out in the analysis of the spatial dimension (see Chapter 2), an ecologically desirable adaptation to natural scales means that ecological governance is inherently multi-level in character. We end up with a system of nested enterprises, all the way from ‘super-local’ eco-system management units to global regimes for such gigantic problems as climate change. This of course also means that the issue of what is the ‘appropriate’ distribution of authority, participation and influence becomes crucial if we want both effective and democratic ecological governance.

At issue, then, is what standard should be applied to determine what is appropriate. When the standard of functional effectiveness is applied, the logic may easily become one of centralisation. The argument is two-pronged. Most problems facing rational ecological governance – such as diffuse pollution affecting eco-systems over long distances, and climate change – are such that their effects and consequences cannot be contained and handled at the level of origin. Their solution demands treatment at national and often international levels. This is further accentuated by the increasing demands for internationally and globally valid common regulations and conditions for economic activities. Ecologically motivated measures to save, protect and manage natural resources and environmental quality should thus as far as possible be common across not only regional but also international political and administrative boundaries.

Applying the principle of functional effectiveness to distribute authority, participation and influence will have repercussions for
democracy. There are different constituencies at different scales, meaning that democratic participation is faced with differing opportunities and obstacles at each level. The further up authority is moved for the sake of functional effectiveness, the more difficult it may be for ecological governance to actually be rational in the sense of valuing individual autonomy and democracy. The principle of *subsidiarity* could be applied here. As I interpret this principle, it is applicable within *any* multi-level system of governance. In its most general form, it means that authority to take action should be allocated to the level where the objectives of a given policy can be sufficiently achieved. The application of subsidiarity would then be a decentralising force. If lower levels can sufficiently handle an issue related to ecological governance, then that is where authority should be allocated. Needless to say, this will have positive implications for the possibility of citizen and interest participation in governance (see Weale et al. 2000:494).

It is interesting here to compare the patterns of ecological governance we have found in Sweden to those of the European Union. The authors of a recent study of EU environmental policy conclude that the complex EU system of ecological governance has gained capacity to make significant choices for the European environment. Environmental concern has moved from obscurity to centre stage in EU very much because the strive to widen and consolidate the single market has made member states see it as functionally effective to support common approaches and measures to ecological problems, as much as or more than opting for subsidiarity as the guiding principle. However, the procedures by which this centralisation has come about – government level negotiations to find contingent majorities, Commission initiatives, little input or participation from the European Parliament, etc. – are such that environmental issues have not been subjected to political competition and are characterised by low democratic accountability. They may thus not fully ‘approximate the interest of the citizens of Europe’ (Weale et al. 2000:437, 440).

It seems as if both subsidiarity and functional effectiveness have been applied as guiding principles in the emerging system of ecological governance in Sweden. There has been some scaling down of authority to local government. There was an initial and strong move to incorporate citizens in the Local Agenda 21
activities. There will be moves to arrange new entities at the local and ‘super-local’ level with respect to the management of ecosystems such as small water catchments. And there is, as we have seen, a comparatively generous and liberal formal regulation of citizen access to the public policy process.

Yet, important as these signs of subsidiarity may be for the democratic and participatory character of ecological governance, there are very strong indications of functional effectiveness as a major principle for distributing authority, participation and opportunities to influence such governance. The LIP process involved traditional local and business elites, but was exceptionally centralised in that the Cabinet itself made the implementing decisions on how to allocate funds. The NEO process builds very much on developing nation-wide targets and deadlines in cooperation with organised sectoral – read producer – interests.

From the perspective of functional effectiveness, these patterns of incorporating crucial socio-economic interests in processes to reach nation-wide agreements on measures could be seen as efforts to secure progress towards sustainability. However, problems of democratic accountability and legitimacy arise if ecological governance comes to involve specific channels for compromise and accommodation between government and organised sectoral interests. As was seen from the recent study of organised interests’ access to the policy process in Sweden, the stages to which citizens have access provide mostly for symbolic participation, whereas the most resourceful organised interests can wage real influence.

It would seem as if both the EU and the Swedish processes tend to follow a similar pattern. There is a push upward in terms of the levels and scales where final decisions are taken, as well as where and by whom participation and influence is exercised. This could spell difficulties for how to get over to the greener side in a democratically acceptable style, i.e., through an open political process with lively public participation and rich possibilities to hold those involved accountable. In a wider perspective, the similarities of the two processes point to a feature of modern advanced societies that further studies of ecological governance must address, i.e., the fact that they are so highly and thoroughly organised.
Governing the commons; negotiated ecological governance in modern highly organised societies

This high degree of organisation colours the ultimate lessons from Sweden’s struggle towards ecologically rational governance. On the side of sustainability, Sweden’s experience points to the political readiness to incorporate the conceptual framework of sustainable development into the political process, as well as much of the arsenal of measures seen as necessary for its practical implementation. At the same time, we have found that the Swedish governmental efforts to implement sustainable development seem to follow the maxim of minimum coercion and maximum consent; the dominant form for ecological governance is co-operation with organised interests and persuasion of the general public.

While having advantages in terms of sustainability, this governance pattern is also problematic. First, as a co-operative, agreement-seeking and long-term directed strategy, the Swedish NEO (read management by objectives) process may ease the implementation of sustainability measures. However, it may at the same time be based on policies setting the stakes lower than those claimed necessary by those possessing expert knowledge, all because of the value policymakers put on political feasibility and acceptance among target-groups. Second, the co-operative, agreement-seeking and long-term directed NEO strategy is formally based on easy access and rich opportunities for participation, which would speak in favour of democracy in ecological governance. However, the real pattern found in crucial policy-making processes is one of special and resourceful highly organised interests, talking the right ‘technocratic’ language, and getting further into the corridors of power than citizen and action groups promoting broad societal and value changes.

This latter characteristic seems to be particularly at odds with much of the argument put forth on the relationship between sustainability and democracy in the discourse of green political theory. Ecologically rational governance for sustainability is said to necessitate a new communicative rationality in a discursive democracy characterised by lively citizen involvement (see summarising discussion in Barry 1999:226 ff.). At the risk of sounding somewhat biased, I would argue that many green political theorists have approached this issue almost wholly from an
individualistic and pluralistic angle. Their view comes close to classic liberalism. The democratic political system consists of elected representatives and electing citizens with the latter standing in a direct, individual relationship to government. Insofar as there are discussions and examples of organisations in civil society as intermediary aggregators of group interest, they mostly concern associations in a civil society working to protect individuals from both the state and the market, not to positively influence future governance (see Barry 1999:237).

This means that many of the normative designs of governance for sustainable development often tend to neglect, or perhaps better put, wish away the existence in advanced societies of strong socio-economic and other interest organisations. Across all possible expressions of human life we find special interest organisations, actively fighting to influence public policy with whatever resources they have and appearing wherever they can get access to processes of governance seen as relevant to their interests. This further means that empirical studies of ecological governance that do not take into account that modern society is thoroughly organised are also bound to miss important points. There is also evidence from comparative research implying that industrially advanced countries with high capacities for environmental policymaking and implementation seem to favour ‘sophisticated forms of governance based on high public-private interaction instead of command-control regulation or self-regulation’ (Enevoldsen 2001:104). To sum up this line of argument, the democratic state in modern advanced societies is increasingly engaged in establishing some form of ‘negotiated social governance’ with large hierarchically managed organisations (Hirst 2000:20).

This thoroughly organised character of modern advanced societies must thus be given close attention when we analyse how ecological governance is organised to deal with both sustainability and autonomy. Greening the commons to achieve sustainable development in such thoroughly organised modern societies as Sweden does indeed resemble a steeplechase. The commons is criss-crossed by enclosures claimed or defended by strongly organised special interests, often with historically gained status as keepers at the gates to specific natural resources. To prevent these claims from becoming fences that place the greening of society
beyond political feasibility, negotiations with those interests have to be carried out, and resulting agreements must be made politically legitimate.

Of central concern, then, is how inherently multi-level ecological governance is organised to allow for interplay between governmental authority and organised interest activities (necessary for the successful implementation of adopted policies) and still preserve the political legitimacy and accountability of ‘negotiated’ ecological governance. Two things are of crucial importance here. First, it must be remembered that not all organisations are as internally democratic as to provide citizens with appropriate opportunities for participation and influence. Second, the democratic government should preserve the ultimate authority and remain the ultimate source of legitimacy for such elaborate division of labour in the greening of the commons.

The most salient lesson from the review of the Swedish case is that it points to both opportunities and conditions for securing the legitimacy of negotiated ecological governance. Founded on a base of broadly co-ordinated regulation, where the Environmental Code covers the full spectrum of the society-environment relationship, the Swedish approach to ecological governance has involved organised interests from all walks of life. This holds all the way from policy formulation and selection of strategies to the implementation of detailed measures all the way down to the ecosystem level. As shown in the preceding chapters, this negotiated form of ecological governance has promoted policy and action beyond ecological modernisation and towards a path of sustainable development.

We have argued that the selection and success of the negotiation approach to ecological governance is very much a matter of path dependence. Organised interests engaged in activities with potentially heavy impact on natural resources and the environment, such as industry, agriculture and transport are historically used to participating in negotiations with government on policy formulation and implementation ever since the building of the social welfare state. This inherited legitimacy of co-operative negotiated governance has both directed the construction, and legitimised the continued process of ecological governance in Sweden. Here, it seems appropriate to return to the 1997 words of Prime Minister Göran Persson when setting the ‘Sustainable
Sweden’s programme in motion. The Swedish welfare state – the People’s Home – was built through ‘broad consensus on the conditions for production, increased standards of living, and security for everyone.’ In a similar way, he said, ‘[w]e will realise the vision of a green welfare state’.

The attentive reader might object that the negotiated approach could lead to the stakes being set lower than might be necessary for sustainability. After all, the strongest and most resourceful interests involved in negotiating the actual implementation of the NEO strategy of management by objectives are those who stand to lose substantially from a more radical change of values that some deem crucial to ‘real’ progress towards sustainable development. These interests are also the ones found to get closest to influencing government and the way its authority should be used to direct future developments.

To this it must be said again that it is too early to judge how far negotiated ecological governance will help Sweden in retaining the integrity of the commons. What could be said, however, is that just as no country could get over to the greener grass on the other side alone, no national government could command its people to sustainability. Legitimacy for a unilateral commandeering system of ecologically rational government would be hard to accept in democracies valuing individual autonomy. To this should be added what research on implementation convincingly shows, i.e., that interest participation increases the effectiveness and efficiency of governance.

What is the real problem for the latter approach is that the unevenly distributed resources and historically achieved power positions of different affected interests may detract from the legitimacy of negotiated ecological governance. Again, the historic record is an important conditioning factor. The success and legitimacy of negotiated governance are crucially dependent on the degree of trust and reciprocity on both sides of the public-private divide. When such values are part and parcel of the collective memories among actors in negotiated governance, there is a potential for getting over the fence to attain ecologically rational governance, i.e., one that both values democracy and individual autonomy and still retains the integrity of the commons.