

Sustainability and Social Cohesion in Luxembourg: By Design or Disaster

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Summary

I use two Luxembourgish cultural stories to show how they weave through the issues of sustainability and social cohesion with regards to five looming crises that concern the energy, economy, environment, equity, and culture. I propose a critical review of the concept of ‘social cohesion’ and propose that its usefulness as an analytical term has quietly slipped away. I analyse, *inter alia*, the Luxembourgish dream, the Agenda 2030 and the Rifkin study as partial and positioned responses to the five crises and explain how the cultural stories influence the ways in which we are able to respond to the crises. I demonstrate that Luxembourg has no systemic response to the five-fold conundrum, and argue that it does have a choice of how to utilise actually existing models and solutions to fully redesign our society, orienting it towards the common good and thus averting disaster.

Two Cultural Stories

In Luxembourg, two persistent cultural stories coexist, despite apparently contradicting one another. The first one goes like this: in the early nineteenth century, as we became independent from those that had colonised us, we were poor small-scale farmers working bad soils in inclement weather. The steel industry – our industrial revolution – turned this around and brought us prosperity. With the dusk of the steel industry, we found a new niche with a highly specialised service economy and managed to secure even more financial wealth. The second story tells of Luxembourg’s difference to other places around it. In Luxembourg, the good things about the old days have not been abandoned; here, the welfare state is intact; here, we know one another, and the ‘paths are short’ to get things done. The first story describes a linear ascension from domination into prosperity; the second the authenticity of a village that has stayed true to itself. They may be paradoxical and appear mutually exclusive, but I argue that they represent something about how Luxembourg is currently positioning itself.

I would like to use these two stories here to show how they weave through the issues of sustainability and social cohesion in Luxembourg. Luxembourg is no island unto itself. Mirroring the wider world, Luxembourg is currently facing five looming crises that concern the energy, economy, environment, equity, and culture. These crises are interconnected, but not discussed as such in mainstream public discourse. My argument is that they are all highly relevant to social cohesion, and I will treat each in turn (with the cultural crisis weaving across the others), and also give some context to why these crises are not addressed in a systemic and systematic way. First, however, I briefly need to make my position on social cohesion explicit.

Down the Social Cohesion Rabbit Hole

What Karl Marx said about the commodity rings true with the concept of social cohesion. It, too, ‘appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.’¹ Social cohesion was, in the time of the emergence of the social sciences² an analytical term used to describe the social phenomena that give rise to society, anomie and cooperation, for instance, but has since moved on to OECD and Club of Rome policy documents as well as politicians’ speeches to signify a yay-concept that does not have an easily scrutable signifier.

Indeed, in recent social theory, repeated calls for consensus with regards to the definition of cohesiveness – e.g. what exactly is this social glue and what are the conditions under which it thrives? – were largely academic echo chambers.³ While social theory has progressively abandoned concepts that work as static totalities in a paradigm shift towards favouring dynamic processes and networked thinking, in public discourse, social cohesion is still referring to a totality, often mapped onto national boundaries. Across different wealthy countries, social cohesion is a nostalgic concept that evokes the post second-world war welfare state of the French *Trente Glorieuses* or the German *Wirtschaftswunder*, a rather atypical and exceptional period.⁴ After the demise of the Bretton Woods System and

1 Marx (1867), Capital Vol 1 26.a.

2 Psychology, anthropology and sociology emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as a by-product of industrialised society and its Others.

3 However, it might be argued that social network analysis theory promised to overcome the methodological difficulties that the study of social cohesion of larger groups posed, as its appeal lay in that it took an interest in the patterns and network connections conducive to qualities of cohesiveness, notwithstanding group size.

4 Piketty (2014), p. 87. It is an exceptional period for European and other Western countries in terms of unprecedented economic and social mobility, economic growth, development of infrastructure and tertiarisation of the economy. I would argue that the growth and development the BRIC countries are experiencing today is of a very different quality.

subsequent increasing economic deregulation, the positive potential of the welfare state has decreased a lot, even in Luxembourg.

Literature by both academics and policymakers describes social cohesion as a desirable feature of a social entity, yet often implies a normative edge, deploring a society where this social cohesion currently deteriorating.⁵ There has been much theorising and much critiquing of social cohesion as a concept.⁶ Social cohesion has been referred to as a quasi-concept⁷ that aims at detecting and forging a consensus on a certain reality. In other words, social cohesion can be an empty shell for both right-wing and left-wing contents. This is why I find the term less than helpful as an analytical term, but acknowledge we may consider it as a primary source that can be read as a perlocutionary⁸ act in everyday political and social discourse, fitting into a *langue de bois* that, to some degree, euphemises society as a stable entity in a time of high diversity, increasing inequalities and an uncertain future.

I am not discarding the concept as an analytical term entirely, drawing in my analysis on a recent synthesis of the social cohesion literature that has identified the following dimensions to the concept: social relations, identification, orientation towards the common good, shared values, quality of life and (in)equality.⁹ I consider these as variables towards a more or less defined nebula of social cohesion. My analysis will be particularly attentive to the orientation towards the common good, but also dip into other dimensions as required.

Luxembourg's Five-Fold Sustainability Predicament

My premise is that Luxembourg is facing crises in the area of energy, economy, environment, equity, and culture.¹⁰ These crises influence and multiply one another and are part of a systemic crisis of sustainability that impacts social cohesion. They are referred to as crises as they push us to make a decision to ignore them, fight them or otherwise engage with them. I use sustainability here as a kind of human development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.¹¹ It is my view that a transition oriented towards the common good is needed to shift from our current unsustainable way of living to a way that is compatible with social and ecological thriving for all beings.

5 Schiefer & van der Noll (2017), p.579-580.

6 See Schiefer & van der Noll (2017), Friedkin (2004), Bruhn (2009), Bernard (1999).

7 Bernard (1999).

8 Austin (1962, p. 101.

9 David Schiefer & Jolanda van der Noll (2017).

10 My work is inspired by the Post Carbon Institute, that has defined the E4 crises (environment, energy, economy and equity), but I add a cultural dimension in its own right.

11 WCED (1987).

Energy and Luxembourg's Silence on Sufficiency

Although in Luxembourg we might not feel this directly (yet), the global energy crisis is here. In 2018, it is safe to say that oil depletion of finite quantities of petrol is a global issue and that the era of cheap fossil fuels is over. The global energy industry is scrambling for deepwater drilling, shale oil exploration and coal mining on a very large scale. Meanwhile, in Luxembourg, while the Tram is being built, commuters and residents alike still move towards Luxembourg city and the south bumper on bumper, and petrol continues to be sold in large quantities with taxes diverted to the state. The government's Agenda 2030 implementation paper mentions many measures, including investment into solar, wind and biogas energy, electrical automobiles, and energy-efficient buildings.¹² The energy component of the ambitious Agenda 2030 is based on the Third Industrial Revolution (hereafter TIR, also known as Rifkin study) that wants 'to make the existing economic model more sustainable and interconnected for future generations by working with ICT, energy and transport as part of an intelligent network'.¹³ TIR heavily promotes technological fixes for, among others, the energy sector in the form of smart meters, smart grids, and the Internet of Things. According to the IEA, Luxembourg's renewables produced 8% of electricity in 2016, of which 26% were from agrofuels.¹⁴ This means that Luxembourg continues to remain extremely dependent on other countries for its energy needs. With 14.27 MWh/capita, Luxembourg is consuming double the IEA average, but its CO₂ emissions have been falling between 2014 and 2016.¹⁵

It is clear that renewable energy, even if invested in heavily and rolled out fully cannot replace the marvellous quantity of fossil energy that has been bestowed upon us since the industrial revolution, and it is clear that fossil energy needs to die as fast as possible if runaway climate deregulation is to be averted.¹⁶ It follows logically that a great leap down in terms of energy use is required as soon as possible. It is important to take note of the silences in the Agenda 2030: while energy efficiency is a commonly used term, there is no explicit mention of energy sufficiency, i.e. reducing the energy needed by Luxembourg's population.

12 Luxembourg Government Report (2017).

13 Quote from http://imslux.lu/eng/nos-activites/pole-de-specialites/8_the-third-industrial-revolution-in-luxembourg (01.02.2018).

14 IEA (no date).

15 *ibid.*

16 As a reminder, unless radical steps are taken, the world is currently set for a 4°C warming, which means an array of devastating consequences, including water scarcity in many regions, flooding of coastal settlements, unprecedented heat waves, high risks for food production and ensuing human health costs, increased frequency of storms and extreme weather events, irreversible loss of biodiversity. See <http://keepitintheground.org>.

The omission is part of the first cultural story: this nation, it is believed, is on a path to constant improvement, and it is taboo (or simply outside the paradigm) to hypothesise that this may not continue for eternity. Furthermore, TIR is slanted towards technologies that will purportedly solve our problems. When it comes to futureproofing Luxembourg, we are asking technology to solve problems that actually demand human moral intervention – ones that require ethical decisions, behaviour change, negotiation, and sacrifice.

Who does the Economy serve?

Luxembourg's economy is slanted, as 36% of its GDP arise from its still expanding financial sector.¹⁷ In both 2015 and 2018, Luxembourg was ranked sixth in the Financial Secrecy Index, a politically neutral tool for understanding global financial secrecy, tax havens or secrecy jurisdictions, and illicit financial flows or capital flight.¹⁸ Luxembourg has a moderate secrecy score of 58 and a very large share of the market for offshore financial services, at over 12% of the global total. The disproportionate weight of the financial sector in the Luxembourg economy achieves a strong degree of capture over the political system, media and culture, and despite repeated opportunities for coverage (Luxleaks whistleblowers case, Panama papers, etc.). Public criticism of the financial system is still rare and discouraged by various political figureheads.¹⁹ The New Economics Foundation has established a way to measure financial systems' resilience, in which Luxembourg's financial system does not do particularly well, especially in terms of relative size of the system to the real economy.²⁰

Despite some recent efforts to align with the evolving international climate on transparency, Luxembourg remains one of the world's most important secrecy jurisdictions. The latter effectively foster illegality or abuses elsewhere. TIR does not explicitly encourage divestment from fossil fuels (or, for that matter, from other extractive economies that create sacrifice zones).²¹ The Freeport is the latest instance of a long history of serving the international and national economic elites through private wealth 'management', as

17 Palgrave Macmillan (2016), p. 776.

18 Financial Secrecy Index, URL: <https://www.financialsecrecyindex.com> (01.02.2018).

19 I do acknowledge that this very partially relates to the structure of the media in Luxembourg as well and their being caught up in a global trend of the general public unwillingness to pay for high-quality, critical media reporting.

20 NEF (2015).

21 See Haas *et al.* (2017) for case studies on how Luxembourg's pension funds violate human rights. The report argues that human and environmental rights have many connection points between them. In a personal communication with Dietmar Mirkes (February 2018), he told me that the Luxembourg government is aware that a change is needed here, and that they are currently detailing the criteria for sustainable investment for these funds.

well as hosting holdings of transnational companies, thus facilitating the setting up of tax structures (keyword ‘tax rulings’) for tax evasion and avoidance.²²

Financial markets, products, and firms now play a much larger role in many areas from pensions and social insurance to homes and public infrastructure.²³ Privatisation and the doctrine of maximising value for shareholders have increased the amount of economic activity focused on extracting the largest possible short-term profit. This links to the second cultural story (this place is different, and we have not been affected by negative trends), which is revealed to be illusory: Luxembourg’s landscapes may still look quaint, but the country’s financial sector is causing sacrifice zones elsewhere.

The Space Resources initiative is the latest, superficially innovative initiative with doubtful impact on the common good for Luxembourg, and instead exploiting national sovereignty for short-term gain (if it does not turn out to be a money sink). This initiative, while ambitious in scope, is a rather odd choice of priority in terms of public funding, but also in line with the first cultural story of continuous improvement: to infinity and beyond. It is a result of niche (not systems) thinking and can be interpreted as a re-rigging of space industry through privatisation – no longer serving all of humankind with grand state-backed idealism, but in full service to capitalism.²⁴

This brings us to the environment: the idea that resources from space can somehow be useful and effective to counteract resource depletion seems, in 2018, rather ludicrous.²⁵

Environment – No Wealth on a Degraded Earth

One of the most visible in terms of public discourse (and possibly most fundamental) crises is the environmental crisis. There is a quote attributed to various people (pick your favourite) that rings out how much we are alienated from nature: ‘Despite our civilizational achievements, we owe our life to a few centimetres of topsoil and the fact that it rains.’ Everything we need to survive depends on the natural world. Any sustainable wealth has its basis in terrestrial systems. There is simply no wealth on a degraded Earth. There cannot be, as a consequence any degree of meaningful social cohesion on a degraded Earth. Think about that for a second, and about how little this fundamental fact matters in how you live your life right now.

Ecosystems have two important limitations: their capacity to deal with stress and disruption and their rate of replenishment. Experiential knowledge that our climate is changing and more extensive periods of drought and permanent rain are having an impact

22 Financial Secrecy Index (2018), p. 2-4.

23 See Haas *et al.* (2017).

24 See Abrahamian (2017).

25 I hope to be proven wrong, though.

on the development of cultivated and wild plant species is no longer restricted to food producers and farmers who are in contact with weather patterns every day. Luxembourg may so far not have borne the brunt of climate disruption in the form of an all-out disaster (e.g. deadly storm or floods). In other, quieter news, however, Luxembourg's dominant agricultural practices are causing topsoil erosion, killing soil life, contaminating our entire river systems through eutrophication processes and pesticide residues, and potentially polluting our bodies with endocrine disruptors harming long-term public health.²⁶ Luxembourg's endemic species (not just charismatic megafauna, but also lesser honoured species such as insects, birds and arachnids) are finding it hard to thrive in the agricultural deserts that have developed, and in the increasingly severe urban sprawl or land fragmentation²⁷ that population growth has entailed. Governmental plans to further encourage an increase of Luxembourg's population to 1.5 million in the next 30 years will exacerbate these trends through the added ecosystemic pressure due to further intensification of infrastructure use and housing construction. Luxembourg's recent initiative of promoting Circular Economy (now in its infancy) may not be able to relieve the pressure on the environment to a sufficient degree, since, like TIR, it is not sufficiently focused on or knowledgeable about ecosystem deterioration, overshoot and collapse.

While our environmental policies are relatively strict, we nonetheless cause widespread damage elsewhere through the Luxembourgish dream, i.e. our massively high consumption levels. Under late capitalism, and despite our global awareness, we have a curious cultural notion that an *elsewhere* exists, even though it is all part of the same biosphere. Our notion of trash is premised on an elsewhere. Our diet is premised on an elsewhere. Through our consumption patterns, we exacerbate environmental destruction elsewhere. It is important to note that environmental destruction is impacting the poor and the excluded to a much greater degree than the rich. A few examples include the cotton textiles grown and manufactured by un(der)paid people who are exposed to appalling living and working conditions; the meat or dairy product you bought cheap in a supermarket has an enormous ecological footprint and its producers are very likely trapped in a spiral of debt; the petrol you put in your car, the production of which disrupts ecosystems on a global scale and the agrofuels contained therein, which displace food production areas; and your six or so mobile phones you have in various drawers in your home contain rare earths mined in destroyed and polluting mining landscapes by people under abysmal working conditions, and that are assembled by factory workers in quasi slavery.

26 Karier, Kraus & Kolber (2017). See also the work of PAN (Pesticide Action Network).

27 I find the German term 'Zersiedlung' very graphic.

Limits to Growth is a report by systems scientists on the computer simulation of exponential economic and population growth in a finite world commissioned by the Club of Rome and made public in 1972.²⁸ There have been a number of updates to this influential report, and all of them conclude that there is unsettling evidence that society is still following the so-called ‘standard run’ (business as usual) of the original study, in which overshoot leads to an eventual collapse of production and living standards.²⁹ One follow-up report noted that some issues not fully addressed by the original report, e.g. climate change, present additional challenges for humanity.³⁰ In order to change our lifestyle in order to forge livelihoods and ways of living that do not destroy the environment in the medium-term and in order to prevent catastrophic collapse, we need to rethink urgently not only our relationship to environment, but also to economy, livelihood, sufficiency and low-impact living, in other words our relationship to the common good of humanity and ecosystems.

If we hark back to the first cultural story, we realise that Luxembourg’s wealth is predicated on a disconnection from the ecosystems that sustain it: in the name of progress and advancement of civilisation, we have ‘emancipated’ ourselves from the agricultural livelihoods that, a few generations back, sustained us. This is a cultural problem, as the population’s favourite past times are increasingly happening indoors, on screens, and in tourist visits in places far away. How can a population disconnected from its own resources, its local food supply, and its neighbours become able to apprehend the connections when dominant culture does not model them as essential?

Inequality Harms Everyone

If you are reading this, chances are you already know that relative equality is critical in creating a sustainable future. There are established links between inequality and its negative impact on individual health and wellbeing, social mobility, connections between communities, the common good, etc.³¹ Inequality is not just something to be shrugged off as part and parcel of capitalist dynamics, but something of deep concern. We currently live in an era of historic levels of inequality both within and between nations. 82% of financial wealth created in 2017 went to the richest 1% of humanity.³² Late capitalism’s failure to fully extend economic opportunity and a functional safety net (along with the failure to address institutionalized racism, sexism and other forms of prejudice) has led to ever magnifying inequality of economic, social and political power. Luxembourg’s legislation has been encouraging so-called high net-worth individuals (HNWIs) for a long time promising ‘a

28 Meadows *et al.* (1972).

29 See the 40-year update by Jorgen Randers (2012) to the Report and Rockström (2009).

30 See Jackson & Webster (2016), and APPG (2016).

31 See Shaheen (2011) for further references.

32 Pimentel *et al.* (2018).

geographical and a societal situation particularly adapted to HNWIs [and] offer[ing] many advantages on wealth protection, investment structures and taxation'.³³

However, it is not just the existence of economic elites that contributes to inequality and polarisation. In Luxembourg, while having the highest median income on earth, levels of inequality have been rising in recent years across the board, due to a transformation of the middle class, which is polarizing into two groups, one gaining and the other losing income, resulting in a greater distance between high- and low-income individuals.³⁴ Individuals working in unskilled occupations are those whose income has dropped the most during the recent crisis. The difference between migrants' and 'natives' income levels may not be significant, but their wealth accumulation process differs, as the latter often inherit wealth.³⁵ This is reflected in the lower homeownership rate among migrants. Only 45.1% of migrants own, compared to 83.6% of 'natives'.³⁶ Despite the internal inequality, on the global scale, Luxembourgers are part of the richest 3%. In how far do we, in our everyday lives as citizens, fulfill an ensuing ethical duty to contribute to reducing inequality?³⁷

Economic inequality and ensuing concentration of wealth begets a concentration of political power. This leads to ever increasing slanting of society as the beneficiaries of the politico-economic system tilt the field to further their privilege.³⁸ As a bolt-on effect, Luxembourg benefits disproportionately from the setup of its economy based on the financial sector. Almost half of Luxembourg's population is excluded from voting despite residency, which creates a gap between the newcomers or long-time migrants and people whose origins lie in Luxembourg. This inequality is contributing to further depoliticisation and polarisation, as economic elites differ from political elites. The danger of populism that we are currently seeing on the rise around the globe is a direct effect of the fact that liberalism is no longer considered to be a viable counter-ideology, if it does not propose solutions to existing conundra.³⁹ Current regressive and often violent (not explicitly excluding or condemning it, in any case) right-wing and extreme-right resurgence, with a white supremacist tinge (scapegoating and demonising marginalised, non-white people) on several continents is a definite sign of nostalgia for a supposedly more "certain" and "ordered" time in the past (that is obviously a complete fabrication and may never have existed). The danger of populism is not to be underestimated in Luxembourg, despite a relative historical lack of extreme-right and populist tendencies.

33 Quoted from <http://aitc-pro.com/hnwis-advantages-become-resident-luxembourg/> (01.02.2018).

34 Conchita d'Ambrosio & Marta Barazzetta (2016).

35 I put natives in inverted commas, because it is a strange word in the context of Luxembourg.

36 Weber & Sierminska (2017), p.10.

37 You may check where you stand here : <http://www.globalrichlist.com> (01.02.2018).

38 Lerch (2017), p. 99-100.

39 See Zielonka (2018).

Inequity is the crisis of our time that affects the other aforementioned crises across the board, and, depending on the choices for the transition to a future, inequality will be exacerbated or lessened. If we posit that Luxembourg will continue to implement the Agenda 2030 in order to bring about an energy and transport transition, who will benefit? Due to increasing gentrification of Luxembourg as a whole⁴⁰, it is not far-fetched to predict a polarization of the wellbeing of people who live centrally as opposed to those who live further away from the centre of Luxembourg. This trend is already happening with commuters who accept considerable drops in their wellbeing as they commute for many hours a day. This means that the second story is a lie: things have been changing very fast for a relatively long time, and not to the benefit of the common good.

Culture – There’s No App for That

Finally, underpinning all the crises I have been discussing is a cultural crisis. How do the cultural stories I evoked inform us about the possibility for social cohesion with the looming horizon of the five aforementioned crises?

In the first story, there is a linear development of culture, which makes it hard to admit that this linear progress will not go on. Considering this sort of transition means considering death on a personal and cultural level. It means becoming aware of and addressing the stages of grief⁴¹, and it means coming to terms that hopium may not be what sustains us. Addressing death in our deathphobic culture is more or less impossible in a capitalist world full of lurking distractions.

There is a cultural taboo around publicly admitting or committing to degrowth in a new-rich, monopolistic economy such as Luxembourg. Admitting to this would mean admitting that enormous changes on both personal and collective levels is necessary, and since, according to the second story, we are lucky, and there are no changes needed, this is not possible to do. Committing to degrowth would mean the death of the current way of living, no less. This is anathema in a politically liberal climate where the well-performing individual shall not be changed (except perhaps in some paternalistic discourses around health). The kind of change that degrowth would entail is often emotionally assimilated to a return to poverty, only one or two generations away, and deeply engrained in the cultural and biological DNA, so to speak. This is too big a cognitive dissonance for individuals to take on, even theoretically, in a discussion. This is why we have a culture of denial and of minimisation of crisis. While cooperation is possible and welcomed in limited ways, the new-rich frame of mind tends to want to avoid too much of it, because it is tinged with ideas and memories of dependence, which becomes an emotional throwback to poverty

⁴⁰ Luxembourg’s size warrants that we treat it as a single urban area with a lot of sprawl.

⁴¹ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969).

and perceived deprivation. There is a contradiction in our cultural idea of autonomy that is based on independence, rather than relationality, which is closer to what is actually going on.

Ecosocial Transition: By Design or By Disaster

In conclusion, then, Luxembourg has a choice regarding the five crises that we are currently facing, and, as I have shown, these crises influence and multiply one another and are part of a systemic crisis of sustainability that impacts social cohesion. The models and solutions exist to redesign our society and to orient it towards the common good. To name but one of the myriad projects that researchers, social innovators and environmental activists have been developing for different locales around the world, project Drawdown has collected one hundred creative ideas to reverse the effects of the Luxembourgish dream and to regenerate the Earth and the social relations we depend on.⁴² This means designing and implementing local and agroecological food systems, changing land use, solving the energy issue, empowering women and girls, re-rigging transport and materials in a holistic manner so as to avoid collapse. The choice is really by design or by disaster to achieve an eco-social transition towards desirable and viable futures in Luxembourg.

⁴² Hawken (ed. 2017). See also the P2P, transition and ecovillage movements for innovative and pragmatic solutions to our current conundra.

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