

12 QUESTIONS TO RAFAEL ZIEGLER

1. From your point of view, what are today's most pressing environmental problems?

Climate change, biodiversity loss, water shortage and pollution and many more are important, but so is the problem of finding organizational models and ways of thinking about “the environment” that do not reproduce these problems. This is why I feel very fortunate to be responsible for a cooperative institute. Historically, cooperatives emerged in Europe as a response to the socio-economic crises of early capitalism. They offer a model to prioritize the needs of members over the expectations of capital. Can the cooperative, and related models that do not prioritize capital, also support socio-ecological transitions? Due to their experience with mutualization and shared ownership, I believe there is a very interesting potential here, and there is also a young generation of cooperators who are already exploring it. Furthermore, there are indigenous-lead cooperatives, which offer an additional point: we have to move beyond “the environment” to relationships with the land, and to socio-ecological ways of thinking about reciprocity and solidarity.

2. When looking at potential improvements in our environment, what gives you hope?

I am inspired by efforts that complement the discussion of limits, which is often based on forecasting and the extrapolation of past trends into the future, with another important question. What are desirable futures? Where would we as individuals, organizations and societies like to move to; and given such desirable possibilities, what changes and actions are needed now to support desirable, long-term orientations? The latter is called backcasting, as opposed to the more familiar forecasting. Here in Quebec, the Université de Montréal is leading a big project called *Chemins de transitions*, exploring such questions for the ecological, digital and food transitions. I also regularly use this perspective in teaching to explore desirable futures of public, communal and private organizations together with students in my sustainability courses.

3. Is there a particular environmental policy reform you admire the most?

Since I am based in Montreal, this probably would have to be the *Montreal Protocol* to protect the Ozone layer!

4. Which trend in environmental policy and politics do you consider an aberration?

Here in Canada, and North America more generally, it is very worrisome to see how many politicians are attacking the idea of climate taxation, and that this is not a one off, but something that seems to reemerge regularly, a zombie making polit-

ical planning more difficult and creating uncertainty and uncertainty across all sectors. As the recent US election showed, these attacks use misinformation via social-media campaigns. They seem to have successfully eliminated references to facts, complex questions and long-term collective action.

5. Why environmental communication and campaigning?

Because it forces us to find ways of communicating complex issues with images, stories, and experiences. I really enjoyed being part of the *Big Jump* campaign for river protection: river swimming as both an unforgettable experience with others – you can never jump in the same river twice! – and as an intuitive way to start thinking about water quality, morphology, access to the river ... and to discover a lot of abandoned bikes in rivers. Such campaigns are also a place to explore alternative, desirable futures and real utopias.

6. What has your experience been when it comes to transferring scientific insights into practice?

That it is not a one-way street. It takes time to develop relationships, and to avoid being used either for legitimization purposes or to transfer insights that are not really relevant to practice. I suspect that a lot of transfer takes place in “implicit” transfers during workshops and conversations, whereas “explicit” transfer via texts benefits much from professional support (for example, by journalists).

7. What field of research in the environmental sciences do you find most exciting?

I was amazed to learn – from my son – about the deep biosphere. We are talking about slow food “up here”, and “down there” are organisms with metabolic rates enabling them to live for thousands of years!

8. Can you name any person or event that has had a particular influence on your commitment to environmental issues?

When I was in school, my mother gave me a t-shirt with the slogan “Ich bin ein Störfall” (“I am a nuclear accident”)! It was part of a fundraising campaign for the future energy cooperative EWS Schönau, and no doubt beyond this my mother had her own further reasons for the gift. While I did not really understand the context at the time, and just thought that the t-shirt was fun, I now understand that the idea of responding to real needs, producing renewable and sufficient energy controlled by citizens is a good and important example of socio-ecological action.

9. What knowledge about the environment would you like to pass on to young people?

The analysis of “environmental problems” as part of socio-ecological systems, but also that young people do not have all the responsibility, that we can also learn from them, and that we can explore dystopias/utopias together.

10. As a person concerned with environmental and especially climate communication, what contradictions do you face in everyday life?

The tensions between the global nature of the scientific community (jobs, conferences, etc.) on the one hand, and on the other hand the local place of family life.

11. What are you reading at the moment?

Living for pleasure, an epicurean guide to life (2023). Philosopher Emily Austin explains the pertinence of the Epicurean philosophy, for example its idea of “living unnoticed” as a protection against corrosive desires created by social media, stealing time from contemplative observation, friendship, and regeneration.

12. Apart from the ones we've raised here, what is the most important question of our day?

In honor of the 300th birthday of Immanuel Kant, his fourth fundamental question: What is a human being? Did you know that in his Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view of 1798 Kant wrote the following about foresight: “To possess this faculty interests us more than any other, because it is the condition of all possible practice and of the ends to which human beings relate the use of their powers.”



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Studies in philosophy and economics at London School of Economics, UK and McGill University, Montréal, CA (2007 PhD in philosophy). 2009 co-founder of the social-ecological research group GETIDOS – Getting Things Done Sustainably (2009 to 2019 University of Greifswald and Institute for Ecological Economy Research – IÖW). Associate editor of the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, and of the *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*.

Publications (selected): Embedding circularity: Theorizing the social economy, its potential, and its challenges (*Ecological Economics* 2023; with others) | Backcasting for sustainability – an approach to education for sustainable development in management (*International Journal of Management Education* 2022; with L. C. Porto de Oliveira) | *Innovation, ethics and our common futures: A collaborative philosophy* (2020) | *Creating economic space for social innovation* (2019; with A. Nicholls).

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RAFAEL ZIEGLER ...

... is traveling between worlds, both in terms of countries and disciplines. He was born in 1977 in Nairobi, Kenya, and grew up in Nehren at the foot of the Swabian Jura, close to Tübingen, Germany. He studied philosophy and economics at the London School of Economics, UK and McGill University in Canada. Back in Germany, he co-founded the social-ecological research group GETIDOS (Getting Things Done Sustainably) at Greifswald University in 2009 and served as director until 2019. He then moved back to the second family home in Canada to become a professor at the Department of Management at HEC Montréal and director of the Alphonse and Dorimène Desjardins International Institute for Cooperatives. He also is a member of the Centre de Recherche en Éthique, Axe en éthique et économie of Université de Montréal.

He has a long history of concern for the environment: When he was in school, the Chernobyl nuclear accident happened in the USSR. A group of parents in Schönau (Black Forest, Germany) came up with a creative idea: they founded an energy cooperative that took over the local power grid. This was a big step forward in the energy transition process and served as a model case. Rafael was inspired and became interested in innovations and ideas that contribute to a transformation towards sustainability. Innovation is also about making a difference in the public sphere – and having fun while doing it: Rafael and the GETIDOS group have organized the *Big Jump Challenge* – youth campaign of the European river swimming day with participating teams from all over Europe. By encouraging people to jump and swim in their local rivers and lakes, this event draws attention to our rivers and calls for good water quality.

Rafael works on social innovation as an inter- and transdisciplinary research topic and as a source of new ideas and concepts, especially in the context of water, justice and sustainability. His work is linked to environmental ethics and philosophy of science. This is also related to the theme of this Special Focus *Sustainable development and ethics of science* of GAIA: emphasizing the importance of making explicit and justifying the four features of sustainability science, that is, normativity, inclusion of non-scientists, urgency, and interdisciplinary cooperation, while at the same time critically reflecting on how exactly these could and should be put into practice.

In recent years, Rafael has been particularly interested in the capabilities approach. He has been an associate editor of the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* since 2017, and an associate editor of the *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship* since 2019. His focus is on understanding the role, potential and limitations of the cooperative movement for a circular economy and society. Of course, Rafael is also committed to promoting sustainability in his local campus environment: he was the winner of the eighth edition of the *Trophées Francophones des Campus Responsables* in the category “Pedagogies for a sustainable society”.

Especially today, when the economic ideas of the last century that led to our unsustainable world are gaining strength, it is even more important to think about economic innovation and sustainable development together, both conceptually and practically, as Rafael does.

Dr. Cordula Brand, managing director and scientific coordinator, International Center for Ethics in the Sciences and Humanities (IZEW), University of Tübingen, DE and *Prof. Dr. Thomas Potthast*, executive director of the IZEW and head of the department Nature and Sustainable Development at University of Tübingen, DE