

BEYOND THE POST-PRINCIPLES NARRATIVE: MORALITY AND DISCOURSE IN SUSTAINABILITY AND STRATEGY FROM A SOCIAL SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper addresses backlash against embedding sustainability and moral concerns into policymakers' and business organisations' strategies and priorities. Sceptical voices claim that a "principled world order" has ended, leading businesses to dismiss ethics and sustainability as subjective, low-priority, or not the responsibility of business actors. Deprioritising sustainability and moral considerations is a significant problem because it weakens the legitimacy and governance of organisations and institutions to contribute to, and places the well-being of households and people at risk vis-à-vis systemic sustainability risks and impacts. This problem is well-suited to investigation from a systems science perspective, as it enables reflection on aspects of order-constituting communication and action in organisations, and on the place of morality and sustainability therein. The study applies a theoretical and integrative systems inquiry, drawing from Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action, and discourse ethics and from Niklas Luhmann's theory of autopoietic social systems and ecological communication. It extends this framework by integrating Anna-Verena Nosthoff's recent critique of cybernetics and digital forms of governance control. We argue that calls to exclude principle and value frameworks from organisational identity and management ignore that ethical or legal validity of norms, and the decisions to apply or not apply them in managing organisations (Habermas, 1983) constitute two distinct categories. However, moral communication, for example, on ecological issues, sometimes has limited power to survive in functionally differentiated systems (Luhmann, 1998: 396ff; 2008). It further shows that cybernetic systems control may pose barriers to sustainability and moral considerations on risks and impacts in organisational strategy, behaviour, and communication (Nosthoff, 2026). This paper reframes sustainability concerns in organisations as a problem of legitimacy and complexity management. It proposes a dual strategy to overcome this problem: to strengthen discursive infrastructure to factor in sustainability and moral considerations in business and strategy, translating social and ecological risks and impacts into organisational decision premises, complemented by cybernetic governance safeguards that preserve transparency and accountability of the organisational discourse.

Keywords: organised social systems, legitimacy, sustainability, cybernetic governance, morality.

1 | Introduction

The early decades of the twenty-first century have generated mounting evidence that market economies and the organisations embedded within them face sustainability pressures threatening the Earth's life-support systems at an unprecedented scale and complexity (Niklas Kitzmann et al., 2025). These pressures result from social and environmental risks related to climate change, resource scarcity, biodiversity loss, and growing social inequality. They constitute present-tense governance challenges that demand coherent strategic and normative responses from both public institutions and private actors in order to mitigate planetary risks. However, precisely at this

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juncture, a rhetorical counter-movement has emerged that frames morality and sustainability commitments as artefacts of a now-defunct liberal world order. For example, Friedrich Merz, Federal Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, reflecting on the title Under Destruction of the 2026 Munich Security Conference said in his opening address: "This title appears to suggest that the international order, which was based on rights and rules, is in the process of being destroyed. - I fear we must put this even more bluntly: this order, as imperfect as it was even at the best of times, no longer exists" (Merz, Federal Government of the Federal Republic of Germany, 2026).

As a parallel sign of the times, the World Economic Forum states in its Global Risks Report 2026, "that environmental concerns, especially in the short term, are slipping down the ranking of leading risks for the first time in many years" and that "the downward reprioritisation of environmental risks is unfolding in a geopolitical landscape shaped by growing multipolarity and protectionism" (World Economic Forum, 2026, page 38).

This paper investigates the *post-principles narrative* on theoretical and systemic grounds. It does so by drawing on three bodies of thought that are rarely brought into dialogue about sustainability: Jürgen Habermas' discourse ethics and theory of communicative action, Niklas Luhmann's theory of autopoietic social systems and ecological communication, and Anna-Verena Nosthoff's critique of cybernetic governance. The juxtaposition of Habermas and Luhmann is itself not new — scholars such as Rasch (2000) and Scheuerman (1999) have mapped their differences — but the specific question of how their respective frameworks illuminate the persistence and practical force of moral and sustainability norms in organisational strategy remains underexplored. Nosthoff's analyses cybernetic control of the concrete technological and organisational mechanisms that filter or suppress moral and sustainability signals in contemporary governance architectures.

Section 2 situates the "post-principles" narrative and identifies its logical and empirical deficiencies. Section 3 introduces the Habermasian framework, foregrounding communicative rationality and discourse ethics as resources for understanding the normative infrastructure of organisations. Section 4 presents Luhmann's systems theory perspective, with particular attention to the concepts of functional differentiation, resonance, and structural coupling as tools for analysing how moral and ecological communication enters — or fails to enter — organisational decision-making. Section 5 integrates Nosthoff's cybernetic critique. Section 6 proposes a dual strategy for sustaining moral and sustainability discourse in organisations. Section 7 presents conclusive considerations.

2 | The Post-Principles Narrative and Its Deficiencies

The *post-principles* narrative refers to state actors expressing and justifying a reduced adherence or applicability of international good governance principles and ambitions that result from them, thus weakening their management efforts, or applying them more selectively or with a limited scope compared to previously. Language that speaks about past times when the international order was supposedly based on relatively homogeneous norms and principles, while also pointing to futures where this will not be the case to the same extent, explicitly divides time linguistically into an historic past and a changed future era, classifying current value and norm frameworks as obsolete. Whether the justifications for post-principle behaviour are valid from moral or sustainability perspectives is a question that needs to be investigated and answered separately.

Post-principle behaviour may manifest itself in decisions of states to abandon their commitments to the global accord on climate change; in states applying international aggression or waging illegal wars incompatible with the prohibitions to do so that have been present for decades in the contributory treaties underlying membership of the United Nations or the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization; or in authorities' decisions to treating democratic protest groups differently in their rights to protest, for example in terms of the violence levels applied to

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different groups. At the level of organisations, especially for-profit business organisations, post-principle behaviour is visible in companies scaling down or abandoning ecological and social commitments, de facto scaling back climate actions or applying their climate actions to a smaller percentage of their business value; in ignoring external social and environmental impacts it had said before to find important, and to no longer report on sustainability risks and impacts that were previously important; and in scaling back hitherto applicable social and environmental norms down to the mere level of what is legally required.

Arguing that sustainability or moral values need to be deprioritised as security, military strength and economic competitiveness concerns are currently considered more important does not necessarily invalidate environmental and social risks, nor legal or moral obligations to keep adverse impacts as low as possible. Moreover, these arguments are also not automatically aligned with civil, public or (international) legal norms.

Simultaneously, business organisations may have understandable reasons to scale back the applicability of social, environmental, and ethical concerns, for example, to maintain competitiveness or due to a lack of customer demand.

However, these reasons do not necessarily imply that organisations can retract norms and frameworks voluntarily adhered to before at will without consequences. Such a retraction might be questioned by investors or affected stakeholders under anti-greenwashing or consumer protection regulations, for example.

Post-principles behaviour shows that a change in social systems has occurred when specific principles and norms are scaled back and treated differently in communication. This raises the question of how the organised social systems came to scale back on ethical and sustainability concerns, whether the arguments, consequences and risks attached had been properly considered and tested through *pre-mortem* impact analysis, whether different stakeholder perspectives have sufficiently addressed in deliberations, and whether ethical and sustainability concerns can still be discussed and handled inside the company to identify and assess risks to the company and hazards transferred to outside and stakeholders. Deprioritising values and principles may remove management attention for specific risks and impacts altogether, or even become organisational taboos or censorship, pointing to managerial *noocide*, defined as the suppression, elimination, destruction, removal or rendering impact less of, first, human knowledge from the public or organisational *noosphere*, and, second, the removal of people carrying or expression this knowledge.

From a systems science standpoint, the eye-catching deficiency of the post-principles narrative is a category error of conflation: the decision to no longer apply specific social, environmental or ethical principles does not imply that these norms are or have become generally invalid or not applicable. Secondly, where the act of noocide follows the narrative, the post-principles narrative is destructive to sustainability and ethical elements in discourse. This raises the question of how organisations take decisions on these matters, and how robust and multi-perspective the deliberations were that led to the retraction of principles and norms, even if those are said to be voluntary (i.e., not legal requirements). Voluntary is not per se without obligation.

3 | Communicative Rationality, Discourse Ethics, and Organisational Legitimacy

3.1 | Communicative Action and the Validity of Norms

The German sociologist Jürgen Habermas' core work on social action and (organised) social systems is laid out in this seminal work, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (English: *The Theory of Communicative Action*, first published in 1981 and revised in later editions (Habermas 1987a, 1987b)). An extension of work, focused on ethics and communicative action, was laid out in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (German original title: *Moralbewußtsein und kommunikatives Handeln*), in 1983.

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In his theory on social action and organisation, Habermas distinguishes between strategic action and communicative action. The former refers to strategic action oriented towards instrumental success, whilst the latter refers to communicative action toward mutual understanding to arrive at shared validity of the meaning of specific acts of social action. In his ethical theory, Habermas distinguished between principles (Habermas, 1983, p. 127) and the justification of their validity. For example, the statement “principle X is applicable” and the discourse on the validity of the arguments of the statement are two separate and distinct processes. For example, financial risks to society and organisations resulting from rising global temperatures continue to be genuine risks, even when dismissed as irrelevant in public or internal communications.

The post-principles narrative is problematic in two ways from the perspective of Habermas' key distinctions. First, declaring certain principles or values as obsolete or no longer applicable does not mean that they have lost their meaning, value, or even broad international agreement and support. Just as a map of a landscape is not the landscape, declaring the end of specific order or values is not their end, especially when the involved or the affected do not agree on their abolishment or depriorisation. Norms do not lose their validity because their enforcement mechanisms are weak; they remain as standards against which actual practice can be assessed and challenged.

Organisations that lower or exclude sustainability and moral considerations from their communicative practice incur legitimacy deficit risk, which may accumulate into governance crises, for example, in the form of regulatory backlash, reputational damage, or the withdrawal of the social license to operate.

A second problematic aspect appears when we analyse the *post-principle narrative* from a second major distinction in Habermas' work, the difference between *system* and *lifeworld* (German: *Lebenswelt*). The former refers to purpose- and goal-oriented organised social systems and technology, and the latter refers to knowledge, social norms, culture, beliefs and (public) opinions of people. Both are aspects of society to be understood simultaneously. Habermas (1987b: 522ff) points to the phenomenon of systems of society and the economy colonising people's lifeworld as one of the consequences of the dynamics between the system and the lifeworld.

To understand the implications of social systems such as organisations, businesses or governments applying post-principle narrative, we can now conclude that we first need to establish and investigate separately what exactly post-principle claims refer to and also how they affect the system and people's *lifeworld*. This includes investigating what it is that comes after the principles have been retracted. Second, we need to investigate whether the arguments underlying the claim and the acceptance of something are logically and ethically coherent and acceptable to those involved or affected.

From this, we infer that the order and mechanism by which drastic changes in norms are brought about in a system deserve explicit scrutiny in the analysis of the system in focus. The systems scientific instruments we use to diagnose or steer a system need to be able to identify, observe and assess how the change narratives are constructed, debated in a transparent way, whether mutual agreement or understanding was reached, how internal or external criticism is allowed and handled, and how the changes pan out for the involved or affected. Especially new narratives that change the balance between strategic decisions and action, ethical reflection, lifeworld and their interactions are likely to enable new and unseen consequences.

3.2 | Legitimacy, Lifeworld, and System

The distinction between systems and lifeworld is relevant to sustainability governance. Habermas's colonisation thesis holds that system push toward greater organisational efficiency, effectiveness and economic growth may replace what is held as meaningful and rational

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rationality in the lifeworld, degrading the informal normative infrastructure on which social integration depends (Habermas, 1987a, 1987b).

Systems resist the full translation and adoption of sustainability and ethical codes of the life world into system codes. When organisations treat sustainability principles, for example, or ethics exclusively as a compliance cost or as a reputational investment, principles and values become a strategic calculation. The result is not only ethical impoverishment but also systemic fragility: organisations that have removed ground values and principles are ill-equipped to read and respond to the social and ecological signals that constitute their long-run operating environment as well as to related risks and impacts to the system and the lebenswelt. Of course, this may well result from deliberate decisions to gain more benefits for the system and externalize moral, social and environmental hazards to people and their lifeworld. Where this is the case, decisions that take externalized hazards granted are seldomly explicitly announced nor justified, pointing to potential transparency and credibility issues. Post-principle narratives are suspect to overemphasise less controversial implications, and underemphasise risks and hazards to society and people. Post-principle narratives may resemble more strategically calculated and propagandistic communication, rather than providing information for reflective and investigative discourse.

4 | Autopoietic Systems, Resonance, and Ecological Communication

4.1 | Functional Differentiation and the Limits of Moral Communication

Luhmann's systems theory, first systematically laid out in one of his seminal works, *Soziale Systeme* (English: *Social Systems*; Luhmann, 1984), offers a different perspective and tools to explore our leading question. In a nutshell, Luhmann understands social systems essentially as *autopoietic* bodies of self-reproducing communications and decisions in social interactions and orientation to meaning, whilst differentiating themselves into functional systems, such as society, the economy, the legal system, science, political systems, art systems, religious systems, etc. Functional systems deal with generalised communication media for each functional system: for example, money and prices for economic systems, legal norms and the distinction legal/illegal is what the legal system operates on, love is the medium of intimate relationship systems (Luhmann, 1982). A key aspect of his social systems concept is that social systems draw distinctions to differentiate themselves into system and environment. In fact, systems reproduce and develop in terms of and through key distinctions.

Revisiting the post-principles era with Luhmann's systems concepts, we can understand actors in political and economic systems advocating to drop or scale back climate change action, regulations for financial markets, and regulations for corporate disclosures on sustainability- or ESG-related disclosures as attempts to change the leading communicative distinctions of systems. Such changes change the reference norms for social actors to orient their behaviour and action to. Examples of such attempts to change leading distinctions may take the form of complaints about high costs of ESG or human rights due diligence or disclosures in the economic system, international human rights frameworks not being in the interest of a jurisdiction in political systems, or designating specific themes or people from what is being discussed and communicated in a political system. These themes and people may be labelled as woke, lefties or communists in attempts to declare these themes and peoples as taboo, denying access to the system and effectively *noociding* their knowledge. Please note that several of these examples involve using the legal system to change the system's distinctions in some societal subsystems.

A consequence of working with Luhmann's conceptual systems concepts is that changes in the distinctions in use in systems change over time and are primarily observed as changed distinctions. The specific substance and topics in those distinctions and communications may move to the background of the system's course of development and might even become detached completely from the substance. Whether specific distinctions are more worthy or desirable than

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others is a separate question and of secondary importance in such cases, which can only be answered relative to the systems distinctions of the observer or the judge qualifying the meaning of the changes. Changing systems turn to changed key distinctions to define themselves and their environments. Changing key distinctions and language signal changing systems.

4.2 | Resonance, Structural Coupling, and Ecological Communication

Structural coupling — the stable, co-evolutionary relationship between different autopoietic systems — provides the mechanism through which resonance can be systematically organised. Law couples to the economy through contract and property rights; science couples to the economy through technology and intellectual property. Sustainability governance, on this analysis, requires the development of robust structural couplings that enable ecological and social signals to achieve regular, institutionalised resonance in economic organisations. Carbon pricing, mandatory disclosure frameworks, fiduciary duty regulations, and producer responsibility schemes are all attempts to construct such couplings.

Luhmann's concept of resonance refers to the capacity of a social system to respond to environmental disturbances, unusual or challenging distinctions, in ways that alter its own operations (Luhmann, 1989). Ecological threats — climate change, resource depletion, pollution — do not automatically resonate in economic organisations because they do not present themselves in economically codified form. The translation problem is structural: ecological systems operate according to their own dynamics, which are not intrinsically legible to economic or political systems. Economic systems will be more able and motivated to understand social and environmental threats to their survivability to the degree that the distinctions brought by communications on ecological risks are effectively speaking the language of money and prices. Pending ecological risks that can be expressed in reliable financial risk terms are admitted more quickly to strategically discourse and become part of the discourse. Ecological or social horizon risks that are not as reliably expressible in money terms are expected to *resonate* less in economic systems.

With reference to our leading question, Luhmann's system concept provides us with specific tools to understand our systems focus: how do systems define what is in scope or out of scope for them? Where economic or political systems differentiate themselves based on money and power, respectively, moral or ethical concerns are not the prime differences that these systems work with. An economic or political system does not prioritise ethics as its prime differentiating concern in decisions and system steering, although some concern for ethics may play a role to some extent. Luhmann refers to this as distinctions that may or may not resonate in a given social system. Luhmann has elaborated this idea for communication on dealing with ecological challenges specifically (Luhmann, 1986). The language of money or power does not necessarily affect legal or moral systems, whilst ethical or environmental concerns may not be able to resonate enough in economic systems to change decisions in the economy or politics.

It comes as no surprise that social and environmental considerations have found their way into (financial) risk management, where cost signals stemming from social, environmental and governance (abbreviated as ESG) considerations, notably with regard to the financial risks to business stemming from climate-related risk, increase the future cost base of business, which are by definition matters of concern in economic systems.

The failure of specific coupling mechanisms — the collapse of carbon markets, the scale back of disclosure requirements — does not dissolve the underlying need for resonance any more than the breakdown of a bridge dissolves the need to cross a river. The post-principles narrative, by treating the failure of particular coupling instruments as evidence that sustainability signals are not legitimate system demands, mistakes mechanism failure for problem dissolution.

5 | Cybernetic Governance and the Suppression of Value Signals

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Nosthoff's in-depth and multiperspective critique of cybernetics provides a third framework to understand how organised social systems deal with the post-principles era and the critical debate around the announcement of such an era (Nosthoff, 2026). Nosthoff's reconstruction of the development of cybernetic thought continues its lineage up to the present day, up to the cybernetisation of the individual, capitalism, politics and public opinion, including the cybernetisation of the general will of the people (*volonté général*), for example through profiling people and their views on public issues to engineer winning election programs. Societal complexity is reduced to purpose- and function-oriented rationalisation, the deconstruction of complex interactions and sequences into formalised processes and steps defined therein, and reinforcement of feedback-adjusted *homeostats*: metric-based management, monitoring and intervention, mass surveillance of people and process components, wearables (always connected, always identified, always located). The cocktail consisting of designing social organisation from a functional or purpose-led perspective, technical solutions to monitor people and processes in a high degree of detail, and the growing technical capacity to increase data-capture and data-processing of personal thoughts before they become public enable government, political systems and economic systems to reinforce control mechanisms. For example, the current trend of people workers feeding their thoughts, ways of thinking, values into Artificial Intelligence chat tools, is a form of data capture by *systems* from the *lebenswelt*. Leading distinctions in such thought, whether on a personal or affective level, are being learned by such AI systems. Nosthoff provides ample examples and hypotheses on how our use of AI systems comes back to people in forms of higher degrees of surveillance and control.

The question is how organised social systems allow for reflection, dialogue and for the challenging of views, what communication channels and processes are available to them, and - if available - whether they can match the variety and processing capacity of rationalised processes in bureaucracies, government, politics, public media and businesses. In our view, the post-principles narrative contributes to a removal of principles and values from systems. It increases *resonance barriers* to reflect and discuss what constitutes responsible and just action in public debates, political decision-making, and in sustainability aspects in business decision-making and the key distinctions used therein. Powers governing these systems set the rules, and ideas and people not aligned with principle- and value-stripped systems management may become taboo, illegal or *noocided*. As an hypothesis, universal principles regarding human rights and global accords on, for example, combating global warming, are more likely to be pushed to outside the system. Of course, this process may be more or less intense or all-encompassing depending on the jurisdiction in focus.

Taking this back to the Luhmannian and Habermasian perspectives mentioned above, we stipulate that in terms of Habermas's thought framework, more invasion of systems into the lifeworld seems to be more probable than its opposite tendency, especially under conditions of cybernetisation. A pure goal-oriented organisation, or a functionally concentrated organisation, puts specific distinctions in focus and blends out others. To avoid system diagnoses and interventions becoming caught in these cross-hairs, systems methods, value frameworks and communication mechanisms and themes need to be manifolded and show redundancy to test values and principles in and by mechanisms of decision-making. *Post-principle decisions* would weaken the opportunities to test, and are resisting scrutiny. They resist environmental and ecological values and risk signals (*low resonance*).

Whilst Nosthoff investigates cybernetics, and the interaction of cybernetic economic, political and social systems from a wide variety of sociological, philosophical, ethical and technological perspectives, she sees cybernetics as a school of thought and its intellectual founders, such as Ashby and Wiener, as culprits and pars pro toto cause of increasing governmental and technological control over public opinion, governance, virtually all aspects of life. However, as a point of critical analysis of Nosthoff's book, cybernetics as a school of thought cannot be the root cause of increasing technical control systems and the retirement of value

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frameworks that come with it: goal-oriented action and norm-oriented behaviour form the foundations of organised social systems. To scapegoat (management) cybernetics for this is a fallacy of category. The intention to take control of social order and the means available to influence it was not constituted by cybernetics, but rather seems entirely part of being human.

6 | A Dual Strategy: Discursive Infrastructure and Cybernetic Safeguards

As sustainability and ecological, social and governance (“ESG”) initiatives are concerned with how sustainability factors affect the resilience and well-being of people, communities, and the environment, they are, by definition, also concerned with matters of responsibility and morality. With regard to organised social systems, sustainability is concerned with how organisations see their role and responsibility vis-à-vis maintaining the planetary ecological life support system in the light of climate change, and with regard to treating people fairly. Whatever position is chosen to be pursued in the organisation’s strategy, decision-making will need to make trade-offs between various simultaneous interests of stakeholders and society at large. And organisations make these trade-offs in every decision, even if not explicitly or consciously addressing their social, environmental and governance impacts on themselves and on their environment.

Organisations might argue that it is not their role to pre-empt non-monetary risks and impact goals, or that they are not obliged to go beyond legal and supervisory requirements. As a consequence, they would then be reluctant to address those risks and impacts if they do not affect their financial bottom line. That could be an ethically consistent line of reasoning, if it were not for the use of environmental services or the infringements on people’s rights organisations are causing, as far as they are not priced in in markets and they would not pay for (clean air, clean water, emissions of greenhouse gases that impact global temperature rise).

Two general strategies to keep organised social systems capable of detecting and reflecting on the key distinctions they apply or are about to change and on the actual impact on social systems’ environments are strengthening the discursive infrastructure of the organisation and applying cybernetic governance safeguards.

6.1 | Strengthening Institutional governance for Discourse

The first strategy is to strengthen the governance for discourse, which we derive mainly from Habermas’s thought on ethical discourse: the institutional arrangements, communicative processes, and deliberative forums through which sustainability and moral principles are identified, assessed, tested and acted upon in organisational decision-making. This involves several elements. One element is the (multi-)stakeholder engagement processes enabling co-determination of decision premises. The development of shared sustainability accounting frameworks that make social and ecological impacts legible in organisational decision processes constitutes a second. The reform of corporate governance structures to include stakeholder representation in board-level deliberations constitutes a third. Each of these elements addresses the resonance issue identified by Luhmann: creating structural couplings of and within systems that enable sustainability signals to achieve resonance in economic organisations now that post-principle attitudes would undermine the need to do so. From Habermas, we adopt that communicative processes should be able to discuss and preserve the normative validity of the signals rather than domesticating them by strategic calculation in order to establish discourse from one discourse participant manipulating the other (Habermas, 1987a, p. 385).

6.2 | Cybernetic Governance Safeguards

The second strategy, derived from Nosthoff, addresses the warnings for specific risks from applying technological cybernetic tools to steer social systems and the people, language, topics and distinctions thereof. In a post-principles context, when cybernetic control, information and governance systems contain or suppress communication and dialogue, the strategic response is not to abandon such systems, but rather to embed them in tools and governance arrangements

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that would maintain the ability to investigate the validity and consequences of removed principles and of the act of removal itself.

This involves, first, the deliberate design of governance arrangements that guarantee key management decisions in the context of its dialogical vetting. Automated and algorithm-based decisions should be transparent and tested/testable in dialogue. When external scrutiny (audit, supervision, reporting, for example) disappears, changing key distinctions in the social system become untestable, undetectable, and without resonance. In short, where technological systems reign - and increasingly invade our *lifeworld* - cybernetic colonisation is a key risk and should stay investigable and discussable before key distinctions are changed.

6.3 | Sustainability as Legitimacy and Complexity Management

The dual strategy redefines sustainability as a viability management imperative and not as an ethical luxury or a reputational investment. From a Habermasian perspective, organisations that fail to adequately process principled sustainability and moral claims generate legitimacy deficits that may constitute strategic risks. From a Luhmannian perspective, organisations that fail to develop adequate structural couplings with their social and ecological environments accumulate undetected or underaddressed complexity, implying risks to organisations and their affected stakeholders. From Nosthoff's perspective, a social system adopting post-principle distinctions and their consequences may be exposed to risk and instability, even exacerbated by techno-cybernetic system control.

The “post-principles” narrative, by contrast, proposes to manage this complexity by dismissing and censoring specific distinctions in organised collective communication and action rather than increasing the capacity to process them. This is, in systems-theoretic terms, an attempt to reduce complexity by ignoring it — a strategy that is effective in the short run for those governing an organisation, and it can be catastrophic in the long run. Making distinctions disappear, prohibited, or punishable is a form of flattening problems and risks. The dual strategy proposed here accepts the complexity and develops the institutional and communicative infrastructure needed to navigate it.

7 | Conclusion

This paper has argued that the “post-principles” narrative, which frames the marginalisation of sustainability and moral considerations in organisational strategy as a rational response to changed geopolitical and competitive conditions, commits a category error that can be diagnosed with precision through theoretical resources of systems science, in our analysis taken from German (organizational) sociological frameworks (Habermas, Luhmann, Nosthoff).

From Habermas, we learn that the perceived failure of enforcement of principles and norms does not necessarily imply the fairness and reason of existence of this norms. From Luhmann, we learn that the limited resonance of moral communication in functionally differentiated systems points to structural translation problem rather than normative irrelevance. From Nosthoff, we learn that techno-cybernetic governance arrangements can limit organisational and freedom of decision-making, thus effectively gagging people to not raise unwelcome issues in communication. The dual strategy proposed — strengthening discursive infrastructure and building cybernetic governance safeguards — is a contribution to the theory and practice of sustainability governance rather than a comprehensive programme. Its implementation will vary by organisational context, sector, and regulatory environment. What is constant is the underlying logic: sustainability and morality are not peripheral concerns that organisations can strategically bracket without systemic consequence. They are constitutive elements of the communicative and operational environments within which organisations are embedded, and their adequate processing is a condition of long-run legitimacy, resilience, and governance effectiveness.

Blending out these elements beforehand in organisational strategies may significantly compromise freedom and innovation, as well as hide systemic risks to organizations and society.

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The systems science community is well positioned to advance this agenda. The integrative theoretical resources illustrated here, combining Habermas, Luhmann, and Nosthoff, provide counterweight to reductive functionalism and communications. They also show that concepts from German sociological thought are fit to identify and assess risks and impacts regarding sustainability and moral principles and values in contemporary organisations.

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