

Towards a European College of Human Ecology

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The Idea: Background, Initial Explorations and Measures

In the wake of increasing environmental awareness and, in particular, the first UN conference on the environment in Stockholm in 1972, courses in human ecology were established at a number of universities in Europe. These have largely disappeared again for two reasons. Firstly, human ecology is not a traditionally recognized subject on the European continent, particularly in German-speaking countries, and, at the same time, it goes beyond the scope of conventional science. This is a thorn in the side of proponents of “pure” science. Secondly, in the course of the economization of higher education, which includes the introduction of the so-called Bologna system in Europe, the necessary preoccupation with environmental issues has largely been transferred to the concept of “sustainable development”. This hardly has the necessary depth, neither on the subject matter side (societal reasons for the current precarious situation) nor on the student side (personal development).

In this situation, the sociologist and human ecologist Wolfgang Serbser became convinced in 2005 that the founding of a college for human ecology in Europe was absolutely necessary. This was prompted by his experiences with the reform of German universities and his leading involvement in new degree programs at the Technical University of Berlin and Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus, in which many achievements, such as project studies and practical field studies, were lost. However, the main reason for his commitment was the impressions he gained during several visits to the College of the Atlantic (COA) in the USA, where what was considered unfeasible in the reform of German degree programs was put into practice (see the text “The College of the Atlantic (COA): Our Great Role Model” and Steiner 2011). As an organizational body the study group “College of Human Ecology and Liberal Arts” was formed within the German Society for Human Ecology (DGH). Under the leadership of Serbser, the group began to develop the project. Contacts were established with the COA and possible locations were considered: In Germany, a North Sea island, Rügen in the Baltic Sea or the Spreewald biosphere south of Berlin; in Switzerland, the Entlebuch biosphere (west of Lucerne) or the Pays d'Enhaut (canton of Vaud). A founding appeal in English appeared in the journal GAIA (see Serbser & Mrzljak 2006 or [Call for the foundation 2006](#)). For a justification, see also [A College of Human Ecology for Europe](#).

On September 13, 2007, the initiative holds an international DGH symposium entitled “Perspectives on Human Ecology and Higher Education in Germany and Switzerland” at the TU Berlin. Under the moderation of study group member Parto Teherani-Krönner from Humboldt University, they discussed further aspects of establishing a college. The then president of COA, David Hales, issued a statement of support (see Serbser & Mrzljak 2007, which also contains information on the initial work of the study group). A college foundation was also the topic of a symposium entitled “Directions in human ecology education - a core human ecology curriculum?” at the 17th International Conference of the Society for Human Ecology (SHE) in Manchester, 2009. The outcome of this international meeting is set out in the Manchester Declaration. See [Manchester Declaration](#).

Concentration on Emmendingen

Meanwhile there were active reports of interest from two regions: From the Freiburg i.Br. area and from Weißenburg in Bavaria. In the former, there were contacts with Regionalwert AG in Eichstetten with a

view to a possible future teaching and research focus on organic farming. However, after encouraging discussions with the mayor, the town of Emmendingen, north of Freiburg i.Br. in Baden-Württemberg, came into focus as the preferred location. The region offered a variety of starting points for a practice-oriented course of study. In February 2011 the initiative organized a four-day public planning workshop of the charrette type in Emmendingen. Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, later Co-President of the Club of Rome, and Nader Maleki, Chairman of the communications company Maleki Corporate Group and the International Bankers Forum (IBF), were keynote speakers. The urban planner Harald Kegler was available for the topics of city, region and economy, the architecture firm Duane Phillips for architecture, object planning and costs. Wolfgang Serbser had already drawn up a financing plan for the college's operations determining the space requirements too. At the charrette, possible locations for the college (conversion of existing buildings or new buildings) were assessed, possible contents of the study program were discussed and an Emmendingen citizens' association was founded. The results were finally presented to the city representatives at a public event. See [Results of the charrette](#). For the status of the study group's work up to 2011, see Steiner 2011.

In November of the same year, the three-day annual conference of the "Council of European Urbanism Germany" (CEUD) also took place in Emmendingen. The results of the Charrette were discussed and supplemented with recommendations from an urban development perspective. This was followed in May 2012 by the First International College Forum in Frankfurt entitled "Liberal Arts and Science - Education for Agents of Transition." The college project was thus an official part of the *Global Business Week 2012* organized by the Maleki Group in Frankfurt am Main. The forum had an international audience. In addition to people interested in college and human ecology from abroad and members of the DGH, faculty members of the COA were also present. For the status of planning at this time, see ["At a glance – Call 2015" and the Flyer](#).

Contacts for the Purpose of Cooperation

Originally, a similar process to that in Emmendingen was planned for Weißenburg. However, it was postponed due to indispositions. Since it was now clear that we wanted to concentrate fully on Emmendingen, however, the Weissenburg option was no longer pursued. Now we had to look for cooperation partners. Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker arranged a contact with the University of Freiburg. The Faculty of Environment and Natural Resources there showed interest. Our initiative member Parto Teherani-Krönner established contact with Humboldt University in Berlin. She worked there as a social scientist specializing in gender studies in rural areas and meal culture.

Of crucial importance, however, was COA's attitude towards our project. COA agreed to cooperate, and this was important in terms of solving the problem of accreditation, as it would take some years before this would be possible in Germany. One option discussed was to obtain accreditation for the European college in the state of Maine, USA, with the support of COA; another was to enable the students to spend the last two years of the Bachelor's program at COA and obtain a degree there. Contact with SHE, which is closely associated with COA, was and is important too. At their international conferences, Wolfgang Serbser had the opportunity to contribute his thoughts on new developments, report on plans for a European college (see Serbser 2016 as an example) and thus attract new cooperation in sessions dedicated to human ecology higher education.

Summer Universities

In 2013, the College group decided to offer two-week summer universities in Emmendingen. The idea was firstly, to raise awareness of the college project and secondly, to experiment with a practice-oriented teaching concept based on the idea of the real-world laboratory. The first summer university took place in 2015 entitled "The Future of Food Sustainability" and with the support of COA through its faculty member and ecologist Molly Anderson. The students had the opportunity to get to know various local companies in practice and select one of them as a partner for their project work. The aim was to work on and implement selected future tasks of these partners in practice-oriented development projects. One group each dealt with the Demeter farm Querbeet, the wine manufacturer Mario Burkhart and the Citizens' stock corporation "Bürgeraktiengesellschaft Regionalwert AG". The work consisted of reading, discussions, interviews, participant observation and practical work in the companies. Reports recorded the results and posters and short presentations presented the project work at a public final event. See the [Concept](#), the [2015 Charrette Book](#) and the report by Teherani-Krönner et al. 2015.

A second summer university was offered the following year. This time the topic was "The Future of Sustainable Food Business". Once again, we received support from the COA, this time in the person of Jay Friedlander, a business economist specializing in sustainability. And once again, regional companies made themselves available as partner companies. Five groups were formed to tackle the following tasks:

- 1) Producing a digital map of the widely scattered fields of the Demeter farm Querbeet;
- 2) Proposing an improved investment strategy for Regionalwert AG;
- 3) Experimenting with a new method of producing tofu and considering new marketing strategies for the Taifun Tofu company;
- 4) Development of a marketing concept with the aim of increasing the number of suppliers of goat milk for the goat cheese producer Monte Ziego;
- 5) Proposals for the design of an urban garden to enable beekeeping on the premises of the industrial company Wehrle Werk, which specializes in environmental technology.

See the [2016 Concept](#), the [2016 Charrette Book](#) and the reports by Schmidtsdorf and Serbser 2016 and Serbser 2016.

A third summer university in 2018 focused on "Urban Concepts in Sustainable Transition". In consultation with the city, the focus was on its former fairground, which had since deteriorated into a mass parking lot. Under the direction of architect Duane Phillips, member of the COHE Faculty, who had already played a leading role in the 2011 charrette, the students were given the task of developing a master plan for a sustainable, climate-neutral and resilient district for this site. This fitted in perfectly with the city's intention to develop, starting next year, an urban climate analysis and then an adaptation concept for a climate-friendly city. The students not only planned residential units, offices, gardens, cultural facilities and integrated infrastructure for mobility and recreation, but also the main building for our planned college. In addition, the students developed various elements for the neighborhood to mitigate the effects of climate change. Of particular importance was the work of three students who developed a concept for cooling the rooms of the college buildings without having to use energy-intensive air conditioning systems. They made use of the centuries-old oriental tradition of the wind tower, which enables cooling and cross-ventilation without the use of additional energy.

The results were presented at the end of the summer university to a large audience of Emmendingen residents. The event led to the plan for the town to submit a funding application based on the described work as part of the “National Urban Development Projects (NPS)” of the Federal Ministry of Housing, Urban Development and Construction. However, this ultimately did not take place for local political reasons. Since then, the College project in Emmendingen has been put on ice. See the [2018 Concept](#), the [2018 Charrette Book](#) (the described wind tower concept is presented on pages 27 to 30) and the report by Serbser and Hofmann 2018.

The results of the summer universities were shown in two exhibitions in Emmendingen, 2017 for the first two, 2018 for all three. The exhibition then toured to Sommerhausen in 2020 (DGH annual conference) and to the Potsdam conference in 2022.

Organizational Matters and Curriculum Development

As early as 2013, an advisory board consisting of prominent figures from science and culture was formed under the chairmanship of Ernst-Ulrich von Weizsäcker. In 2017, the independent limited liability company (German abbreviation: gGmbH) “European College of Human Ecology” (COHE) emerged from the previous DGH study group. The partners were the sociologist and human ecologist Wolfgang Serbser, the ecologically oriented economist Klaus Markus Hofmann, the agricultural and environmental sociologist Andreas Nebelung and the geographer and human ecologist Dieter Steiner. The first two shared the management. The aforementioned Summer University 2018 was the first project. This was followed by the development of a Master's degree program in “Human Ecology and Philosophy of Social Innovation” for Alanus University in Alfter near Bonn, after representatives of this institution expressed their interest. See the [Handbook Master Program](#). Unfortunately, this study option has not yet been activated. We also pursued the idea of initially establishing, instead of a college, a smaller institution, which we called academy. It could have served as an information center, developed curricula, offered courses, promoted networking and generally promoted the existence of human ecology. Unfortunately, contacts with a foundation came to nothing. In 2021, Andreas Nebelung and Markus Hofmann left the gGmbH, the former because he wanted to change direction, the latter for health reasons. Wolfgang Serbser continued to manage the company and developed the academy concept together with Dieter Steiner.

International Online Program 2021

In summer 2021 - it was still the time of restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic - an online program was organized instead of another summer university. There was a call to produce and submit videos on human ecology topics. A large number of people responded, resulting in a collection of 14 contributions, some in German, some in English. All presentations are freely accessible subject to academic terms of use (see [Online Program 2021](#)). A Zoom meeting entitled “Human Ecology - Basic Knowledge for Agents of Transition” then took place on August 20. The recording of the contributions to this event can be found at [Online Conference 2021](#). It also served as a preliminary stage for the major international conference in Potsdam in 2022.

International Hybrid Conference 2022

This conference was held under the title “Facing the Future - Human Ecology and Higher Education” from August 31 to September 3, 2022 in Potsdam. The conference was organized in a hybrid format (i.e. participation was partly live, partly online). The Co-President of the conference was Ortwin Renn, then Director of the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS, now the Research Institute for Sustainability = RIFS). He provided the necessary premises and technical infrastructure. A [topic paper](#) served as a call for participation. A second paper named the [conference objective](#). Around 100 people from all continents took part and offered around 60 contributions, which were presented and discussed in 16 thematic blocks. Topics included: Impact of Climate Change, Agenda 2030, War and Politics, Transdisciplinarity, STEM Education, Digitalization, Systems Theory, Environmental Education, Environmental Justice, Food Security, Meal Culture, Studium Generale, Social Innovation, Art of Living, Harmony with Nature and Radical Human Ecology (see [Program 2022](#)).

Instructive were contributions from non-European universities, especially from the Philippines, in that a strongly practice-oriented human ecology is part of the curriculum. The conference was rounded off by keynote speeches from:

- Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, now Honorary President of the Club of Rome;
 - Richard Borden, Dean of the College of the Atlantic for many years;
 - Lene Rachel Andersen, Danish economist, known for her book “Education, Keep Growing,” a Report to the Club of Rome«;
 - Jennifer Amparo, Professor at the College of Human Ecology and Assistant Vice Chancellor at the University of the Philippines, Los Banos;
 - Thomas Schmaus, Professor of Philosophy at Alanus University in Alfter near Bonn;
- and finally
- Johan Rockström, Professor at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK) and co-chair of the Earth Commission, an association of scientists trying to define a safe and just future path for people and the planet. Rockström, in his closing presentation at the conference, made public the new report to the Club of Rome “Earth for All.”

Recordings of most of the [presentations](#) can be found on the COHE website. Eleven people agreed to put their contributions into written form. A total of 13 articles are being published in the Human Ecology Review (HER), the organ of the Society for Human Ecology. See the report by Serbser & Steiner 2023.

European Network

At the above-mentioned conference, there was a call for the formation of a European network of human ecology. People interested in human ecology should be able to find each other, communicate with each other and possibly discover opportunities for cooperation. In the meantime, Sara Löwgren, a PhD student at the University of Linköping in Sweden, has taken on a leading role. She does this independently of COHE, but in contact with it. Sara Löwgren has a BA in Human Ecology from the College of the Atlantic, studied for an MA in Global Studies at the University of Gothenburg (Sweden) and is now doing her PhD in Linköping in the Department of Thematic Studies on the topic “How can better futures be shaped in rural areas in the age of climate change?” See Sara’s website on <http://sara.lowgren.info/>. Thematic Studies in Linköping addresses societal issues that require an interdisciplinary approach. In cooperation with

Mihnea Tănăsescu at the University of Mons (Belgium) and Vasna Ramasar at the University of Lund (Sweden), Sara also organizes online human ecology seminars. Contact: sara.lowgren@liu.se.

Remember at this point that there once was a European Association for Human Ecology (EAHE). This was founded in 1988 and comprised people representing universities or societies from Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, England, Sweden and Switzerland. Even before that, since 1973, there had been an agreement between a number of universities under the auspices of the regional office of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Copenhagen concerning the possibility of obtaining an International Certificate in Human Ecology. This was a postgraduate course in human ecology. The idea was to promote inter-university cooperation in this field. This network was coordinated by the Centre Européen d'Ecologie Humaine at the Free University in Brussels, supervised by Luc Hens and Charles Susanne. See Hens, Susanne & Devuyt 1989, Hens 1991a and 1991b, Hens 1994 and Hens & Devuyt 1994. With the resignation of key individuals and thematic reorientations at the universities, this old network subsequently disappeared.

Conclusion

From the outset, the European College of Human Ecology was founded with the aim of promoting the European networking of human ecology not only in an idealistic sense, but also to create a place that can take the European idea into account in a very practical way. Even if an accredited degree course in human ecology has not yet been created and a campus has not yet been established, many successful steps have been taken in this direction in recent years. The European College of Human Ecology offers the legal, administrative and practical prerequisites for pursuing this goal in the long term. The non-profit status established in Germany offers tax and legal advantages and thus an excellent starting point for the pan-European, international development of human ecology. This is the legacy and the treasure of the previous work at and for the College we wish to pass on to the next generation.

Documentation

Website COHE

<https://coh-europe.de/>

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