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Post-capitalism, post-growth, post-consumerism? Eco-political hopes beyond sustainability

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ABSTRACT

As a road map for a structural transformation of socially and ecologically self-destructive consumer societies, the paradigm of *sustainability* is increasingly regarded as a spent force. Yet, its exhaustion seems to coincide with the rebirth of several ideas reminiscent of earlier, more radical currents of eco-political thought: liberation from capitalism, consumerism and the logic of growth. May the exhaustion of the sustainability paradigm finally re-open the intellectual and political space for the big push beyond the established socio-economic order? Looking from the perspective of social and eco-political theory, this article argues that the new narratives (and social practices) of post-capitalism, degrowth and post-consumerism cannot plausibly be read as signalling a new eco-political departure. It suggests that beyond the exhaustion of the sustainability paradigm, we are witnessing, more than anything, the further advancement of the *politics of unsustainability* – and that in this politics the new narratives of hope may themselves be playing a crucial role.

1. Introduction

Since the 2012 Rio+20 Summit, at the latest, the paradigm of sustainability is widely regarded as exhausted – categorically unable to deliver any profound structural transformation of capitalist consumer societies. To be sure, actual policy-making, from the local to the international level, firmly holds on to the sustainable development promise that consumer capitalism can actually be reconciled with values of social justice, political equality and ecological integrity. Yet, as modern societies' crises continue to tighten, such promises are becoming ever less plausible. In view of accelerating climate change, the unrestrained exploitation of natural resources, the precariousness of the global financial system, the public and private debt crisis, ever higher levels of social inequality, rapidly eroding trust in political elites, the challenges of mass migration, proliferating movements of populism and so forth – all feeding into a multi-dimensional sustainability crisis that leaves politicians (as well as the market) utterly helpless – there is an anxious awareness that present social and economic arrangements simply cannot be sustained, and that before long some kind of cataclysmic event must and will trigger major change.

In this situation of disoriented anxiety, a number of discourses have (re)emerged which, although not necessarily connected to each other, may generate some considerable hope. They rehearse the hypotheses that the demise of capitalism is now both foreseeable and inevitable (e.g. Streeck 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Mason 2015, 2016); that a new citizens' revolution is emerging to self-organise the departure from the fossil growth economy which mainstream politics has so far failed to deliver (e.g. Prinzen 2005, 2010; Muraca 2013); that a shift in social value preferences is about to take modern societies beyond the consumer culture (e.g. Soper 2007, 2008; Jackson 2009; Schlosberg and Coles 2015); that technological innovation increasingly enables communities to unplug from industrial mega-circulation and develop decentralised, needs-oriented and resource-efficient local economies (e.g. Petschow et al. 2014); and that the arrival of the Anthropocene may finally take modern societies into a new era where nature and society can be developed symbiotically (e.g. Crutzen and Schwägerl 2011; Arias-Maldonado 2012, 2013, 2015).

Thus, the exhaustion of the sustainability paradigm seems to coincide with the rebirth of several ideas reminiscent of earlier, more radical currents of eco-political thought which the reformist sustainability paradigm had pushed into the very margins. And at the latter's demise, the sociocultural conditions for radical change – beyond capitalism, growth and consumerism – in many respects, actually seem more favourable than at any earlier point in time. So, might the exhaustion of the sustainability paradigm, in that it finally re-opens the intellectual and political space, be a blessing rather than a reason for despair? Are we witnessing the emergence of a new, much more genuinely transformative eco-politics? How should we interpret these new initiatives and narratives? In order to shed light on eco-politics beyond the paradigm of sustainability, this article relates them to recent sociological and eco-political theory. It suggests that they remain strangely ignorant of the distinctive conditions and key dilemmas diagnosed, for example, by the theorists of *liquid modernity* (Bauman) and *post-ecologism* (Blühdorn) and that they can, therefore, not offer any plausible perspective for a structural transformation of liberal consumer societies. But despite this striking blindness, these practices and narratives should, arguably, not simply be interpreted as further evidence of the 'pervasive culture of denial' that Foster and many others have attributed to contemporary consumer societies (Foster 2015, 35ff; also see; Hamilton 2010; Norgaard 2011; Dunlap and McCright 2011). Instead, this article will argue that the discourses and experimental practices of post-capitalism, post-growth and post-consumerism are more suitably interpreted within the model of the *politics* and *governance of unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2000, 2011, 2013b, 2014, 2015; Blühdorn and Welsh 2007): as *discourses of simulation* (Blühdorn 2007, 2013a, 2016b) they help to organise – quite contrary to their own self-perception and declared intentions – modern societies' journey towards ever more social inequality and ecological destruction.

In the past decades, environmental sociologists have contributed quite significantly to the 'pervasive culture of denial'. They have forcefully promoted strategies of *sustainable development* and *ecological modernisation* which have, despite their undeniable successes, always been known to be very limited, and hence problematic. Their promises of technological fixes and environmental-economic win–win scenarios could easily be sold to academic funders, governments, businesses and many others who, more than anything, wanted to leave the core principles of liberal consumer

capitalism untouched. Thus, environmental sociologists have helped to provide cover under which the socially and ecologically destructive order could continue to flourish and deplete the cultural resources which are essential to even imagine, let alone implement, any alternative to the status quo. But as these narratives are collapsing and emergent social conflicts are becoming unmanageable, environmental sociology may have an opportunity to redress this complicity. Rather than nurturing new narratives of hope, it may now fully focus on its academic task to investigate the prevailing politics of unsustainability. Indeed, looking beyond sustainability is not just a matter of looking for a new eco-political master-frame! Bearing this in mind, the present article proceeds in four steps: it next very briefly reviews the argument that the sustainability paradigm has become exhausted. Section 3 provides a more detailed account of the new narratives of hope. Section 4 explores whether and how these narratives relate to recent sociological and eco-political theory. And the last substantive section then outlines why interpretations of these narratives in terms of *denial* fail to capture the distinctive quality of eco-politics beyond sustainability. It reinterprets these narratives and practices as *exercises of simulation* which help to manage the challenges of sustained unsustainability.

2. Sustainability and ecological modernisation

When in the late 1980s the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) kick-started the comet-like career of the notions of sustainability and sustainable development, the great eco-political promise of these concepts was that they would address the new social and ecological concerns voiced in some sections of advanced consumer societies and at the same time accommodate the interests of those who were hoping for further economic development and growth. The Brundtland Report acknowledged the problem of Third World poverty and the unsuitability of the industrialised countries' path of development as a model for the global South. It promised to take the concern for environmental integrity seriously and recognised the existence of bio-physical limits. It conceded that in the industrialised North structural change to the established logic of development was required in order to stay within 'the bounds of the ecologically possible' (WCED 1987, 55). Yet, it also provided reassurance that this would neither have to entail a wholesale departure from liberal consumer capitalism, nor a radical critique of the established western logic of modernisation, or even 'the cessation of economic growth' (40). Indeed, the Brundtland commission demanded that the international 'economy must speed up world growth' (89), and it portrayed the advancement of scientific knowledge, accelerated technological innovation, improved monitoring and management, and the internalisation into the market of social and environmental costs as effective tools to 'avert economic, social and environmental catastrophes' (WCED 1987). Put differently, it suggested that modern societies might *grow beyond* and *modernise themselves out of* the social and ecological problems to which the traditional pattern of modernisation had given rise. A new form of *ecological* modernisation (Mol 1995, 1996; Spaargaren 1997; Mol and Sonnenfeld 2000) would now address these problems and put industrialised societies, and the world at large, onto a trajectory of sustainable development. In terms of sociological theory, Ulrich Beck's concept of a *second* or *reflexive* modernity provided the foundations for this new eco-modernist approach which would remedy the

unforeseen side effects of traditional, first modernity and fulfil those promises of modernity which had so far remained unfulfilled (Beck 1992, 1997).

Three decades later, the terms sustainability, sustainable development and ecological modernisation are ubiquitously present, but they are, more than ever, fuzzy concepts which, rather than mapping an agenda for, and signalling any commitment to, a structural transformation of liberal consumer capitalism, seem to be tools for artificially extending its life expectancy: as national governments and international institutions are signalling 'little political appetite for anything but very modest change' (Linnér and Selin 2013, 983), 'both sustainability governance and the sustainable development concept are under growing pressure' (Bulkeley et al. 2013, 958). Not only has in contemporary eco-politics the comprehensive package of concerns, which environmental movements had once raised, apparently shrivelled to the single issue of climate change, but in light of international political instability, economic turmoil, populist uprisings and the paralysis of political institutions (such as the European Union) which once spearheaded the sustainability project, there is little evidence of any 'genuine pursuit of serious change' (Foster 2015, 2). 'Mainstreamed as sustainability or sustainable development', Foster notes, 'environmentalism has failed to reduce, even remotely adequately, the impact of humans on the biosphere' (Foster 2015). Hence, the paradigm that for a long time has been beacon of international eco-politics is increasingly regarded as 'an irretrievably misconceived framework and a delusive policy goal' (Foster 2015, Preface).

Apart from the fact that – at least in those *weak* mainstream varieties which have always been dominant (Baker 2006) – the sustainability paradigm had never really intended to suspend the established understanding of progress and development, the prime reason why today it 'no longer exerts the pulling power it once had' (Bulkeley 2013, 959) is, arguably, that it consistently evaded all normative issues and insisted that environmental issues can more effectively be addressed by the means of science, technology, the market and professional management. Trying to bypass the notorious conflicts of values which had previously often obstructed environmental policy-making, the proponents of the new paradigm aimed to detach environmental policy from *soft* subjective and cultural criteria (tradition, aesthetics, religion and ethics) and place it, instead, on *hard* objective scientific foundations. The scientific diagnosis of bio-physical limits was assumed to facilitate agreement about the issues to be addressed, and appropriate technologies – supported by depoliticised 'new environmental policy instruments' (Jordan, Wurzel, and Zito 2003) – were to secure that consensual objectives would actually be achieved.

Yet, in their fixation on science, technology and management, the related policy approaches not only failed to address many of the emancipatory eco-movements' concerns, which were, although they often crystallised around the condition of the bio-physical environment, to a significant extent about non-material issues of identity, integrity and self-determination (Inglehart 1977, 1997; Inglehart and Welzel 2005), but they also failed to recognise that, as a matter of principle, environmental problems are never objectively identifiable conditions *out there* in the natural environment, but always *perceived violations of socio-cultural norms*. For effective environmental policy-making, the accumulation of scientific knowledge and the development of new technologies can, undoubtedly, be extremely helpful, but however sophisticated such knowledge and these technologies might be, they can never substitute for

normative judgement. As it were, the shift from thinking in terms of an *environmental crisis* – a concept that explicitly externalises the problem and locates it in the environment – to the frame of the *sustainability* crisis might actually even have placed additional emphasis on the irreducibly normative core of all eco-politics: *What* is to be sustained, *for whom*, *for how long, in what condition* and *for what reasons*? And the lively debate throughout the 1990s about the *end of nature*, the *culturalisation of nature* and the *naturalisation of culture* (e.g. McKibben 1990; Eder 1996; Beck 1997; MacNaghten and Urry 1998) could actually have provided a very favourable framework for this. But the sustainability paradigm, instead, promoted a strongly techno-managerial perspective and agenda. It failed to define progress and development in terms pointing beyond the established notions of economic growth and material accumulation. It did not provide an attractive vision of a substantially different modernity and, ultimately, it boiled down to the technocratic pursuit of uninspiring goals such as *resource efficiency* or *decarbonisation* – as if these were intrinsically meaningful and desirable. Hence, the sceptical view that this 'would-be scientific model of environmental concern isn't actually part of the solution' but a 'deeply embedded part of the problem' (Foster 2015, 35) does not come as a surprise.

3. Narratives of hope

The 'end of sustainability' (Benson and Craig 2014), it has been suggested, will trigger a 'deep crisis within environmentalism itself' (Foster 2015, 1), force an 'end of pretending' (Foster 2015, Chapter 1) and move capitalist consumer societies beyond their 'current state of denial' (Benson and Craig 2014, 778). For the time being, such predictions do not seem to materialise: not only do recent developments, for example, in the provision of (renewable) energy, geo- and climate-engineering, electric mobility or smart cities provide rich evidence that policy makers continue to have much confidence in technological fixes and Green growth, but even if the sustainability paradigm really has become exhausted, there is no shortage of narratives of hope to counterbalance any 'inner crises of environmentalism' (Foster 2015, 1). The most important one of these – given that capitalism itself has by so many, and for so long, been regarded as the root cause of modern societies' social and ecological problems – is probably that the collapse of capitalism is now imminent and unavoidable, and that this provides a unique opportunity for the transition towards a socially and ecologically more benign socio-economic order. In the wake of the international banking crisis and the subsequent politics of austerity, 'there is now a widespread sense that capitalism is in a critical condition, more so than at any time since the end of the Second World War' (Streeck 2014a, 35). In fact, the crash of 2008/2009 and the economic and political upheaval since have called to mind that, rather than being eternal and without alternatives, 'capitalism has a beginning, a middle and an end' (Mason 2015, xiii) and that, in the course of this lifecycle, instability and crisis have by no means been the exception, but 'the normal condition' (Streeck 2011, 6). And whilst a few decades ago the early Greens' diagnosis that 'the system is bankrupt' (Kelly 1984) had, obviously, still been premature, there is now a widespread feeling that today it really is, and the further 'prospects for capitalism are bleak' (Mason 2015, x).

Streeck focuses specifically on *democratic* capitalism which, he suggests, has always been inherently instable and destined to fail because the two logics, or principles, of resource allocation which it promised to reconcile ultimately remain incompatible. In the post-war era, he argues, the conflict between these two logics – 'one operating according to marginal productivity, or a free play of market forces, and the other based on social need or entitlement, as certified by the collective choices of democratic politics' (2011, 7) – could initially be patched over by high economic growth. But as growth rates began to decline, a range of different strategies were employed to pacify the conflict: high inflation in the 1970s was followed first by lavish government deficit spending and then, since the 1990s, by waves of public asset privatisation, deregulation and increases in private debts (Streeck 2011, 2014a, 2014b). In each case, the objective was to stabilise the inherently instable system by drawing on 'additional money, as yet uncovered by the real economy' (Streeck 2011, 12). However, none of these strategies, Streeck suggests, could be sustained for any significant length of time, and the 'sequential displacement' (Streeck 2011, 23–24) of the irresolvable conflict steadily built up a triple problem of persistently low economic growth, increasing indebtedness (public and private) and ever rising social inequality. The monetary policies of *quantitative easing* and minimal (or indeed negative) interest rates, one might add, are the most recent such displacement strategies, and yet another attempt to mine the resources of the future for consumption in the present. But today even these measures are failing to jumpstart the economy, while the imposition of harsh austerity policies are causing political upheaval and 'pervasive government instability' (Streeck 2014a, 41) not just in Europe, but also in the USA and elsewhere. And as there is nothing to suggest that economic growth may catch up any time soon; as 'even capitalism's master technicians have no clue how to make the system whole again' (Streeck 2014a, 46); and as the limits to the political manageability of ensuing social conflicts seem almost exhausted, the collapse of capitalism does indeed appear a plausible scenario.

Streeck does not explore what may evolve in its aftermath. In fact, rather than conceiving of the end of capitalism as a cataclysmic event, he believes that for the foreseeable future modern societies will remain caught up in 'a long and painful period of cumulative decay: of intensifying frictions, of fragility and uncertainty, and of a steady succession of *normal accidents*' (Streeck 2014a, 64). Paul Mason, in contrast, in *Postcapitalism* (2015) boldly announces the 'beginning of something radically new' and is convinced that 'we can now build a fairer and more sustainable society' (Mason 2016, 45). Mason does not just talk about *democratic* capitalism, but diagnoses the end of capitalism more generally. And the societal order that is emerging to succeed it, he suggests, is no longer based on the logic of competition, profitability and wealth accumulation but on new forms of 'non-market production and exchange' (Mason 2015, 265). Already now, he notes, 'we're seeing the spontaneous rise of collaborative production: goods, services and organizations are appearing that no longer respond to the dictates of the market and the managerial hierarchy' (xv) but are geared towards collective use and social efficiency. We are seeing the rise of 'horizontally distributed peer-production networks' generating 'goods that are either completely free, or which – being Open Source – have very limited commercial value' (143). To this new order he refers as 'Project Zero – because its aims are a zero-carbon energy system; the production of machines, products and services with zero marginal costs; and the reduction of

necessary labour time as close as possible to zero' (266). Furthermore, this project will, supposedly, also deliver the eradication of social inequality: 'Because its precondition is abundance, postcapitalism will deliver some form of social justice spontaneously' (144); because 'as much as possible is produced free, for collaborative common use', it offers an opportunity for 'reversing the tide of inequality' (212).

Mason predicts that the new order 'can be global' and will bring 'a future substantially better than the one capitalism will be offering' (2015, xiii). It comes about, he believes, because technological change gives rise to a 'new fault-line' in modern capitalism that runs 'between the possibility of free, abundant socially produced goods, and a system of monopolies, banks and governments struggling to maintain control over power and information' (144). Everything then 'comes down to the struggle between the network and the hierarchy, between old forms of society moulded around capitalism and new forms of society that prefigure what comes next' (xix). In the current interim phase, he notes, the old capitalist structures and the emerging collaborative economy are existing side by side, but eventually capitalism will lose out because technological development 'has created a new agent of change' (xvii) that will 'be its gravedigger' (212). And this ongoing transition 'is not just about economics', he insists, but also entails a 'human transition' (267) in the wake of which a 'new kind of person' (144), 'a new kind of human being' (xiv), is emerging. For Mason, 'the values, voices and morals' of these new 'bearers of the postcapitalist society' are 'obvious' (xvii, 144). Their interests, he notes, are diverse, but they 'converge on the need to make postcapitalism happen' (212).

Mason's optimism is remarkable but, in fact, many of the same ideas also figure prominently in the recent literature on new degrowth and sufficiency movements which are widely portrayed as a promising 'project for a radical transformation of society' (Muraca 2013; Petridis, Muraca, and Kallis 2015; also see e.g. Prinzen 2005; Jackson 2009; Paech 2012; Alexander 2013; Dietz and O'Neill 2013). Many of these authors share Mason's belief in a new collaborative economy that will no longer be profit-driven but non-commercially cater to social needs (Botsman and Rogers 2010). Technological developments such as 3D printing (Petschow et al. 2014) are expected to empower *makers' movements* (Anderson 2012) for decentralised and needs-oriented forms of production and consumption which respect the limits of ecological sustainability and promote environmental justice (Martínez-Alier 2012). Yet, when Mason, following the socialist tradition, explicitly aims for productivity growth and abundance, this literature refreshes the post-materialist belief in degrowth and sufficiency. The former is supposed to re-embed the economy into non-negotiable ecological boundaries; the latter is believed to complement – from the perspective of needs and desires – the supply-side attempts to increase the resource efficiency of production processes (Muller and Huppenbauer 2016, 105). The 'liberation from excess' (Paech 2012) and the embrace of 'voluntary simplicity' (Alexander 2013) are believed to facilitate a lifestyle that is 'more satisfying and would leave us happier' (Jackson 2009, 148). An 'alternative hedonism' (Soper 2007, 2008) is predicted to push the liberation from the false promises of wealth accumulation and mass consumption and to provide much stronger motivation for categorical change than any ethics of 'altruistic compassion and environmental concern' possibly can (Soper 2008,

571–572). And just like Mason believes that already in the present 'whole swathes of economic life are beginning to move to a different rhythm' (Mason 2015, xv), this literature, too, suggests that environmental movements and activism are already in the midst of a shift towards new practice-based forms of action which orchestrate societies' *self-transformation* as part of everyday politics (Forno and Graziano 2014). The 'disconnect between political and ecological values', on the one hand, and 'the everyday and large-scale political, cultural and industrial landscape', on the other, is said to have triggered 'a growth of new groups and movements with a different – much more embodied and applied – idea of appropriate and necessary political action' (Schlosberg and Coles 2015, 8). This proliferation of seemingly disparate initiatives is portrayed as a 'new environmentalism of everyday life', as evidence of 'new growths of radical democracy' and as 'representative of a new and sustainable materialism' (1–2).

And this confidence in a new transformative dynamics at the micro-level is, actually, complemented by a significant macro-level optimism that needs to be addressed here as well: 'the beginning of a new geological epoch', the Anthropocene, which at least some observers enthusiastically welcome as being 'ripe with human-directed opportunity' (Ellis 2011; also see: Crutzen 2002; Crutzen and Steffen 2003; Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007; Crutzen and Schwägerl 2011; Schwägerl 2012). The concept of the Anthropocene remains contested, and there are very different – indeed incompatible – interpretations of what exactly its arrival may imply (Hamilton 2015, 2016; Lewis and Maslin 2015). Also, the Anthropocene debate differs from the ones explored above in that it is an elite discourse and not rooted in social practices of everyday life. Still, it has been argued very powerfully that in the Anthropocene there is huge potential for human ingenuity to finally overcome the deep rift between nature and society that has marred modernity so far. In this new epoch, humans themselves are said to have become 'a force of nature' changing 'the functioning of the Earth System' (Hamilton 2015, 2), and the old distinction between human society (social systems) and the bio-physical system (nature) as the much larger, self-stabilising context into which the former is embedded becomes obsolete. In this 'age of human kind' (Schwägerl 2012), it has been suggested, the traditional idea of a nature/civilisation dualism is outdated: 'It's no longer us against *Nature*', but it is 'we who decide what nature is and what it will be' (Crutzen and Schwägerl 2011). As Lynas put it: 'Nature no longer runs the Earth', but 'we do' (Lynas 2012, 8). Accordingly, *environmental politics* turns – at least for some contributors to the debate – into *planetary management*, and it no longer implies respecting the laws, imperatives, boundaries and integrity of a superior system which is human civilisation's host, but means that the human 'god species' (Lynas 2012) must make full use of its knowledge, creativity, technology and industry to 'steer nature's course' (Crutzen and Schwägerl 2011). Radicalising the ecological modernisation belief in technological fixes, *good stewardship* now becomes even more Promethean than before and 'may well involve […] large-scale geo-engineering projects, for instance to *optimize* climate' (Crutzen 2002, 23). Sustainability then no longer means identification of, and subordination to, ecological limits and imperatives, but it is 'an inherently open principle' that frames the debate on the kind of nature and society 'we wish to have' (Arias-Maldonado 2013, 17).

4. Beyond reflexive modernity

So rather than for a 'crisis of environmentalism' modern societies seem set for, or are already witnessing, a powerful 'renewal of environmentalism' (Arias-Maldonado 2013, 17). Admittedly, this brief survey has bulked together diverse literatures and brushed over significant differences within the respective debates. It brings together discussions which are, in practice, not necessarily interlinked and, at times, based on very different ideological positions. But even if they do not add up to one single overarching storyline, and even though, many of these debates' key ideas are, in fact, not particularly new (Muraca 2013, 147, 150–153), these narratives are incredibly attractive, popular and eagerly embraced. Indeed, at a juncture where a radical transformation of the established order of unsustainability seems more urgent than ever, yet the old paradigm of sustainability seems exhausted and unable to signpost the way, they seem to address – and resolve! – a whole range of problems which have obstructed eco-politics so far:

- The end of capitalism, which time and again had been identified as the core problem, no longer appears as a demand and hope for the distant future, but now appears as a thoroughly realistic – indeed, real – scenario;
- It no longer depends on the availability of a – notoriously difficult to identify – revolutionary subject, but capitalism seems to be 'dying, as it were, from an overdose of itself' (Streeck 2014a, 55), quite irrespective of established power relations;
- A profound transformation towards a new socially and ecologically benign order is underway even without anyone being able to offer any consistent vision, utopia or grand master plan;
- Political equality, social justice and democratic governance are core principles of the newly emerging structures;
- Science and technology facilitate needs-oriented production at the micro-level and for macro-level planetary management;
- And the new 'age of human kind' finally enables humanity to 'shift our mission from crusade to management, so we can steer nature's course symbiotically instead of enslaving the formerly natural world' (Crutzen and Schwägerl 2011).

Thus, much of what political ecologists had already been demanding well before sustainable development and ecological modernisation came to dilute, delay and obstruct their agenda may now eventually be coming true. But are these predictions plausible?

Proliferating transformation research is undoubtedly right in suggesting that modern societies, and the global order, are in the midst of profound and very rapid structural change, which political leaders and established political institutions no longer control and co-ordinate. In addition to the problems of the economic system and global warming, the refugee crisis, the spread of terrorism or the rise of rogue politicians such as Donald Trump, Recep Erdoğan or Nigel Farage provides unmistakable evidence. But any attempt to conceptualise this change – as the above narratives of hope are doing – in terms resembling Ulrich Beck's 'reinvention of politics' and his *second* or *reflexive* modernisation that will bring the emancipatory project to fruition and fulfil, finally, the promises of modernity (Beck 1997) seems misdirected. In fact, with regard to

both the ecological as well as the democratic dimension of this project, factual developments seem to suggest that the emancipatory agenda – rather than being fulfilled – is in the process of being radically redefined. In this situation, environmental sociologists are well advised to bear in mind that 'social science can do little, if anything, to help resolve the structural tensions and contradictions underlying the economic and social disorders of the day' (Streeck 2011, 28). But what it can – and must – do is provide careful analyses and conceptualisations of these tensions and contradictions. In particular, those raising expectations about a 'renewal of environmentalism', a 'new sustainable materialism' and 'new growths of radical democracy' may be expected to engage with recent debates about *post-ecologism* and *post-democracy* and explain how their activist narratives of hope relate to these socio-theoretical diagnoses.

Crucially important in this context is the hypothesis already touched upon above that the ongoing process of modernisation continuously chips away at its own foundations and incrementally exhausts – not only in *material* but also in *cultural* terms – the very resources on which it rests: democratically, ecologically and economically (Beck 1997; Greven 2009). Talking about capitalism, Streeck refers to the 'non-capitalist foundations – trust, good faith, altruism, solidarity with families and communities' on which the 'stability and survival of capitalism depends', but which it continuously destroys (commodifies) without being able to reproduce them (Streeck 2014a, 50). As regards the emancipatory project, as it had been articulated first by enlightenment philosophy, then by a succession of democratic movements and then by ecological movements campaigning for the liberation, integrity and dignity of nature, this crucial resource is the specifically modernist idea of the *autonomous subject*, which is – further elaborating on what has been said in Section 2 – the ultimate norm of reference wherever social movements are identifying political problems, politicising societal conditions, critiquing prevalent power relations and mobilising political protest, be it with regard to democratic self-determination or in relation to the natural environment (Blühdorn 2000). Addressing the evident failures of traditional modernity and modernisation, Ulrich Beck's *second modernity* was supposed to fulfil the promises inherent in this norm; and the above narratives of hope are suggesting we may be closer to achieving this than ever before. Yet, in the wake of a process which elsewhere I have conceptualised as *second-order emancipation* (e.g. Blühdorn 2013b, 2014, 2016a) the logic of modernisation itself, i.e. the logic of individualisation, differentiation, pluralisation, acceleration, commodification and so forth, has profoundly reshaped prevalent understandings of this norm and thus undermined the normative foundations of the emancipatory project as the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s had still conceptualised it. This does not necessarily endanger the emancipatory project's overall 'stability and survival', yet it does imply that this project has been comprehensively reformulated and, in a sense, changed direction (Blühdorn 2016b).

Second-order emancipation implies the critical review of, and partial liberation from, the particular norms of subjectivity and identity which, for a long time, had underpinned the emancipatory agenda, but which under the conditions of advanced post-industrial society are experienced as unduly restrictive and a burden to be unloaded. More specifically, the Protestant-rationalist, the Marxian as well as the bourgeois tradition had conceptualised the truly autonomous subject as (a) unitary, consistent, principled, stable and identical, and (b) composed of *innate* qualities of character and *inner* values

as opposed to anything external, material, ephemeral and superficial. The new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s – whilst also challenging the rigidity of traditional norms – had once again emphatically renewed the commitment to these ideals. In contemporary societies, however, they now appear ever less appropriate: for purposes of their self-realisation, self-articulation and self-experience, modern individuals rely ever more confidently on material accumulation and consumption, and on the product- and lifestyle-choices provided by the market. And as contemporary societies are becoming ever more differentiated and subject to accelerated innovation; as the life-worlds of modern individuals, the opportunities they want to make use of and the pressures to which they have to respond are becoming ever more multi-faceted, the traditional ideal of the homogenous and unitary identity has given way to more flexible, versatile, plural and dynamic notions of identity: *liquid identity* for *liquid life* in *liquid modernity* (Bauman 2000, 2005). Despite their firm belief in solid, non-negotiable ecological and social imperatives, the libertarian, identity-focused new social movements had, in many respects, themselves initiated this *liquefaction* process. In today's world of information, communication and virtuality, the requirements of image-production, ego-marketing and (social) media resonance have much accelerated this transformation of traditional ideals of subjectivity and identity. It is not only a requirement of the labour market and its continuous pressure on the Self to be *entrepreneurial* and *self-responsible*, but in the private realm, too, *liquid* identity and *liquid* lifestyles promise a richer experience of life and more personal fulfilment.

Thus, the emancipatory project can no longer be conceptualised just as the political struggle for ideals of autonomy and subjectivity which are themselves immutable, but the ongoing process of modernisation remolds these norms themselves (Latour 1993). Second-order emancipation then implies, firstly, the rejection of earlier ideals of subjectivity which are now experienced as too restrictive and, secondly, a much more open-minded reassessment of aspirations, practices and lifestyles which had formerly been portrayed as corrupting character, mutilating the authentic Self, repressive or as *false consciousness*. In eco-political terms, this second-order emancipation erodes the normative validity of any ecological critique: it has induced a pluralisation of understandings of nature and the natural, a diversification of what is being perceived as environmentally problematic or desirable, and a liberation from what activists portray as *categorical ecological imperatives*. Furthermore, it also mainstreams notions of identity, patterns of identity construction and lifestyles which are inherently – by design – unsustainable, in that (a) they are not meant to be sustained, but to be reconstructed as and when required, (b) they are based on patterns of consumption which are well-known to be socially exclusive and ecologically destructive and (c) in that the liberation from social or ecological commitments which may restrict flexibility and mobility is one of the core principles. And beyond that, the new ideals of subjectivity and identity install their own categorical imperative: as ever expanding needs in terms of, for example, mobility, technology, travel opportunities and shopping outlets have become a constitutive and essentially non-negotiable ingredient of freedom, quality of life and wellbeing, ways *must* be found to meet them. I have conceptualised this modernisation-induced value- and culture-shift as the *post-ecologist turn* and the rise of the *politics of unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2000, 2011, 2013b). Ironically, it

delivers exactly what sustainable development and ecological modernisation had always aimed for and promised: modern societies are modernizing themselves out of their sustainability crisis. Yet they are doing so not (just) by developing technological solutions to supposedly objective environmental problems, but (ever more importantly) by updating their subjective modes of problem perception, and shifting the boundaries of the socially acceptable, so as to accommodate the particular ways in which modern individuals are interpreting their basic needs, inalienable rights and non-negotiable form of self-realisation.

In the democratic-egalitarian dimension of the emancipatory project, second-order emancipation has no less significant implications: on the one hand, the increasing fixation on self-realisation, self-determination and self-experience, paired with declining confidence in existing political institutions, leads to ever more vociferously articulated demands for more direct democracy, better representation and authentic sovereignty of the people. At the same time, however, the participatory social movements' failure to reverse the continuous rise of political inequality, growing concerns about the unsuitability of democratic processes for conditions of high differentiation and complexity, the neoliberal instrumentalisation of democracy and civil society, and economic growth rates too low to sustain established notions of social equality and policies of redistribution trigger profound democratic disillusionment. *Anti-democratic feelings* (Rancière 2006) and *anti-political sentiments* (Mair 2006) are proliferating. As the limits to growth are more evident and uncontested than ever before, whilst prevalent forms of self-determination, self-realisation and self-experience are more than ever based on expanding and accelerating consumption, egalitarian and redistributive notions of democracy are turning into a serious problem – not only for the privileged, but in virtually all sections of society. Ordinary citizens as well as elites, although for different reasons, 'are losing faith in democratic government and its suitability for reshaping societies' (Mair 2006, 44). Thus, the *post-ecologist* turn is complemented by an equally important *post-democratic turn* (Blühdorn 2013a, 2013b, 2014). Indeed, there is good reason to speak of a profound *legitimation crisis of democracy* (Blühdorn 2016b).

In both of its dimensions, this fundamental value- and culture-shift have major implications for any envisaged socio-ecological transformation. Activists may themselves not share the increasingly prevalent value-orientations and lifestyle ideals. They may campaign individually or within social movement networks against the developments sketched above. Still, the post-ecologist and post-democratic turn, and the prevailing determination to sustain the established order of unsustainability affect the ways in which, and the extent to which, their efforts may have societal resonance and develop transformative potential. Furthermore, these changes in the societal conditions into which such activism is embedded also impact the ways in which such action and the related narratives can plausibly be interpreted. Yet, in the narratives of hope sketched above, these fundamental shifts essentially do not figure. These narratives not only ignore the fact that capitalism has proved, time and again, to be infinitely adaptable and malleable, but in terms of their critique and vision, they remain firmly within the 1970s and 1980s imaginary and thus offer amazingly simplistic interpretations of today's forms of anti-politics. For political activists such social-theoretical deficits may be perfectly acceptable – or even helpful; for political and environmental sociologists, they are not.

Quite clearly, the traditional norms of *solid* subjectivity and identity have never been more than what Kant called *regulative ideas of reason*. Also, the shift towards *liquid* ideals of subjectivity, identity and lifestyles has, undoubtedly, not affected all sections of modern societies to the same degree. Yet, the trend towards ever more differentiation, mobilisation, flexibilisation, innovation, virtualisation and so forth, is uncontested; and the popular embrace of these trends provides evidence that what Beck once critically conceptualised as the *risk society* (Beck 1992) is today much more commonly experienced as an *opportunity society*. Against this background, the old narratives of alienation and repression seem strangely out of date, and so do the promises of sufficiency and post-consumerism. Whilst the sketched value- and culture-shift goes a long way to explain the low appetite for any significant eco-political change, the widely perceived crisis of democracy, the desperate attempts to reinvigorate economic growth, the proliferation of aggressive populism, the continuous increase in social inequality and exclusion, or the unyielding resolve – ritually reconfirmed after every terrorist attack – to *do whatever is necessary to defend our values, our freedom, our culture*, the above narratives of hope are at best 'wishful thinking' (Spash 2015, 13), and at worst a political tranquilliser helping to manage the 'long and painful period of cumulative decay' predicted by Streeck.

Indeed, if there is any truth in the above suggestions about emancipatory progress, the prospects of these narratives and the related social practices developing any transformative potential are – despite the evident crisis of capitalism and the multi-dimensional sustainability crisis – even less favourable today than at earlier points in time. And far from paving the way for a renewal of environmentalism, the arrival of the Anthropocene actually radicalises the normative problems which have always plagued environmental politics: the collapse of the nature–society dualism, which had been essential for any attempt to find an *objective* normative point of reference for eco-political prescriptions, renders environmental policy, once and for all, self-referential (Blühdorn 2015). Already at the turn to the 1990s, McKibben had, in *The End of Nature*, warned that without nature, in the 'post-natural world', there will be 'nothing but us' (McKibben 1990, 55). In the Anthropocene there is, indeed, nothing left that might provide non-subjective, solid, foundations upon which to base environmental politics. More evidently than ever before, environmental policy is now exclusively about prevalent norms of subjectivity: the kind of nature and society 'we wish to have'. Yet, beyond second-order emancipation this is less likely than ever to imply any significant deviation from the established order.

5. Denial or simulation?

Thus, the narratives of hope which are emerging as the paradigm of sustainability seems exhausted are strikingly illusory and blind. Second-order emancipation and the arrival of the Anthropocene clearly take capitalist consumer societies beyond Ulrich Beck's second or reflexive modernity – yet, the prophets of the great transformation unwaveringly hold on to the narratives of this bygone era. In a sense, the Anthropocene is a radicalised global risk society. More than ever it is an 'age of side-effects' and crises (Beck 1997, 11–60). Hence, it might appear that now, as Beck had believed already in the 1990s, 'action [really] has to be taken, immediately, everywhere, by everyone and under all circumstances' (92). Yet, as second-order emancipation has radically redefined the

emancipatory project in both its ecological and its democratic dimensions, the progressive emancipatory agenda of societal *metamorphosis* is being superseded by a new agenda of *metastasis*: the ever more ecstatic production of variations of the extant (Baudrillard 1983, 141–142). In fact, in the emerging *third modernity* – which moves beyond the old narratives of alienation and the traditional-style emancipatory project – it remains uncertain whether Beck's kind of action really *must be* taken at all. After all, this only applies if, and to the extent that, social norms are being violated and this translates into political grievances and mobilisation. If, however, in major parts of society patterns of problem perception and thresholds of acceptability are updated to accommodate the implications of now prevalent notions of freedom, wellbeing and the good life, environmentalist appeals for rapid and transformative action will find even less positive resonance than before. And whilst activist movements might continue to campaign for what Michel Serres called *the natural contract* (Serres 1995), or an advisory committee to the German Bundestag a *new social contract for sustainability* (WBGU 2011), the reality of eco-politics is being shaped by a stronger than ever *social contract for sustaining the unsustainable*.

John Foster has conceptualised this as a politics of *denial* and suggested that the above narratives of hope, as well as the related social practices, ought to be interpreted as 'a form of refusal to see' (Foster 2015, 7). Denial, Foster notes, 'isn't just something the bad guys do' (5), but 'the characteristic structures and practices of denial are also fully exhibited by environmental activists' (Foster 2015, 41, also see Hamilton 2010, 95ff). Environmental activists – and their academic division can probably be added in – are well aware, Foster argues, that the window of opportunity to stop climate change and achieve a structural transformation of modern societies has essentially closed, but they keep campaigning 'as if this crucial window for effective action had not closed' (Foster 2015, 5). And the more scientific evidence that environmental and climate change 'are real, unignorable and increasingly imminent' (41) undermines any environmental optimism, the stronger, Foster believes, does the 'desperate need to reassert and reinforce it' (31) grow. He describes this variety of denial as 'willed optimism' (29–33) which, he suggests, is indispensable for activists because, from their perspective, admitting that it is too late 'is taken to mean despair, which would paralyse us' (8).

Foster is right in pointing out that in modern societies eco-political practices of denial are much more widely spread than much of the activist literature (e.g. on the climate change denial industry) suggests. Furthermore, he is right in saying that willed optimism 'warps thought' (Foster 2015, 30) and obfuscates the capacity for sober analysis – which in the academic context is even more detrimental than in political campaigning. And what he describes as the 'pervasive culture of denial' (35) bears striking similarities to the above *social contract for unsustainability* and what I have conceptualised as a *broad societal alliance* for *sustaining the unsustainable* (Blühdorn 2007, 2011, 2016b). Still, for a number of reasons, this thinking in terms of *denial* is, arguably, unable to capture the specific character of contemporary eco-politics. Most importantly, Foster holds on to the belief in undeniable truths and objective ecological threats or crises which those engaging in practices of denial willingly refuse to see. Conceptualisations in terms of denial imply the distinction between facts and illusions and thus fall back into the eco-political positivism which had already marred the paradigm of sustainability and which the arrival of the Anthropocene renders fully untenable. In a sense, Foster's attempt to

expose and destroy 'the pervasive culture of denial' is based on – an ever thinner – residue of the belief that it might not be too late, after all, and that enlightenment about *objectively existing environmental problems* might provide us with a very, very last opportunity to turn things round. Yet, such constructions not only themselves tap into *the pervasive culture of denial*, but they also fail to recognise the normative void of eco-politics in the Anthropocene.

Furthermore, Foster's diagnosis of a 'refusal to see' sits uneasily with the fact that in modern information societies, knowledge about climate change, biodiversity loss, resource over-use, environmental refugees, etc. is more readily available than ever before and is, actually, literally being *imposed* on people. Hence, further enlightenment about denial and illusions is ever less likely to effect any significant behaviour change. Instead, a distinctive feature of the prevailing politics of unsustainability is that people are, more than ever, well aware of the social and ecological implications of their lifestyles, but their commitment to these values and lifestyles is at least as strong as any commitment to environmental and egalitarian values resonating from the tradition of first-order emancipation and reflexive modernity. And far from getting politically 'paralysed' or 'despair', as Foster suggests, contemporary individuals and societies – quite realistically recognising that their values and lifestyles cannot be generalised and necessitate social exclusion – are, in fact, taking commensurate action: the manifold ways in which social contracts are being redefined and ties of solidarity severed, the diverse facets and effects of populist mobilisation (also against *green elites trying to impose lifestyle changes*), or the indefatigable efforts of governments to secure further growth at least for some sections of society provide rich evidence that, rather than being paralysed, modern societies are catapulted into action and are, individually and collectively, fully engaged in the competitive scramble for limited resources and the pole position in the race for social exclusion. Thus, action is in fact being taken, everywhere, by everybody, under all circumstances! Yet, it is not the kind of action radical ecologists or the believers in reflexive modernisation had had in mind.

The distinctive feature of the new eco-politics is, indeed, as signalled above, the coincidence of (a) an unprecedented level of scientific understanding and public awareness of the social and ecological implications of modern lifestyles and patterns of self-realisation and (b) an equally unprecedented determination to defend and further develop these values, lifestyles and emancipatory achievements. When Foster points to the 'the inadmissible awareness' of the ecological and social realities that 'has been growing more and more painfully insistent' (2015, 5); when he notes that modern societies 'are well-placed to see that our newly globalized civilization is now irreversibly committed to a trajectory into climate jeopardy and massive ecological damage' (Foster 2015, 35); and when he states that 'contemporary environmentalists are caught in a tragic bind' (Foster 2015) in that they have to pursue their practices of willed optimism 'with increasing stridency against the clear evidence of facts that they nevertheless increasingly recognize' (Foster 2015, 115), he actually captures this distinctive feature of contemporary eco-politics – and implicitly acknowledges that it cannot really be conceptualised in terms of denial. This simultaneity of awareness and determination shifts the focus of contemporary eco-politics from the attempt to change social values, patterns of behaviour and lifestyles so as to bring them in line with planetary boundaries, categorical eco-imperatives or norms of equality towards managing the inevitable

implications of, and promoting societal *adaptation* and *resilience* to, the sustained violation of these boundaries, imperatives and norms (Blühdorn 2011, 2016a). This crucial shift and new core concern, the concept of denial cannot capture.

Adaptation and building resilience to the apparently non-negotiable conditions of sustained unsustainability entails, in particular, the development of coping strategies for ever increasing levels of social inequality, injustice and exclusion. Norms of social acceptability change only incrementally, and to the extent that the values of first-order emancipation continue to retain validity – at the individual as well as the collective level – the social and ecological implications of the non-negotiable commitment to modern value preferences and lifestyles continue to be perceived as problematic. Alongside the development of effective security policies, the politics of unsustainability therefore requires forms of communication and arenas for social practices in which the commitment to values of ecological integrity and social equality can be articulated and experienced without the values, achievements and further trajectory of second-order emancipation coming under threat. And as the continuous acceleration of innovation and change is a constitutive principle of modern societies, the need for such experiential arenas is considerable. Unsurprisingly, therefore, a wide range of such discourses and arenas have emerged and are being sustained. And they are not simply a tool controlled by manipulative elites, but they are societal tools for the self-management, at the individual and collective level, of irresolvable conflicts between mutually incompatible values. I have conceptualised these forms of communication and practice as *discourses of simulation* (Blühdorn 2007, 2011). They engage a wide and diverse range of societal actors from across the ideological spectrum and all sections of society (Blühdorn 2014, 2016a, 2016b). Adapting Foster's phrase: *simulation is not something just the bad guys do*, but a collective societal practice for managing the implications of the commitment to sustain the unsustainable.

From a functionalist point of view, exactly this is, arguably, where the above narratives of hope find their place. They articulate values and tell stories of transformation which, corresponding to the substantial societal need, are 'heavily marketed and endorsed as path-breaking' (Spash 2015, 13), and enthusiastically embraced by all kinds of actors but which, as regards their transformative potentials, are, sociologically speaking, rather implausible. Like 'sustainability before them', these discourses are indeed 'another servant of powerful interest groups' (14) – which are, however, not just a small social elite, but a rather inclusive alliance of interested parties determined to defend our freedom, our lifestyles, our values and collectively organise the politics of exclusion. Supplementing these purely communicative forms of simulation, the new local initiatives of alternative production, distribution and consumption provide arenas for the real-life exercise of alternative values, practices and social relations. These practices may be highly selective, situated in tightly limited contexts and firmly embedded into macro-structures of unsustainability. Remaining purely *experimental* and *experiential*, they are neither designed to really unhinge the logic which they appear to be challenging, nor are they likely to ever achieve this. Still, they provide opportunities to practically enact and experience ecological and social commitments and self-descriptions. At the same time they also mitigate the inevitable implications of sustained unsustainability: they help the marginalised to self-organise the cost-effective and self-responsible management of their own exclusion. The narratives of the liberation from

capitalist power, consumption and alienation, then provide the moral ennoblement of the exclusion which the winners of second-order emancipation regard as inevitable and the losers somehow have to make bearable. This, too, is part of societies' adaptation and building social resilience to sustained unsustainability.

6. Conclusion

So, by way of conclusion we may note: as a road map for the structural transformation of contemporary capitalist consumer societies, the eco-political paradigm of sustainability has indeed become exhausted. Also, critical observers are right in saying that the established order of consumer capitalism has become more fragile and crisis-ridden than ever before. Furthermore, advanced modern societies are indeed post-growth societies – which is not to say that the logic of growth has been abandoned but that – in light of economic stagnation – the demands for further growth which are resolutely articulated by virtually all parts of society can be realised only for some, and at direct expense of others. Fourth, in contemporary capitalist consumer societies, the dualist patterns of thought which are characteristic for modernist thinking have indeed become implausible, both from a social-theoretical and an eco-theoretical perspective. Yet, the hope and claims that any of this might open up new avenues for a societal transformation towards the realisation of eco-egalitarian ideals seem entirely unjustified. Instead, a value- and culture-shift, conceptualised here as second-order emancipation, has taken advanced modern societies into a post-ecologist and post-democratic constellation where unsustainability is a constitutive principle of prevalent ideals of subjectivity, identity and notions of the good life. And these prevailing ideals, in turn, underpin a new social contract for sustaining the unsustainable.

It is from this particular perspective, this article has suggested, that the new social practices and narratives of post-capitalism, post-growth and post-consumerism, need to be interpreted. Yet, the popular narratives of hope, which portray these new practices as the beginning of a great societal transformation towards a socially and ecologically more benign society, do not take account of these major socio-cultural shifts. Just as the exhausted narratives of sustainability before them, they remain within the realm of Ulrich Beck's second or reflexive modernity and refuse to acknowledge that modern societies have moved on – into a third modernity. Within this third modernity, governed by the values of second-order emancipation, these narratives of hope, therefore, only contribute to the construction and maintenance of societal self-descriptions which perform the ongoing validity of the old eco-emancipatory project. Or, put differently, they contribute to the stabilisation of the order which they intend to attack. The objective of making this argument is not to question the commitment and sincerity of social movement actors. But a clear distinction ought to be made between such actors and their sociological observers. Whatever the latter may suggest in terms of interpretations of the former's endeavours can claim only restricted validity because it invariably remains contingent on the assumptions, reach and plausibility of the socio-theoretical models which frame the observers' perspective. Yet, this does not absolve environmental sociologists from their responsibility to critically investigate and interpret the new activists' practices and self-descriptions, rather than simply reproduce them. At present, however, it seems that many observers are, once again, more inclined to promote popular and convenient – albeit implausible – narratives of hope. If environmental sociology can do

anything to nurture transformative energies at all, exploring the prevailing politics of unsustainability – and its own contribution to it – is its most promising strategy.

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Disclosure statement

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