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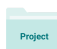

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Post-democracy and Post-sustainability

Emancipatory values and the reconfiguration of the democracy/sustainability nexus

Ingolfur Blühdorn

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1. Introduction

The belief that democracy and sustainability are not simply mutually compatible but indeed inseparably connected to and dependent on each other belongs to the well-established orthodoxies of eco-political movements, thinking and policy. Since the emancipatory *new social movements* of the 1970s, in particular, the democratic empowerment of citizens is widely considered an essential precondition for the achievement of environmental objectives, and there is a consensus that any societal transformation towards sustainability can only be a democratic transformation. After the collapse of the bipolar world order of the Cold War, the state of the biophysical environment in many countries of the former Soviet Union seemed to confirm that democratic systems are much better positioned to take care of the natural environment than their non-democratic competitors. More recently, however, further changes in the socio-economic structure and political culture of capitalist consumer societies have shed doubt on these beliefs. Empirically oriented researchers as well as democratic theorists have diagnosed a *recession of democracy* (Diamond 2015, 2021), a *post-democratic turn* (Crouch 2004; Blühdorn 2013) and the rise of new, autocratic-authoritarian forms of politics (Lührmann 2019; Maerz et al. 2020; Blühdorn 2021) – also in the field of eco- and climate policy (Beeson 2010). Eco-sociological observers, in turn, have drawn attention to a *post-ecologist turn* (Blühdorn 2000), the *end of sustainability* (Foster 2015; Benson and Craig 2017) and the rise of a *politics of unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2007, 2011, 2013). These concepts are trying to capture substantial changes in the condition and prevailing understandings of democracy and no less significant changes in the condition of the biophysical environment and prevailing framings of *the ecological problem* and *the ecological question*. The changes which these concepts are concerned with challenge established beliefs about the democracy/sustainability relationship, and they profoundly reconfigure their interconnection.

Despite the prevailing views of this relationship, doubts about the suitability of democratic approaches to achieving environmental goals are, of course, by no means new. Already in the 1970s eco-political thinkers such as Paul Ehrlich (1971), Robert Heilbroner (1974) or William Ophuls had argued that the ecological crisis 'may require the sacrifice of equality and majority rule' and that to secure the survival of the human species 'democracy *must* give way to elite rule' (Ophuls 1977, 159). Yet, in the 1980s these *survivalist* arguments subsided and democratic

approaches prevailed, not least because the new social movements were *emancipatory* movements which conceived of, and framed, environmental issues from a specifically emancipatory – rather than survivalist – point of view. For them, the democratisation and the ecologisation of modern societies were two dimensions of the same *progressive* project, inseparably connected to each other as two sides of the same coin. When in the 1980s issues of environmental protection became fully mainstreamed and increasingly institutionalised – first at the level of national governments and then at the international and global levels, too – the participation and engagement of citizens incrementally became an uncontested core principle of environmental *good governance* (Bäckstrand et al. 2010; Fischer 2017). Although many environmentalists had, early on, regarded 'standard *liberal democratic* institutions and practices', in particular, as 'ill-suited to managing the [increasingly] boundless character of world risks' (Eckersley 2017, 9; my emphasis), they were convinced that new *grass-roots*, *participatory* and *deliberative* forms of democracy will much improve the quality, legitimacy and implementation of environmental policy (Newig 2007; Blühdorn and Deflorian 2019) and, at the same time, remedy existing democratic deficits and truly democratise liberal representative democracy (Dryzek 2000).

Yet, despite all agendas of democratising democracy, the multiple sustainability crisis continued to tighten. Adding to older topics such as species decline and the depletion of finite natural resources, global warming, in particular, became an increasingly prominent issue. And leading democratic polities such as the USA, Canada and Australia consistently appeared as eco-political laggards, while market-liberal as well as right-wing populist actors invoked democratic values to legitimate explicitly anti-environmental and socially destructive agendas. Hence, the earlier eco-political confidence in democracy began to turn into disillusionment. New demands came up that environmentalists end their 'love affair with democracy' (Shearman and Smith 2008, 121). In view of the continuing accumulation of economic and political power in the hands of a small global elite, many eco-emancipatory movements and critical environmental sociologists are holding on to their critique of capitalist power-relations and their agendas of democratic empowerment. But evidence is mounting that, in a number of respects democracies are actually not well equipped for effective environmental policy making. Their fixation on the present, their short electoral cycles, their territorial boundaries or their principle of compromise are just some prominent weaknesses (Blühdorn 2013, 2020a, 2021). Also, for their own stabilisation and reproduction, democratic polities seem to be inherently reliant on economic growth and environmental exploitation (Mitchell 2011; Pichler et al. 2020). And for the modern environmental state, dependence on democratic legitimacy, increasingly, appears to be a major obstacle to ambitious climate and sustainability policy. In fact, this dependence on democratic legitimacy has been portrayed as the *glass ceiling* to the environmental state's efforts to achieve a socio-ecological transformation (Hausknost 2020).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, academic observers note a new surge of 'interest in non-democratic approaches to environmentalism as an alternative environmental policy model' (Chen and Lees 2018, 2; Beeson 2010). The strong, autocratic state is, by some, once again ascribed the potential to 'achieve [eco-]political feats unimaginable in liberal democracy' (Wainwright and Mann 2013, 10). In fact, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this argument gained considerable prominence. Environmental activists demanded the state to address the climate- and sustainability crisis with the same determination as – some governments – tackled the COVID-pandemic. And more openly than ever, commentators pondered whether centralist and authoritarian systems such as China may, after all, be better positioned for coping with the threats and catastrophes which in the Anthropocene are, increasingly, part of the normality that contemporary societies have to confront. At the same time, the COVID-pandemic also provided further evidence of emancipatory-democratic values being appropriated

by movements rallying against government restrictions devised to contain the virus and protect public health (Lütjen 2021). Compared to the changes in behaviour, lifestyles and social relations which any serious sustainability transformation would require, these restrictions were, undoubtedly, modest, and they were only temporary. Yet, the resistance they triggered in some parts of society – in the name of freedom, citizen rights and authentic democracy – and the desire to *return to normality* which was powerfully articulated by others, signalled more clearly than ever what kind of protests any serious attempt to overcome the established order of unsustainability would have to confront. Thus, with democratic values being appropriated by anti-environmental and anti-egalitarian actors; with eco-political movements such as *Extinction Rebellion* or *Fridays for Future* framing their concerns and agendas in neo-survivalist manners, and with the urgency of a socio-ecological transformation apparently necessitating autocratic-authoritarian approaches, established beliefs about the democracy/sustainability relationship have become very uncertain again.

To explore the ongoing reconfiguration of this relationship is the objective of this contribution. For this endeavour, the dual starting point is, firstly, that the notions of *sustainability* and sustainable development are just one particular framing of *the ecological problem* or *the ecological issue* that competes with other such framings, e.g. the thinking of *radical ecology* or of *degrowth*. Secondly, and related to this, I proceed from the insight that both, *sustainability* as well as *democracy* are what Gallie (1956) once called *essentially contested concepts*: The meaning of these concepts is not fixed but constantly being renegotiated – whereby the understandings of autonomy, subjectivity, identity and a good life prevailing in a particular community at a particular point in time are the crucial point of reference. Thus, these changing ideals of subjectivity, the ongoing reinterpretation of democracy and democratization, and the continuous reframing of ecological concerns and objectives are three constitutive dimensions of this exploration of the democracy/sustainability nexus. To begin with, the focus is on the democratic dimension. Under the heading of the *dialectic of democracy* (Blühdorn 2020b), I will explore how changes in prevailing understandings of freedom, self-determination and a good life have nurtured increasingly ambivalent attitudes towards democracy, and are an important parameter in explaining the much-debated *crisis of democracy* and the *autocratic-authoritarian turn*. Section three addresses the ecological dimension. It investigates how changing notions of autonomy, subjectivity and identity impact on the ways in which eco-political issues are being framed and addressed – taking eco-political discourse in contemporary consumer societies not only beyond the thinking of *political ecology* (Gorz 1987; Lipietz 1995) but also beyond the paradigm of *sustainability* (Foster 2015; Benson and Craig 2017). Section four then explores how in capitalist consumer societies of the global North, the change in prevailing notions of freedom, self-realisation and a good life give rise to forms of democracy which are conducive to the *politics of unsustainability*. The conclusion considers the normative dilemmas which analysis in terms of post-democracy and post-sustainability implies for critical environmental sociology.

2. The dialectic of democracy

Today's concerns about a crisis and *recession of democracy* (Diamond 2015, 2021), a *democratic fatigue syndrome* (Appadurai 2017) and an *autocratic-authoritarian turn* (Lührmann 2019; Blühdorn 2021) may actually be traced back over several decades. Already in the 1960s, when Almond and Verba first diagnosed what they called a *participation explosion*, they were concerned that this new emancipatory impulse may actually destabilise rather than improve liberal democracy (Almond and Verba 1963). In the mid-1970s, Huntington, Crozier, King and others raised concerns that the *democratic distemper*, energised by the value and culture change which

Inglehart shortly after conceptualised as the *silent revolution* (Inglehart 1977) might lead to *state overload* and a condition of *ungovernability* (Crozier et al. 1975). In the 1980s and 1990s there was much debate about the decline of traditional political parties and political organisations such as trade unions, and about the growing number of voters who no longer participated in electoral politics (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Dalton 2004; Mair 2013). Around the turn to the new millennium these debates then culminated in the diagnosis of a condition of *post-democracy* (Rancière 1999; Crouch 2004) and *post-politics* (Boggs 2000; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014) – terms which swiftly gained popularity well beyond the academic realm. They are being used to describe a variety of phenomena and may articulate a range of concerns, normally implying a critique of some kind of deviation from established democratic norms or expectations. Indeed, these concepts may carry diagnoses and agendas to which authoritarian right-wing populists subscribe, just as much as they may be mobilized for the political narratives promoted by liberals or by egalitarian radical democrats.

The best-known account of *post-democracy* is undoubtedly the one provided by Colin Crouch (2004). Crouch suggests that in contemporary Western democracies citizens just play 'a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them' (Crouch 2004, 4). His understanding of post-democracy as a kind of democratic theatre disguising that, factually, 'politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites' (p. 6) resembles the much older critique of *symbolic politics* (Edelman 1964). Crouch points to a number of reasons for the emergence of the post-democratic state of politics. *Inter alia*, he refers to a modernisation-induced and supposedly irreversible 'entropy of democracy' (Crouch 2004, 11f, 29). Ultimately, however, he locates the 'true causes of the problems' in 'the profit-seeking behaviour of the large corporations' which 'are destroying communities and creating instability the world over', and in 'a political class which has become cynical, amoral and cut off from scrutiny and from the public' (p. 10, 119). Constructing a clear cut opposition between, on the one hand, 'small circles of overlapping business lobbyists and a politico-economic elite' (Crouch 2016, 71) who are 'reducing' citizens 'to the role of passive, rare participants' (2004, 21) and, on the other, those 'who were cowed by the apparent superiority' (p. 107) of neoliberal ideology, but whose 'massive escalation of truly disruptive actions' (p. 123) will, at some stage, launch 'a counter-attack on the Anglo-American model' (p. 107), Crouch offers a narrative that talks to popular sentiments well beyond the post-Marxist critical left.

Sociologically, however, neither the assertion that the decline of democratic processes and institutions has been induced primarily by corrupt elites is satisfactory, nor the narrative of an egalitarian counter-attack on the prevailing order of socio-ecological exclusion and destruction. In fact, both suggestions directly contradict Crouch's own hypothesis of an *irreversible entropy* of democracy. And empirically, despite all debates about the multiple unsustainability of the established socio-economic order; despite the impressive mobilisation of movements such as *Fridays for Future* or *Black Lives Matter*, there is not much evidence of any promising eco-egalitarian 'counter-attack on the Anglo-American model'. Quite the contrary, when in 2020 and 2021 the COVID-19 pandemic, more dramatically than ever, exposed and exacerbated the weaknesses and injustice of the established socio-economic order, the governance of the pandemic was not guided by any logic of radical transformation, but by the desire to *return to normality* as swiftly as possible. Indeed, governments invested unprecedented resources into re-stabilising an economic system that is very well known to be not only unsustainable but highly destructive both socially and ecologically.

Therefore, taking a modernisation- and subject-theoretical approach, the diverse phenomena widely discussed as the *crisis of democracy* have also been conceptualised as a *post-democratic turn* (Blühdorn 2000, 2007, 2013) – a concept that facilitates a more nuanced understanding

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than Crouch's rather one-dimensional notion of post-democracy. It suggests that in advanced modern societies, democratic norms, as understood in the Fordist and post-Fordist era, are becoming exhausted – or at least highly ambivalent and are now perceived as a threat at least as much as a promise. Rather than putting the blame, one-dimensionally, on corrupt economic and political elites, this approach explains the new democratic ambivalence also in terms of a modernisation-induced *triple dysfunctionality* and *legitimation crisis* of democracy (Blühdorn 2020a, 2020b). Adapting and expanding the established distinction between the *systemic* performance (problem solving capacity) and the *democratic* performance (ability to deliver to specifically democratic expectations) of political systems (Fuchs 1998; Roller 2005), this new democratic ambivalence may be said to derive from (a) democracy's *systemic dysfunctionality*, i.e. its insufficient problem-solving capacities; (b) its *emancipatory dysfunctionality*, i.e. its unsuitability as a political tool for the realisation of today's understandings of autonomy and self-realisation; and (c) what might be described as *mechanical dysfunctionality*, i.e. its break down due to the corrosion of structural parts on which democratic politics vitally depends.

Of these three dimensions, the first one, i.e. the limited problem-solving capacity of democracy is best researched and the most widely debated. Already in the 1990s, reform governments set out to modernise democratic politics, seeking to increase its efficiency and effectiveness in societies which are becoming ever more complex, internationalised and innovation-oriented. The devolution of responsibilities which the state had once adopted, the depoliticisation of public policy by means of delegation to expert committees, and the streamlining of participation, consultation and decision-making processes were supposed to restore the responsiveness and quality of democratic policy making (Wood and Flinders 2014). Improved *output-legitimacy* was supposed to compensate for the reduction of traditional-style democratic *input-legitimacy* (Scharpf 1999). Yet, given the dynamic of modernisation, these strategies did little to overcome the structural problems of democracy. Whilst challenges such as social inequality, global warming, migration or demographic change are becoming ever more complex and urgent, democratic institutions retain little ability to plan, direct, regulate and coordinate societal development – least of all a socio-ecological transformation towards sustainability. The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic powerfully illustrated the problems democratic governments have to confront.

The *emancipatory dysfunctionality* of democracy, i.e. its increasing unsuitability as a tool for goals of self-determination and self-realisation, derives from the modernisation-induced shift in prevalent understandings of freedom, subjectivity and identity. This shift may be conceptualised as a process of *second-order emancipation* (Blühdorn 2013, 2014, 2017) in which *progressive* and *competitive* individuals (Bröckling 2015; Boltanski and Chiapello 2017) liberate themselves from established emancipatory norms, ideals and assumptions which in advanced modern societies appear unduly restrictive. These include, for example, the protestant, bourgeois and (post-)Marxist assertion that the truly autonomous self can be realised only beyond – and by resisting – the *false promises* and *superficiality* of the *alienating* consumer culture (e.g. Marcuse 1972); the expectation that the fully emancipated subject will develop a consistent, principled and stable identity, thereby achieving personal and *political maturity*, or the commitment to social ties, obligations, responsibilities and solidarities which appear to stand in the way of the full realization of the individuals potentials and opportunities. The suspension of these older notions of subjectivity and identity and the related change in prevailing patterns of self-realisation have been theorized by Sennett (1999), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), Bauman (2000, 2001), Boltanski and Chiapello (2017), Reckwitz (2020) and many others. It implies, *inter alia*, that for *progressive* individuals democracy and democratisation, which had once been the most important tool for the emancipatory project, increasingly turn into a burden and obstacle: They

can neither articulate nor represent the complexity and flexibility of modern individuals and their identity needs, nor can they respond to the dynamics of modern lifestyles and the reality of the competitive struggle for social opportunities. And most importantly: In a societal constellation where the new understandings of autonomy, subjectivity and identity clash, ever more openly, with biophysical limits and persistently low economic growth, the democratic principles of egalitarianism, social justice and social inclusion become a major obstacle to individual freedom and self-realisation.

Hence, from the perspective of contemporary ideals of self-realisation and a good life, egalitarian, participatory and deliberative understandings of democracy, in particular, appear increasingly dysfunctional. Emancipatory movements do, of course, continue to campaign for their respective ideals of a *more authentically democratic* and *more ecologically effective* democracy. But this does not unhinge the progressive liberation from established normative commitments and socio-ecological responsibilities, i.e. the dynamics of *second-order emancipation*. Zygmunt Bauman conceptualised this liberation as the *secession of the successful* (Bauman 2001, 50-57) which he describes as a 'declared war on the community', 'waged in the name of freeing the individual from the inertia of the mass' (Bauman 2001, 27). Whilst 'received notions of communal duty' are being 'dismissed as outmoded tradition', Bauman notes, those endowed with the required forms of capital regard 'the sky' as 'the sole limit' of their ambition (Bauman 2001, 30). Again, the COVID-19 pandemic powerfully illustrated that prevailing understandings of individual rights, freedoms and lifestyles may be suspended, if at all, only briefly and exceptionally. They are perceived as emancipatory achievements which are non-negotiable, and political attempts to restrict or renegotiate these freedoms have to confront insurmountable resistance.

The third dimension of democratic dysfunctionality, described here as *mechanical dysfunctionality*, is directly related to this transformation of prevailing understandings of autonomy, subjectivity and identity. Yet, while the previous two forms of dysfunctionality consider the usefulness of democracy as a tool for a particular purpose (problem-solving, emancipatory self-realisation), this third dimension concerns the functioning of democracy itself. This functioning depends on *material* resources which democracy depletes but does not reproduce (Pichler et al. 2020) but, at least as importantly, on non-material, *ideational* resources which it also depletes without being able to reproduce them. These include, in particular, the Enlightenment idea of the *autonomous subject*. Had it not been for this ideal, neither the emancipatory nor the democratic project would ever have evolved. And one of the fundamental assumptions underpinning both these projects was, from the very outset, that autonomy and subjectivity, liberty and self-determination, were conceived of as being restricted in multiple respects. For, Kant's famous *emergence of mankind from its self-imposed immaturity* was never supposed to imply the complete removal of all restrictions and restraints, but the achievement of *maturity* – which from Kant to the political ecologists of the 1980s always denoted a synthesis of freedom and the subordination to imperatives of reason as two equally constitutive principles of a self-determined and socially just and ecologically responsible society. These bounded notions of freedom and self-determination became democracy's normative point of reference. Indeed, democracy can only function, if the autonomy and subject-status that it is intended to deliver and guarantee are defined and limited in this way.

Yet, by its very nature, by virtue of being emancipatory, the emancipatory project persistently challenged all limitations, including those delimiting its own objectives. Untiringly, progressive movements fought for the flexibilization of values, of established truth, of morals, of identity, of subjectivity, of nature, of reason, etc. And in the wake of this struggle, the Kantian emergence from self-imposed immaturity seamlessly merged into the disposal of the duty to *mature*, i.e., the commitment to the principles of reason and its constraints on freedom. In fact,

this is what *second-order emancipation* is all about. Incrementally, emancipatory movements thus undermined the ideational foundations on which democracy rests and depleted the normative resources without which it cannot survive. By removing the boundaries of freedom; by suspending the Enlightenment notion of the *subject*, it renders democracy – liberal, egalitarian, representative, participatory or deliberative – dysfunctional in a quite literal, mechanical sense.

To a significant extent – but by no means exclusively, of course – the phenomena that have been conceptualized as a *crisis of democracy* (Crozier et al. 1975), a *recession of democracy* (Diamond 2015, 2021), the *democratic fatigue syndrome* (Appadurai 2017) or even the *hatred of democracy* (Ranciere 2006) may, therefore, be traced back to a *dialectic of emancipation* (Blühdorn 2021) that, by hollowing out democracy's normative core and point of reference, propels a *dialectic of democracy* and causes a genuine *legitimation crisis* of democracy (Blühdorn 2020a). Incrementally, it renders democracy not only structurally inadequate for contemporary consumer societies, but also normatively questionable: From the perspective of second-order emancipation, democracy no longer delivers – and in fact *obstructs* – what contemporary individuals regard as their inalienable rights. Hence, the development of democracy can, taking up the concepts suggested by Crouch (2004), indeed, be described in terms of a *parabola* and an *irreversible entropy*. But while Crouch – contradicting his own concepts – remains confident that the emancipatory-democratic project can somehow be revived and the direction of the democratic parabola reversed, the notions of *second-order emancipation* and the *post-democratic turn* suggest – in line with empirical experience – that the democratic project, as the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s had emphatically rearticulated it, can most probably not be resuscitated. This does not necessarily signal the *end* or *death* of democracy (Bouffin de Chosal 2017; Keane 2009), nor does it imply that the struggle for emancipation is over. As Bauman put it: 'only the meaning assigned to emancipation' – and democracy – 'under past but no more present conditions that has become obsolete' (Bauman, 2000: 48). Indeed, given that citizen claims for participation and expectations for better representation continue to rise, a *transformation* of democracy into a new form of appearance that reflects the notions of freedom, subjectivity and self-realisation now prevailing in contemporary consumer societies is the more likely scenario. Exactly this is what the term *dialectic of democracy* aims to capture.

3. Ecology beyond the transformative project

The societal value- and culture shift conceptualised here as second-order emancipation impacts on eco-political debates and agendas no less than on the project of democracy and democratization; in fact, it is a key parameter in explaining the condition of *sustained unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2007, 2011). For an adequate understanding of this impact, it is essential to call to mind that eco-political discourse, struggles and policy-making are – contrary to common intuition and the narratives offered by eco-political activists – never primarily about *extra-societal* facts, *environmental* problems and *bio-physical* conditions or changes but, first and foremost, about *societal* perceptions of these conditions and changes, their *social framing* as problematic and about grievances about the violation of *social* norms and expectations (e.g. Luhmann 1989; Eder 1996; Latour 2004). Bio-physical conditions and changes do play a significant role, of course, but ultimately, eco-political discourses, concerns and struggles are, and have always been, primarily about the perceived violation of social norms. When environmental movements first emerged, towards the end of the 19th Century, they were triggered by the critique of modernity, modernisation and industrialisation. This was a conservative as well as an emancipatory-progressive critique, and it related to both, perceived changes in the bio-physical environment and changes in everyday life and social relations. Conservatives were worried

about the loss of tradition, of established privileges, sources of orientation and meaning, and they criticised human hubris and the belief that humans have the right and ability to unhinge, reorganise and master what they perceived as the intangible, *natural* order. Progressive, emancipatory movements, in turn, were not so much concerned about the loss of traditions – which they perceived not as *natural* but as unduly restrictive and anti-emancipatory – but they shared the concern about the loss of meaning and the perception of dis-embedding. Furthermore, they also shared the critique of industrialisation and human hubris. For them, the main critique was, that the logic and rationality of capitalism, i.e. a logic of exploitation, inequality and domination was being installed in the place of tradition. Put differently, the replacement of tradition was not emancipatory and progressive, but brought just another form of domination, alienation and control. But despite these differences, both the conservative and the progressive critique – this is the key point here – were underpinned by *cultural* norms and ideals about the good, natural and moral (Dominick 1992; Dobson and Eckersley 2006). From the very beginning, such *cultural* norms have always been the crucial driver of *environmental* movements (Guha 2000; Radkau 2014). Hence such norms, their ongoing change and their competitive struggle for hegemony are a centrally important parameter in the investigation of environmental movements and eco-political discourse.

When in the 1970s – long before the concept of *sustainability* first emerged – environmental movements rapidly gained mass support, this was partially, of course, a response to the environmental side-effects of rapid industrial development and the consumer economy becoming increasingly visible. At least as importantly, however, the tide of these movements signalled the rise of what Inglehart first called *post-materialist* values and later values of *self-expression* and *self-experience* (Inglehart 1977, 1997). Increasingly educated, informed, articulate and self-confident citizens placed ever more emphasis on self-determination and *quality of life* issues, including matters of identity, health and environmental pollution. At the time, public authorities addressed environmental concerns primarily by implementing *add-on* or *end-of-pipe* solutions. Such technological fixes contributed a lot to cleaning the emissions from industry chimneys or waste water pipes. Yet, they left the underlying causes of environmental problems in place, i.e. they were unable to address, for example, that the capitalist economy is inherently based on the principle of continuous growth, on the exploitation of resources and the externalisation of social and ecological costs. And they also failed to address the emancipatory claims of the citizenry, who now asserted their right to self-determination and autonomous self-realisation, and who self-confidently insisted on their political competence and maturity.

Reflecting and articulating these more encompassing concerns, a different, emancipatory-progressive strand of eco-political thinking gained in significance that was much more ambitious than technology-oriented environmental protection. In the course of the 1970s, it gradually evolved into what some observers later conceptualised as a political ideology in its own right – *ecologism* (Dobson 1990). *Ecologist* thinking shifted the emancipatory agenda and the claim to autonomy – also for nature – centre stage. It entailed a radical critique of modern society and industrial capitalism. It drew attention to the re-emergence of mass-unemployment in the industrialised North, the persistence of deep poverty in the global South, capitalist power relations and the ways in which the consumer culture systematically alienated modern citizens, obstructed their true self-realisation and enslaved nature, too (Marcuse 1972; Gorz 1987). In other words, *ecologist* thinking raised a range of concerns which the technology-oriented *environmental protection* programmes which some progressive national governments were implementing at the time did not address. It diagnosed a profound crisis not only in ecological terms, but in the social, economic and cultural dimensions of modern societies, too. Radically challenging the established socio-economic as well as political order of the industrialised countries,

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including their relationship to the developing world, ecologists demanded a comprehensive transformation of the established economic structures, the political system, personal lifestyles as well as cultural values and notions of identity. In fact, ecologism envisaged a radically different society in which the tensions between economic, social and ecological concerns would be fully overcome and established socio-ecological relations fundamentally reorganised. In this sense, ecologism was profoundly *political* and is, therefore, often also referred to as *political ecology* (Gorz 1987; Lipietz 1995).

Yet, although its demands for comprehensive socio-cultural change – and in particular its emancipatory agenda of self-determination and democratic empowerment – echoed many concerns of the new educated and politically articulate middle classes, in particular, radical ecologism also triggered substantial resistance: By the less privileged parts of society, it was perceived as an elite agenda and a threat to their own aspirations for further development, social equality and inclusion. And even to many privileged and environmentally aware citizens, the anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist critique of political ecology appeared as a threat to their achievements and the pleasures and conveniences of their established lifestyles. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the ecologist belief that the protection of the natural environment, the realisation of human autonomy and the achievement of social and ecological peace necessarily demand that the capitalist consumer economy be abandoned, triggered deep ideological divisions and gave rise to an eco-political deadlock in which ecological and economic interests seemed mutually incompatible.

In the second half of the 1980s, a further reframing of environmental concerns and policy approaches appeared as the magic solution to this eco-political impasse. The new paradigm of *sustainability* and *sustainable development*, first introduced by the UN Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) and then fully mainstreamed at the UN's 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, emerged as a new eco-political master-frame that soon became hegemonic in mainstream institutionalised eco-policy. It recognised the concerns articulated, in particular, by the younger, materially secure cohorts in Western, post-industrial societies. But at the same time, it also accommodated the interests of those – in the industrialised countries as well as the global South – who were desperately hoping for further economic development and the improvement of their material situation. The Brundtland Report explicitly acknowledged the problems of international inequality and poverty in the global South, as well as the unsuitability of the industrial countries' model of development as an example to be emulated in other parts of the world. It emphasised that the protection of the natural environment would, henceforth, have to be a priority concern in all policy-making and confirmed that there are bio-physical limits which must be respected. In line with *ecologist* thinking, the report also stipulated that the industrial countries would need to undergo a structural transformation so as to make sure that their development remains within 'the bounds of the ecologically possible' (WCED 1987, 55). At the same time, however, the Brundtland Commission also suggested that there is no need for any radical departure from the established trajectory of modernisation, for the abandonment of consumer capitalism or for 'the cessation of economic growth' (p. 40). Quite the contrary, the report explicitly underlined that the international economy 'must speed up world growth' (p. 89). The development of new resource-efficient technologies, improved management and monitoring schemes, and the internalisation of social and ecological costs which had so far been discounted were presented as suitable means allowing to hold on to the capitalist economy and the principle of economic growth, but still 'avert economic, social and environmental catastrophes' (ibid.). Thus, the paradigm of sustainability bridged the abyss between ecology and economy. Yet, in the sense that it fully relied on technological innovation and market instruments; in as much as it dismissed the agenda of anti-capitalism and reframed emancipation as a project to be achieved *within* rather

than *beyond* the established socio-economic order, the sustainability frame was clearly *post-ecologist* (Blühdorn 2000, 2011).

From today's perspective, the sustainability paradigm itself seems exhausted (Blühdorn and Welsh 2007). Already the UN Rio+10 Summit in Johannesburg (2002) had signalled a cooling of the optimism and dynamic of the early 1990s, yet, by the end of the decade, the notion of sustainability had been appropriated by a diverse range of actors for an equally diverse range of purposes and had visibly lost its ability to energise and guide an integrated global transformation (Blühdorn 2011, 2021b). At the time, the collapse of the American investment bank Leeman Brothers and the subsequent crisis of the global banking and financial system triggered a global economic downturn. Governments imposed draconian austerity programmes on their countries, whilst sustainability and sustainable development had degenerated into fuzzy concepts unable to guide any structural transformation of liberal consumer capitalism or give orientation for a socially and ecologically benign development of the Global South. At the Rio+20 Summit of 2012, again held in Rio de Janeiro, national leaders signalled 'little political appetite for anything but very modest change' (Linnér and Selin 2013, 983). Yet, global warming, resource extraction, biodiversity loss and social inequality continued to worsen in an essentially unabated manner, which put 'both sustainability governance and the sustainable development concept under growing pressure' (Bulkeley et al. 2013, 958). 'Mainstreamed as sustainability or sustainable development', John Foster noted, 'environmentalism has failed to reduce, even remotely adequately, the impact of humans on the biosphere' (Foster 2015, 2). Hence, the paradigm that had once been invested with so much hope was increasingly regarded as 'an irretrievably misconceived framework and a delusive policy goal' (Foster 2015, Preface). A world characterised by unprecedented 'complexity, radical uncertainty and [a] lack of stationarity', Benson and Craig argued, 'must face the impossibility of defining – let alone pursuing – a goal of *sustainability*' (Benson and Craig 2014, 777). With the notion of sustainability being little more today than an *empty signifier* in the sense of Laclau (Brown 2016), it 'isn't actually part of the solution' to the socio-ecological crisis, but a 'deeply embedded part of the problem' (Foster 2015, 35).

In public discourse, the concept of sustainability, nevertheless, remains very prominent, not least because in 2015, the United Nations undertook a new attempt to update and revitalise its sustainability agenda. The document *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015) restated the commitment to achieving a genuine transformation rather than just marginal reforms, and to achieving it at a global scale. Yet, the prospects for this agenda to be implemented do not look favourable. Not only does the logic of capitalism, i.e. the logic of growth, inequality, exploitation etc, remain unchanged, but the prevailing notions of subjectivity, autonomy and a good life seem to have largely aligned with this logic (Bauman 2000; Boltanski and Chiapello 2017; Reckwitz 2020), and in the affluent consumer societies of the global North, an order and politics of *unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2007, 2011, 2017; Blühdorn and Deflorian 2019) now actually seems more entrenched than ever before: Empirical data on the state of biophysical environment and the impact of human civilisation on eco-systems are more abundant and publicly accessible than ever before. Scientific knowledge on anthropogenic environmental and climate change is more comprehensive and detailed than it has ever been. Still, the established economic order and prevailing understandings of autonomy and self-realisation seem non-negotiable. Despite all declaratory commitment to ecological goals and the urgency of a socio-ecological transformation, the resolve to sustain established values, lifestyles and visions of progress, success and a good life seem adamant.

In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic may have delivered the final blow to the project of an international sustainability transformation: It has triggered unprecedented new investment

in the further stabilisation of a socio-economic order of growth, resource exploitation and consumerism. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the public desire to *return to normality*, the adamant determination to re-stabilise the established order, *whatever the cost*, provided clear evidence of the extent to which the culture- and value shift conceptualised above, that is, the ongoing *modernisation* of prevailing understandings of autonomy, subjectivity and identity, has eroded the political resonance and transformative potential of the eco-emancipatory imperatives political ecologists had once articulated. In the wake of the pandemic, *resilience* seems to be firmly establishing itself as the new eco-political lead concept and master-frame (Benson and Craig 2017). Essentially, it suspends the emancipatory and transformative project and focuses, instead, on the individual and societal ability to absorb and cope with the social and environmental catastrophes which in the new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, are, increasingly, perceived as normal and unavoidable. Whilst *post-ecologism* and *post-sustainability* are, more than anything, negative concepts which signal what today's eco-politics – in terms of its values and visions – has left behind, the notion of *resilience* may capture in more positive terms what the eco-politics beyond the frames of ecologism and sustainability is aiming for.

4. Democratised exclusion and authoritarian governance

This brief and deliberately simplifying sketch of how changes in the prevailing notions of autonomy, identity and a good life have impacted on perceptions and understandings of both democracy and sustainability offers a nuanced explanation for the *postdemocratic turn* and the strikingly stable condition of *sustained unsustainability*. It sheds light on the rise of a *politics of post-* or *unsustainability*. Indeed, the value and culture shift underpinning the phenomena of post-democracy and post-sustainability is no less significant than the *silent revolution* that Inglehart had diagnosed when the societies to which this cultural shift pertains were moving from their industrial to the post-industrial stage of development (Inglehart 1977, 1997). In a curious manner, this further silent revolution delivers exactly what sustainable development and the proponents of *ecological modernization* approaches (Mol and Sonnenfeld 2000) had always aimed for and promised: *modern societies are modernizing themselves out of their sustainability crisis* (Mol 1995, 42). Yet, going beyond what ecological modernization theorists had proposed, they are doing so not only by developing techno-managerial solutions to supposedly objective environmental problems but, no less importantly, by adapting their normative yardstick und societal modes of problem perception (framing). They are redefining what is regarded as categorically necessary and shifting the boundaries of the socially palatable, so as to accommodate the unavoidable implications of the particular ways in which contemporary individuals are interpreting their essential needs, inalienable rights and non-negotiable freedoms. Indeed, this adaptation of norms and perceptions may be understood as an indispensable strategy of resilience; for, these supposedly inalienable rights and non-negotiable freedoms are based on the premise that those providing the goods and services required for their fulfilment must not claim – or be granted – the same rights and freedoms. Put differently, the realisation and maintenance of the freedom, rights, lifestyles and patterns of self-realisation which majorities in the affluent societies of the Global North are determined to sustain – or to which they aspire – explicitly demand that these rights and freedoms must not be generalised. They are inherently based on the principle of exclusion. The enjoyment of these rights, freedoms and lifestyles by some is being paid for by the exclusion of others – within national societies, and internationally. And in as much as this principle of exclusion is incompatible with the declared commitment to equality, justice, democracy, the rule of law, universal human rights, and so forth, this *imperial mode of living* (Brand and Wissen 2018) in modern *externalisation societies* (Lessenich 2019) necessitates not only a

'new politics of exclusion' (Appadurai 2017, 8), but new strategies of resilience, too, which render the unavoidable implications of the latter more palatable.

In fact, as economic growth rates are set to remain low, *planetary boundaries* (Rockström et al. 2009; Biermann 2012) are becoming ever more visible, and the social implications of global warming and bio-physical system collapse are increasingly tangible, this politics of exclusion becomes ever more urgent, and it has to be ever more effective. Reversely, a re-invigoration of the ecologist-transformative agenda and egalitarian democracy seems ever less likely. Although environmental activists continue to campaign for a *degrowth* society, against endemic injustice and racism and for a *new social contract for sustainability* (WBGU 2011), the reality of eco-politics in modern consumer societies is shaped – as the governance of the COVID-19 pandemic powerfully illustrated – by a stronger than ever *social contract for sustaining the unsustainable*. Indeed, rather than reinforcing the transformative impetus which many believed the *Fridays for Future* movement had delivered, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically reinforced social inequalities, the *secession of the successful* (Bauman 2001, 50-57) and their retreat into exclusive escape properties. In order to re-stabilise and sustain the established order, governments have accumulated unprecedented public debt which will weigh heavily for decades. And the *competition of systems* between the US and China that US President Joe Biden officially declared seems set to further cement the politics of unsustainability.

This politics of unsustainability does not preclude, for example, efforts to develop innovative, resource-saving technologies, to reduce CO_2 emissions, or to stimulate *green growth* and *responsible consumption*. But it precludes that the underlying logic of inequality, exploitation, acceleration, expansion and growth and the underlying socio-ecological power-relations are unhinged. It is a politics of unsustainability exactly in the sense that this underlying logic is being defended and sustained at any cost. And one of its distinctive features is that this politics of *sustaining the unsustainable* (Blühdorn 2007; 2013; 2014) still has to take the form of a democratic politics. For, despite the multiple dysfunctionality and the legitimation crisis of democracy; despite the proliferation of *anti-democratic feelings* (Rancière 2006) and *anti-political sentiments* (Mair 2006); and although contemporary consumer societies show clear symptoms of 'democratic fatigue syndrome' (van Reybrouck 2016; Appadurai 2017), citizens in these societies are making ever more vociferous claims for democratic participation, representation, self-determination and self-realisation. Hence, although this may appear as a contradiction in terms, the new politics of exclusion must be organised in a *democratic* way. Put differently, democracy has to evolve in a way that accommodates this requirement of exclusion. And there is plenty of evidence that it is actually doing so. This is what the seemingly self-contradictory terms *democratised exclusion* and *authoritarian governance* aim to capture.

This transformation of democracy is facilitated, firstly, by the fact that democracy has always been highly adaptable and that, secondly, it has always been not only 'a mechanism of inclusion but also of exclusion' (Krastev 2017, 74; Mouffe 2018). It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that it is explicitly in the name of the people's democratic self-determination and desire to *take back control*, that right-wing populist movements and governments – witness the Trump-government in the US or the Johnson-government in the UK – back out of international agreements and structures of governance, challenge what has been achieved in terms of a societal consensus that a socio-ecological transformation is necessary and urgent, relax existing environmental legislation, cut welfare provision for those deemed *undeserving*, pursue illiberal and xenophobic agendas, and vow to always put their respective country first. In fact, popular pressure for more direct democracy is an important driver of the transformation of 'democracy as a regime favouring the emancipation of minorities' into 'democracy as a political regime that secures the power of majorities' (Krastev 2017, 69), in particular, when these majorities are

experiencing some kind of threat. In the affluent societies of the global North which conceive of themselves as the most *advanced* and *progressive*, these 'threatened majorities' (Krastev 2017: 67) are a most powerful and agenda-setting political force (Inglehart und Norris 2017; Lilla 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019). They are not just the often-cited *losers of modernisation* (Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019), nor is their political agenda well described as 'a reversal' of the 'progressive development' of earlier decades (Krastev 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Geiselberger 2017). Instead, this threatened majority is, as explicated below, a broad, inclusive – and not necessarily openly declared, or even conscious – discursive alliance of diverse societal groups all sharing the concern that in view of low economic growth rates, clearly visible bio-physical limits, ever increasing global competition for resources and steadily rising social inequality, nationally and internationally, their particular understandings of freedom, self-determination and self-realisation, and the lifestyles and notions of fulfilment which they entertain, or are aspiring to, are under severe threat. Yet, these majorities are determined to defend the achievements and promises of *their* emancipatory project. For exactly this reason they are neither well described in terms of a *backlash* (Inglehart), *regression* (Geiselberger) or *retrotopia* (Bauman), nor are they well understood as a *counter*-movement launching an 'attack on the Anglo-American model' of market-liberalism (Crouch 2004: 107).

The empowerment of this threatened majority is a key tool in the new politics of unsustainability. It effectively obstructs political intervention into what these majorities regard as their private sphere, the regulation of what they see as their personal choices, and the restriction of the rights and freedoms which they consider as non-negotiable. Furthermore, the empowerment of this threatened majority organises the democratic definition and implementation of new lines of demarcation and exclusion both within the respective polities and beyond. Its objective is to collectively – and democratically – offload established egalitarian obligations and ecological commitments so as to secure the continuation of the established socio-economic order and socio-ecological relations. This implies, not least, the *democratic* suspension of *universal* human rights and the *inviolable* dignity of (wo)man which are being subordinated – as prominently evidenced, for example, by the EU's migration policy or its policy towards China – to the defence of established privileges, freedoms and lifestyles.

Thus, contemporary consumer societies are witnessing *the people's inclusion into the politics of exclusion*. This *democratisation of exclusion* executes the (ever less) tacit social contract for unsustainability. It co-opts even societal groups into the politics of exclusion, and instrumentalises them for the *governance* of unsustainability (Blühdorn 2013, 2014), who are themselves unlikely to benefit from it, but who are required to endow this politics with democratic legitimacy (Davies 2011; Boezeman et al. 2014). For this governance of unsustainability, the flexible, decentralised, participative and consensus-oriented practices of stakeholder governance, which are increasingly replacing centralised, interventionist environmental government, are proving particularly helpful (Blühdorn and Deflorian 2019). But the threatened majority has also 'turned the state into its own private possession' (Krastev 2017, 74), instrumentalising it for the provision and enforcement of the institutional framework required for the politics of exclusion. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the democratically legitimated environmental state is structurally unable to organise any socio-ecological transformation of capitalist consumer societies that really suspends their underlying logic of unsustainability (Hausknost 2020).

At the same time, the interplay of (a) the ongoing reframing of notions of autonomy and emancipation; (b) the ever-widening abyss between claims to autonomy and self-realisation, on the one hand, and practical experiences of increasing disempowerment, inequality and exclusion, on the other; and (c) the increasing visibility of planetary boundaries which render prevailing notions of autonomy and emancipation ever more directly dependent on rising levels

of social inequality and exclusion not only triggers – as outlined above – a dramatic erosion of confidence in democratic procedures and institutions (e.g. Mair 2013; Blühdorn, 2020a, 2020b), but it gives rise to explicit demands for autocratic-authoritarian rule. It triggers a dynamic of autocratization that is propelled by rather diverse actors and agendas:

- The much-cited *losers of modernisation* who in search of orientation and protection turn towards illiberal, anti-pluralist and authoritarian leaders;
- the *politically disillusioned* who are deeply disappointed by established politics, experience a profound crisis of political representation, no longer believe that political institutions may be reformed and have adopted a mode of permanent rebellion against the established order and its rationality;
- those looking for narratives helping them to make sense of and navigate conditions of high complexity, and allowing them to *take back control* and reinstate a sense of self-efficacy;
- those entertaining understandings of autonomy, self-determination and a good life whose viability demands effective policies of social exclusion;
- those who believe that the societal issues that need to be dealt with swiftly and efficiently – ranging from the containment of COVID-19 to the new system-competition with China – are best managed by non-majoritarian modes of expert governance;
- those who in view of the *liberation from maturity* visible in virtually all sectors of society have lost confidence in the political competence and responsibility of major parts of the citizenry (e.g. Brennan, 2016; van Reybrouck, 2016); and
- those demanding rigorous government action to enforce restrictions which may stave off ecological collapse, catastrophic global warming and the extinction of the human species.

This enumeration is not meant to be exhaustive, and the diverse motivations for autocratic-authoritarian inclinations distinguished here empirically blend in a variety of ways, giving rise to heterogeneous ideological orientations and forms of political practice. These diverse actors may well conceive of each other as political enemies – the radical opposition between American Trumpism and the *Fridays for Future* movement being a prominent case in point. Indeed, the deepening division and polarisation within national societies, transnational communities such as the EU and the global community seem to be a distinctive feature of the new socio-political constellation. Yet, collectively – even if against each other – these diverse actors propel the autocratic-authoritarian turn and are in this sense partners on the road towards new forms of *authoritarian governance* (Swyngedouw 2000; Blühdorn 2021a). In the politics of unsustainability, this authoritarian governance is no less important a parameter than the democratisation of exclusion. Both appear to be contradictions in term, and in exactly that they both signal the emergence of something fundamentally new beyond the binary distinction between democracy and authoritarianism.

5. Conclusion

Thus, in the wake of the post-democratic turn and the rise of the politics of unsustainability – both of which have been induced, not least, by the value- and culture shift conceptualised here as a *second silent revolution* and as *second-order emancipation* – the relationship between democracy and ecology has profoundly changed. Democracy and democratisation which the emancipatory new social movements had once regarded as the most important tool for forcing environmental issues onto the political agenda and for empowering ecological reason and responsibility vis-à-vis the destructive logic of the capitalist economy, modern technology and the bureaucratic

state, seem to be metamorphosing into a tool for organising and legitimating the politics of unsustainability, of exclusion and of defending this very logic they were supposed to unhinge. This metamorphosis does not come entirely unexpected, of course: For most of its history, democracy has had a rather negative reputation. Concerned that popular demands for freedom would invariably become excessive, Plato had famously described democracy as the precursor to tyranny (Plato 1955). When Almond and Verba published their seminal work on the *civic culture* (1963), they still highlighted that what they called the *participatory explosion* would be beneficial to modern societies, only if the new participatory impulses are effectively tamed and moderated. At the threshold to post-industrial society, Inglehart and many others then believed, economic development and the expansion of mass education had finally given citizens the competence and self-confidence to take societal affairs into their own hands – and achieve political maturity. Social movements now portrayed themselves as the avantgarde of a truly democratic and ecologically responsible society. They promised to give a voice to concerns – social and ecological – which had so far been muted and secure equal recognition for subjectivities which had so far been oppressed. Civil society was now widely regarded as the subject and voice of authentic reason and responsibility; and, accordingly, the empowerment of civil society appeared as the most – indeed, the only – promising strategy in the struggle against the immoral, instrumental and destructive interests of elites, and the alienating logic of *the system* comprising the capitalist economy, industrial technology and the bureaucratic state.

In contemporary societies, however, a range of political actors are, for a variety of reasons, increasingly ambivalent about democratic procedures and the prospect of a further democratisation of institutions and policy making. Processes of *second-order emancipation* seem to be effecting a *liberation from maturity* across different sections of the ideological spectrum, giving rise to an increasingly *uncivil society*. As popular movements are appropriating democratic values to legitimise agendas which are explicitly directed against goals of social justice and ecological integrity, and which are *emancipatory* in a radically redefined, exclusive sense, civil society can no longer easily be regarded as the avantgarde prefiguring a socially just and ecologically benign society, nor do democracy and democratisation necessarily appear as a promising tool for achieving it.

For critical environmental sociology, the very idea that emancipation and democratisation might – in the wake of a dialectic transformation – themselves metamorphose into drivers for a politics of unsustainability is extremely challenging. For, not only is there no reason to assume that non-democratic approaches might be more effective in protecting the bio-physical environment, let alone for achieving the emancipatory objectives which *progressive* movements, in the established sense, have sought to promote; but the *dialectic of emancipation* also destroys the normative foundations of the critical project at large (Blühdorn 2021a). Critical environmental sociology has always had a dual commitment: It wanted to provide a societal diagnosis and analysis, and it wanted to change modern societies towards the full realisation of progressive, emancipatory ideals. Yet, if in its diagnostic dimension it finds evidence of, and theorises, what has been described here as a dialectic of emancipation and democracy, critical sociology undermines its own transformative agenda. Still, refusing to diagnose and theorise these phenomena would amount to a 'refusal to see' (Foster 2015, 7) and only reproduce the 'pervasive culture of denial' (Foster 2015, 35) that social movements and critical sociologists have always campaigned against. This is a dilemma which cannot easily be resolved.

In a sense, calling to mind that the key concepts investigated here – ecology, emancipation, democracy – are all *essentially contested concepts* which cannot be monopolised for any particular strands of thinking; and stating unequivocally that the terms *second-order emancipation* and *dysfunctionality of democracy*,in particular, neither imply any normative approval of the value and culture shift they conceptualise, nor describe any end point of the struggle between ever-evolving

notions of freedom, justice and self-determination may render the outcomes of the above analysis more palatable. At this particular point in time, the objective of this article has been to shed light on the reconfiguration of the democracy/ecology nexus as it currently appears. The particular focus has been on the understandings of freedom, self-determination and self-realisation which, according to Inglehart, Bauman, Reckwitz and many others, have become prevalent in contemporary consumer societies. Undeniably, this analysis raises fundamental problems and leaves critical environmental sociology with fundamental dilemmas. Yet, if, for critical environmental sociology analysis in terms of the dialectic of democracy, the dialectic of emancipation and the metamorphosis of the democracy/sustainability relationship might also bear considerable potentials: Not only does it critical sociology to keep its diagnostic commitment but, more importantly, a differentiated understanding the politics of unsustainability is, undoubtedly, a necessary precondition for any promising attempt at overcoming it.

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