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The legitimization crisis of democracy: emancipatory politics, the environmental state and the glass ceiling to socio-ecological transformation

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ABSTRACT

The *democratic legitimization imperative* of the modern state has been conceptualised as the barrier that stops the *environmental* state from developing into a *green* or *eco-state* – and thus as the *glass ceiling* to a socio-ecological transformation of capitalist consumer democracies. Here, I suggest that this state-theoretical explanation of the glass ceiling needs to be supplemented by an analysis of why democratic norms and procedures, which had once been regarded as essential for any socio-ecological transformation, suddenly appear as one of its main obstacles. I conceptualise the new *eco-political dysfunctionality* of democracy as one dimension of a more encompassing *legitimation crisis of democracy* which, in turn, has triggered a profound transformation of democracy. Ultimately, exactly this transformation constitutes the glass ceiling to the socio-ecological restructuring of capitalist consumer societies. It changes democracy into a tool for the *politics of unsustainability*, in which the legitimization-dependent state is a key actor.

KEYWORDS Legitimation crisis; dysfunctionality of democracy; dialectics of emancipation; democratic parabola; politics of unsustainability

Introduction

The tide of right-wing populist movements throughout Europe, the Trump presidency in the US and the new priority that, since the great banking, financial and economic crisis of 2008/9, virtually all national governments have given to economic growth at the expense of environmental, climate-related and social justice commitments signals that – for the time being, at least – the project of a socio-ecological transformation of capitalist consumer societies has hit a *glass ceiling* (Hausknost 2017, *in press*). The ideal of a socially and ecologically sustainable society continues to be debated, of course, and mounting evidence of a multi-dimensional sustainability crisis (economic, social, ecological, political) actually seems to render the project

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more exigent than ever. Yet, so far this crisis has led neither to the *end of capitalism* (Streeck 2014, 2016, Mason 2015) nor – despite the crushing social impact of neoliberal austerity policies – to any *new social contract for sustainability* (WBGU, German Advisory Council on Global Change 2011) but, instead, to the installation of right wing (coalition-)governments that have launched a head-on attack on the eco-democratic project and the cosmopolitan spirit of emancipatory social movements and political parties. Rather than the envisaged *great transformation* (WBGU, German Advisory Council on Global Change 2011), capitalist consumer societies seem to be witnessing a *great regression* (Geiselberger 2017), and the *politics of unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2000, 2011a, 2013b, 2014) appears to be even more deeply entrenched than before.

Daniel Hausknost, who first introduced the concept of a ‘glass ceiling to environmental transformation’ (Hausknost 2017, p. 50), makes an innovative and important contribution to theorising the inability of capitalist consumer democracies to overcome their multiple sustainability crisis in that he supplements the well-established post-Marxist narrative (powerful economic elites consistently block this transformation) and the equally well-established institutionalist perspective (the development of political institutions has not kept pace with the ever rising scale and complexity of environmental problems) with a new state-theoretical approach. Drawing on Skocpol’s notion of *state imperatives* (Skocpol 1979) and more recent work on the *environmental, green or eco-state* (e.g. Dryzek *et al.* 2003, Barry and Eckersley 2005, Christoff 2005, Meadowcroft 2012), Hausknost suggests that the modern state – in order to secure its own stability and survival – needs to comply with a number of imperatives including, *inter alia*, the economic growth imperative and the (democratic) legitimisation imperative. He argues that in order to transform the *environmental state* into a *green or eco-state* that no longer confines itself to policies of *ecological modernisation*, but co-ordinates a transition to ‘a qualitatively new type of society’ (Hausknost 2017, p. 50) beyond the prevailing sustainability crisis, conservation and sustainability would have to become a state imperative in their own right, on a par with, or even superior to, the already established state imperatives. Yet, rather than being an independent imperative, conservation and sustainability remain subordinate to the legitimisation imperative: whilst the need to secure democratic legitimacy does indeed render it imperative for the modern state to address the multi-dimensional sustainability crisis, it must do so only in ways that, and only to the extent that, this does not conflict with other state imperatives and citizen expectations (e.g. internal security, international competitiveness, economic prosperity, ample consumer choice) that are equally important for the state’s legitimisation and stability. Thus, the modern state is expected to deliver protection from environmental risks, to guarantee public health and to secure a high quality of life, but it must not

pursue any agendas of societal transformation that might negatively affect other dimensions of what citizens perceive as their quality of life. Least of all must the state interfere with the freedom, choice, consumer behaviour, and lifestyles of self-determined individuals. Exactly this, Hausknost suggests, constitutes the *glass ceiling* to socio-ecological transformation.

This state-theoretical analysis is provocative in that it relates the glass ceiling to the socio-ecological transformation of capitalist consumer societies directly to their democratic order and explicitly addresses the contentious issue that democracy and democratisation, rather than being the centrepiece of any solution to the multiple sustainability crises, may in fact themselves be a constitutive part of the problem (Shearman and Smith 2007, Dean 2009, Blühdorn 2011b). Yet, Hausknost's discussion of the democratic legitimisation imperative raises questions about the criteria on the basis of which citizens either endow state institutions and policies with democratic legitimacy or deny it. Put differently, the glass ceiling to a socio-ecological transformation is, ultimately, not located at the level of the environmental state but at the level of the interests, norms, and value preferences that make democratic majorities support or reject transformative agendas. Therefore, the state-theoretical approach to understanding the glass ceiling to the socio-ecological transformation of liberal consumer societies needs to be supplemented by an investigation of the social norms and value preferences prevailing in these societies; Hausknost's conceptualisation in terms of the state's democratic legitimisation imperative needs to be backed up by a more encompassing analysis of why democratic procedures, which environmental movements had always regarded as an essential tool for, and prerequisite to, any socio-ecological transformation, now suddenly appear as one of its main obstacles.

Here, I aim to work towards just that. I conceptualise this new *eco-political dysfunctionality* of democracy as one dimension of a more encompassing *legitimation crisis of democracy*. This legitimisation crisis, I suggest, is a modernisation-induced phenomenon and has triggered a profound transformation of prevalent understandings of democracy – which radically challenges established beliefs about the relationship between democracy and ecology. Indeed, in the wake of its ongoing metamorphosis, democracy not only becomes the glass ceiling to the socio-ecological transformation envisaged by radical environmentalists, but it turns into a powerful tool for the prevailing politics of unsustainability. The next section further explores the striking recent erosion of eco-political confidence in democracy and the irritating suggestion that there may, in fact, be a kind of 'complicity' (Eckersley 2017, p. 3) of *liberal* democracy, in particular, in the politics of unsustainability. I then place this eco-political loss of confidence into the context of the crisis of democracy more generally, which is conceptualised in terms of a *dialectic* that renders democracy unsustainable and dysfunctional –

not just in an *ecological* sense and not only *liberal* democracy. I then explore the metamorphosis of democracy that is induced by this dialectic and investigates democracy's transformation into a tool for the politics of unsustainability. The concluding section reflects on the challenges this entails for critical (eco-)sociology.

Eco-political dysfunctionality

The suggestion that the environmental state's dependence on democratic legitimisation may constitute the glass ceiling to a socio-ecological transformation of modern capitalist consumer societies is irritating. After all, political ecologists have always assumed that democracy and democratisation are an essential precondition for, and pathway towards, socio-economic sustainability, ecological integrity and a good life for all. Emancipatory social movements have campaigned to expose and remove democratic deficits, and have conceptualised the achievement of *authentic* democracy and ecological goals as two inseparable, equally important dimensions of their political project. When in the 1980s issues of environmental protection became mainstreamed and increasingly institutionalised, the belief that any societal transformation towards sustainability can only be a democratic transformation became one of the orthodoxies of modern eco-politics. Incremental, flexible, participatory, decentralised and consensus-seeking policy networks not only supplemented, but in many instances actually replaced traditional-style centralised, interventionist, regulatory environmental politics. Radical demands for the scope and depth of democratisation to be increased well beyond the standards of liberal, aggregative, representative democracy remained largely unfulfilled (e.g. Dryzek 2000, Eckersley 2004). Still, democratic participation *has* become an uncontested principle of environmental *good governance* (Newig 2007, Bäckstrand *et al.* 2010, Fischer 2017, Blühdorn and Deflorian 2019).

Over the past decade, however, there has also been a growing number of voices urging that environmentalists end their 'love affair with democracy' (Shearman and Smith 2007, p. 121). In line with the more encompassing concern that in the era of neoliberalism, democracy and democratisation may have become 'inadequate as a language and frame for left political aspiration' (Dean 2009, p. 20), and that today to struggle for more democracy essentially means to struggle 'for more of the same' (p. 24), there is also a notable decline of eco-political confidence in democracy. Concerns that the multi-dimensional sustainability crisis is swiftly evolving into a formidable sustainability emergency, that leading democratic polities such as the USA, Canada, and Australia consistently appear as eco-political laggards, that right-wing populist movements invoke democracy to legitimate policies that are ecologically and socially destructive have, along with the rise of China as a significant player in global climate politics, reawakened

widespread ‘interest in non-democratic approaches to environmentalism as an alternative environmental policy model’ (Chen and Lees 2018, p. 2). Whilst ‘standard *liberal democratic* institutions and practices’, in particular, are increasingly regarded as categorically ‘ill-suited to managing the boundless character of world risks’ (Eckersley 2017: 9, my emphasis), the strong, non-democratic state is, once again, ascribed the potential to ‘achieve political feats unimaginable in liberal democracy’ (Wainwright and Mann 2013, p. 10). A range of eco-political weaknesses of democracy (such as its slow pace, its fixation on the present, or its inability to represent those who don’t have a voice or a vote) had been debated for a long time (Blühdorn 2011b, 2013b, Fischer 2017), yet the more recent literature has raised two more fundamental points that help to explain the erosion of eco-political confidence in democracy and the remarkable rehabilitation of *environmental authoritarianism* (Beeson 2010) and *authoritarian environmentalism* (Chen and Lees 2018). One of them is the dependence of liberal representative democracy on the fossil-based industrial growth economy with which it historically co-evolved, the other that democracy and democratisation are continuously chipping away at the normative foundations and authority of modern eco-politics.

The concern that modern democracy is based on material foundations, and relies on – and drives – the essentially unrestricted appropriation and exploitation of resources, which are finite and non-renewable, reaches well beyond the question for the suitability of democratic institutions and processes as a tool for achieving eco-political goals. Indeed, it affects the sustainability of democracy itself, i.e. its long-term ability to reproduce and stabilize itself. For a long time, this issue had been neglected by both eco-political and democratic theorists. Only in recent years, Mitchell (2011), Malm (2016) and various others (e.g. Hausknost 2017, Pichler *et al.* in press) – also including Hausknost in this volume – have called to mind the material foundations of the democratic project, which renders it eco-politically problematic. Yet, at least as important for the change in the relationship between ecology and democracy, though much less debated, is the second of the above points: the erosive effect ongoing processes of democratization have on the *normative* foundations of modern eco-politics. What is at stake here is what Hausknost (2017) calls the *independent sustainability imperative*, the unavailability of which not only affects the environmental state but all other eco-political actors, too.

For a long time, environmental movements had assumed that environmental problems, the need for transformative action and the key policy measures that are required are essentially self-evident, and that campaigns of public information, education, awareness raising and consciousness building, reinforced by the steady deterioration of environmental conditions would, at some point, almost automatically trigger transformative action at

all levels of society to confront the *realities* that would then be overwhelming and *undeniable*. Up to the present, environmentalists keep reiterating that for modern consumer societies the continuation of the status quo is simply not an option, that there are scientifically identifiable and objectively valid *planetary boundaries* that must not be transgressed (Rockström *et al.* 2009), and that modern eco-politics will inescapably have to evolve into a form of *earth system management* guided by these indisputable boundaries (Biermann 2012; Rockström 2015). Yet, firstly, environmental politics is not primarily about scientifically measurable *facts*, but, more than anything, about social *concerns* (Luhmann 1989, Latour 1993, 2004, Blühdorn 2000); secondly, modern environmental movements have not only firmly relied on science to provide objective foundations for effective eco-politics, but their agenda of *epistemic democratisation* has unceasingly challenged the very objectivity that science was supposed to provide.

Indeed, worried about the close interrelation of modern science and the capitalist growth economy, emancipatory social movements have consistently pushed the public contestation of scientific problem diagnoses and the related policy recommendations. Driven by concerns about science being a tool in the hands of exclusive power elites, about the depoliticising effect of the scientisation of eco-politics and about the spectre of post-democratic expert rule, they demanded to democratise the ways in which problems are framed and policy approaches devised (Bäckstrand 2004). Aiming for a more complex and inclusive understanding of environmental issues (Kitcher 2001, 2011), seeking to bridge the gap between science and society and hoping to improve the effectiveness, legitimacy and implementability of evidence-based policy making, emancipatory movements demanded *abstract* scientific knowledge to be supplemented by embedded, practical *real-world* knowledges of different kinds and communities. Supported by STS scholars and the proponents of *post-normal science* (Irwin 1995, Ravetz 1999, Wynne 2005, Jasanoff 2005, 2012), they argued that the validity of expert assessments and the related policy recommendations always remain limited to the relevant *epistemic communities* and therefore demanded socially inclusive research practices giving appropriate recognition to lay-knowledges, the knowledge of indigenous peoples and traditions, citizen experts, experts by experience, artists, affected communities and so forth. Their social accounts of objectivity put emphasis on the contextual nature of all truth and objectivity. Yet, this democratisation of science, scientific research and scientific knowledge also politicised the authority of scientific diagnoses, relativized the validity of ecological imperatives and propelled the proliferation of eco-political uncertainty.

Up to the present there is some hope that ‘the democratisation of science has a neglected potential to contribute to the democratisation of global environmental policy’ (Berg and Lidskog 2018, p. 3, 16). A ‘more democratically

orchestrated co-production of knowledge’, Eckersley argues, might not only expose ‘the complicity of liberal democracy in undermining Earth systems processes’, but also provide a basis for ‘a more reflexive democratic political culture’ that is ‘more attentive to links with other socio-ecological communities and larger Earth system processes’ (Eckersley 2017, p. 14, 3). But as processes of modernisation (and democratisation) render contemporary societies ever more complex and *liquid* (Bauman 2000, Rosa 2013), giving rise to an ever larger number of ever more changeable perspectives on reality, ever more diverse notions of truth and competing views of what ought to be sustained, for whom, for what reason and so forth, there is mounting evidence that the democratisation of scientific knowledge is at least as disabling and paralysing, eco-politically, as it may have unused potentials to unlock (Koskinen 2017). And as right-wing populists – in the name of *common sense* and *the people* – are pursuing their *agnotological* project (Proctor 2008) of discrediting science, establishing so-called *alternative facts*, and rebuilding political discourse around fabricated fears, the normative foundations of eco-politics are becoming ever more uncertain.

Thus, in addition to the problem that democracy and democratisation seem to propel the appropriation of nature and exploitation of finite *material* resources, emancipatory social movements, including the environmental movement have, unwittingly, also contributed to the depletion of indispensable *normative* resources, thus adding another layer to the eco-political dysfunctionality of democracy and reinforcing the glass ceiling to the socio-ecological transformation of modern societies. Against the backdrop of *epistemic democratisation*, a coordinated and effective politics of intervention, regulation and transformation becomes an ever less realistic prospect, which, as yet, neither reforms to existing democratic institutions nor suggestions of more *authentically democratic* alternatives to liberal democracy have been able to brighten. For, as yet, such reforms or alternative models have not been able to offer any empirically effective or sociologically convincing antidote to the centrifugal forces this democratisation has unleashed. In a dialectical fashion, democracy and democratisation thus seem to be metamorphosing from a much-celebrated tool and assumed precondition for any socio-ecological transformation into one of the main obstacles to it.

The dialectic of emancipation and the democratic parabola

For a fuller understanding of this dialectic (Blühdorn *in press*), to further explore how and why democracy itself turns into the glass ceiling to transformative politics, the discussion of its eco-political dysfunctionality needs to be placed in the wider context of the debate on the crisis of democracy more generally (e.g. Crouch 2004, Mair 2006, Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). Taking a modernisation- and subject-theoretical approach, I have conceptualised this

crisis as the *post-democratic turn* (Blühdorn 2000, 2007, 2013a, b). It implies that in advanced modern societies, democratic norms, as traditionally understood, are becoming exhausted – or at least highly ambivalent and are perceived as a threat at least as much as a promise. Further pursuing this line of enquiry, this new ambivalence may also be conceptualised in terms of a modernisation-induced *triple dysfunctionality* of democracy. Adapting and expanding Fuchs' distinction between the *systemic* performance (problem solving capacity) and *democratic* performance (ability to deliver to specifically democratic expectations) of political systems (Fuchs 1998, Roller 2005), this ambivalence may be said to derive from: democracy's *systemic dysfunctionality* – its insufficient problem solving capacities; its *emancipatory dysfunctionality* – its unsuitability as a tool specifically for the project of self-determination and self-realisation; and what might be described as *mechanical dysfunctionality* – its breakdown due to the corrosion of structural parts on which it vitally depends. This triple dysfunctionality is not confined to liberal democracy, but it affects the democratic project in a much more comprehensive sense.

Of these three dimensions, the first – the limited problem-solving capacity of democracy – not only in eco-political terms, is the best-researched and most widely debated. Already in the 1990s, reform governments set out to modernise democratic politics, seeking to increase its efficiency and effectiveness in the new societal conditions. The devolution of responsibilities that 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 to effect the kind of socio-ecological transformation that ecologists demand.

The *emancipatory dysfunctionality* of democracy – 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. Elsewhere I have conceptualised this shift as a process of *second-order emancipation* (Blühdorn 2013a, b, 2014, 2017) in which contemporary individuals liberate themselves from established emancipatory norms, ideals and assumptions that 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); or the expectation that the fully emancipated subject will develop a consistent, principled, stable and unitary identity, personality or character. Eco-politically, this emancipation from these older notions of subjectivity and identity and the related change in prevailing patterns of self-realisation – theorized also by Sennett (1999), Bauman (2000, 2005), Featherstone (2007), Reckwitz (2017) and many others – implies, *inter alia*, liberation from supposedly *categorical* eco-imperatives and the impossibility of any *independent sustainability imperatives*. In terms of democracy, it implies that democracy and democratisation, which had once been the most important tool for the emancipatory project, increasingly turn into a burden and obstacle. For the articulation and realization of modern understandings of freedom and contemporary aspirations for self-realisation, democratic institutions and processes are structurally inadequate: 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. 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. From the perspective of contemporary ideals of self-realisation and a good life, the – increasingly dysfunctional – democratic project must, therefore, be either abandoned or comprehensively reframed. Egalitarians and ecologists may, of course, continue to campaign for normative ideals of a *more authentically democratic* and *more ecologically effective* democracy – and there is ample evidence that they are doing so. But it is getting ever more difficult for these actors to construct dependable normative foundations for such projects, and their ability to have a transformative effect is set to decline in line with the spread of the value- and culture-change conceptualised here as second-order emancipation.

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, this third dimension concerns the viability of democracy itself. This viability depends not only, as discussed above, on *material* resources that democracy does not reproduce but, at least as importantly, on non-material, *ideational* resources that it also depletes without being able to reproduce. 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 have evolved. 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. Kant's famous *emergence of mankind from its self-imposed immaturity* was never supposed to imply the complete removal of all boundaries, but the achievement of *maturity* – which from Kant to the political ecologists of the 1980s always denoted a synthesis of freedom and obligation as equally important constitutive elements.

More specifically, freedom and self-determination were understood, first and foremost, in an intellectual and moral sense, as *inner* freedom leading to *dignity* and the *worthiness* to be happy rather than to empirical happiness and fulfilment in an outward and material sense (Kant 1781/1983, p. 813). Secondly, freedom and self-determination were understood as the rule of absolute reason (rather than animalistic instinct or instrumental rationalities), as restricted by the obligation to consistency, unity, and truth. Third, the autonomous subject was conceptualized in a collective rather than individual sense, as limited by the principles of inclusion and equality. For political ecologists at least, freedom and self-determination were supposed to also include nature and the environment, to be limited by the imperative to grant nature the same liberty, dignity and integrity that modernist thinking ascribes to the human subject. Precisely within these boundaries, defined in exactly this way, freedom and self-determination became democracy's normative point of reference. Or, conversely, democracy evolved as the political instrument for this particular understanding of freedom and self-determination. At least this has always been the normative justification for the democratic project, and it became the normative yardstick for the critique of forms or institutions of democracy that were perceived as socially and ecologically insufficient, as well as the point of reference for supposedly superior alternatives. Indeed, democracy can only function, if the autonomy and subject-status that it is intended to deliver and guarantee are defined and limited in these particular ways. Put differently, this particular notion of autonomy and subjectivity is part of the indispensable prerequisites (ideational resources) on which democracy vitally depends.

By its very nature, however, the emancipatory project could never content itself with these restrictions; by virtue of being emancipatory, it persistently challenged all limitations, including those delimiting its own original objectives. Untiringly, progressive movements fought for the flexibilization of values, of established truth, of morals, of identity, of subjectivity, of nature, of reason. In the wake of this struggle, the Kantian emergence from self-imposed immaturity seamlessly merged into the disposal of the duty to *mature*, the commitment to the principles of reason and its constraints on freedom. Incrementally, unintentionally and unwittingly, emancipatory movements thus undermined the ideational foundations of democracy and depleted the normative resources without which it cannot survive. Reframing the notions of subjectivity, identity

and self-realisation as described above, the emancipatory project, which was once the midwife of democracy, metamorphosed into its gravedigger. By removing the Kantian boundaries of freedom, by suspending the Kantian notion of the subject, it renders democracy – liberal, egalitarian, representative, participatory, or deliberative – dysfunctional in a quite literal, mechanical sense.

To a significant extent, the development and fate of democracy are thus determined by a *dialectic of emancipation* that, by hollowing out democracy's normative core and point of reference, causes a genuine *legitimation crisis* of democracy. Incrementally, it renders democracy not only structurally inadequate for advanced modern societies, but also normatively questionable. From the perspective of second-order emancipation, democracy no longer delivers what contemporary individuals regard as their inalienable rights, and from the perspective of progressives in a more traditional sense, any reinvigoration of the democratic project or further democratization of democracy would, indeed, most likely deliver just 'more of the same' (Dean 2009, p. 24). Modernity and democracy are connected, therefore, not only in that it was modernity – Enlightenment thinking – which gave birth to the idea of the *autonomous subject* that, ever since, has been the beacon and driving force of all progressive-democratic movements, but the dynamics of modernisation-cum-emancipation also destroy democracy, as traditionally understood. Hence, the development of democracy can, following Crouch (2004), indeed be described in terms of a *parabola*. But while Crouch and many others remain confident that the emancipatory-democratic project can somehow be revived and the direction of the democratic parabola reversed (e.g. Mouffe 2018), the argument here is that the dialectic of emancipation and the decline of the democratic project, as the new social movements had emphatically rearticulated it, can most probably not be unhinged. This triple dysfunctionality accounts for the widely perceived decline in confidence in democracy, and it powers the reconstruction of the democratic project on new normative foundations. In the wake of this reconfiguration, democracy becomes, more than ever, the glass ceiling to the socio-ecological transformation of society. Because of this reconfiguration, the environmental state, which remains tied by the democratic legitimization imperative, is ever less likely to ever evolve into an *eco-* or *green state*.

Metamorphosis and metastasis

In a curious manner, the dialectic of emancipation delivers exactly what sustainable development and ecological modernization had always aimed for and promised: *modern societies are modernizing themselves out of their sustainability crisis* (Mol 1995, p. 42). Yet, they are doing so not by developing techno-managerial solutions to supposedly objective environmental problems, but – much more importantly – by updating their normative

yardstick and societal modes of problem perception (framing). They are shifting the boundaries of the socially acceptable, 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 freedom of self-realization. In as much as these rights and values that contemporary individuals regard as inalienable and non-negotiable are inherently based on the principle of exclusion, in as much as their realisation and maintenance explicitly acknowledges that they cannot – must not – be generalised and directly imply that their enjoyment for some is being paid for by others, the *imperial mode of living* (Brand and Wissen 2018) in modern *externalisation societies* (Lessenich 2019) necessitates a ‘new politics of exclusion’ (Appadurai 2017, p. 8). As economic growth rates are set to remain low, the finiteness of natural resources becomes ever more visible, and the social implications of global warming and bio-physical system collapse are increasingly tangible, this politics of exclusion, of political measures defending and fortifying existing boundaries (national or international), as well as establishing new lines of exclusion, internationally and within national communities, becomes an ever more urgent and important requirement. Conversely, a re-invigoration of the ecologist agenda and egalitarian democracy becomes ever less likely. Activists might continue to campaign for a *new social contract for sustainability* (WBGU, German Advisory Council on Global Change 2011), but the reality of eco-politics in modern consumer societies is shaped by a stronger than ever *social contract for sustaining the unsustainable*. Or adopting a conceptual pair once suggested by Jean Baudrillard; in the wake of modernisation, the old progressive ideal of society’s *metamorphosis* has given way to a project of *metastasis*: ‘the ever more ecstatic production of variations of the extant’ (Baudrillard 1983, p. 151–152; my translation).

As the value- and culture-shift portrayed here as the post-democratic turn by no means implies the radical abandonment of all democratic beliefs, this politics of sustained unsustainability still has to take the form of a democratic politics. Indeed, despite the multiple dysfunctionality and the legitimisation 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 are making ever more vociferous claims for democratic participation, representation, self-determination, and self-realisation. Hence the new politics of exclusion must be organised in a *democratic* way; democracy has to evolve into something categorically new – and the rise of right-wing populism provides evidence that it is already doing so.

Democracy has always been, of course, but a *floating signifier* (Laclau 2005) and a *perennially open project* (Dahl 1989), continually redefined in line with

the norms of subjectivity prevailing in a given polity at any particular point in time. Hence, democracy has always been highly adaptable, and for the politics of unsustainability it is particularly suited because it has, in fact, always been not only ‘a mechanism of inclusion but also of exclusion’ (Krastev 2017, p. 74, Mouffe 2018). Indeed, 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 now back out of international agreements and structures of governance, relax existing environmental legislation, cut support for so-called *welfare parasites*, pursue illiberal and xenophobic agendas, and vow to always put their respective country first. Popular pressure for more direct democracy propels 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, p. 69). These ‘threatened majorities’ (Krastev 2017, p. 67) are not only the motor of right-wing populist movements, but in contemporary consumer societies, they are the most powerful and agenda-setting political force much more generally (Inglehart and Norris 2016, 2017, Lilla 2017).

These ‘threatened majorities’ are neither just the often-cited *losers of modernisation* that are commonly presented as the core of the populist revolution (e.g. Oliver and Rahn 2016, Spruyt *et al.* 2016), nor is their political agenda well described as ‘a reversal’ of the ‘progressive development’ of earlier decades (Inglehart and Norris 2016, 2017, Krastev 2017, Geiselberger 2017). Instead, this threatened majority is a broad, inclusive – and not necessarily openly declared, or even conscious – alliance of diverse socio-economic groups all sharing the concern that in view of low economic growth rates, clearly visible bio-physical limits and steadily increasing social inequality, nationally and internationally, their de-limited understandings of freedom, self-determination and self-realisation, and the lifestyles and notions of fulfilment that they entertain, or are aspiring to, are under severe threat. They are determined to defend the achievements and promises of the emancipatory project, in its contemporary appearance. For this reason, widespread attempts to conceptualize them as ‘regressive’ (Geiselberger 2017), a ‘cultural backlash’ (Inglehart and Norris 2016), a ‘retrogression’ (Inglehart and Norris 2017) or ‘retrotopia’ (Bauman 2017) are simplistic (Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2018). From the normative perspective of first-order emancipation, they may, of course, be described as such. Yet, from the analytical perspective outlined above, they appear as the *continuation* rather than *reversal* of the emancipatory project. The moralising critique of the ‘regressive’ believers in ‘retrotopia’ may well be a discursive strategy to veil a tacit complicity in (parts of) the project it claims to reject.

The plebiscitary empowerment of this threatened majority is the democratic tool for the new politics of exclusion. It organises the democratic definition and implementation of new lines of demarcation and exclusion

both within the respective polities and beyond. It suspends established democratic requirements of detailed information, rational deliberation, and public justification; it abandons the principle of compromise and replaces the idea of collective reason and reasoning with the articulation and aggregation of individualistic interests, emotions, and fears. Its objective is to collectively – and democratically – offload established egalitarian obligations and ecological commitments so as to keep the cumulative size of the *rightful* claim to participation in line with the declining availability of resources and opportunities. In particular, this implies the *democratic* suspension of *universal* human rights and the *inviolable* dignity of (wo)man. Thus, contemporary consumer societies are witnessing *the people's inclusion into the politics of exclusion*. The *democratisation of exclusion* executes the (ever less) tacit social contract for unsustainability. For this purpose the flexible, decentralised, participative and consensus-oriented practices of stakeholder governance, which are increasingly replacing centralised, interventionist environmental government, are proving particularly helpful (Blühndorn and Deflorian 2019). But the threatened majority has also 'turned the state into its own private possession' (Krastev 2017, p. 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 develop into a *green* or *eco*-state in Hausknost's sense. Contrary to any hopes that the crisis of capitalism or the multiple sustainability crisis might trigger a renewal of egalitarian democracy and the socio-ecological transformation to sustainability, democracy is, more than ever, the latter's glass ceiling.

Conclusion

Following extended debates about the decline of the nation state and the post-national constellation, nation states and national governments are currently reasserting their power and political steering capacity. Yet, there is no evidence of this implying that the environmental state may eventually turn into a green or eco-state. Following up Hausknost's suggestion that this may be due to the state's dependence on the democratic legitimisation imperative, I have aimed here to demonstrate that the glass ceiling to this happening and to the socio-ecological transformation of contemporary consumer societies may indeed be their ongoing commitment to democracy. Supplementing Hausknost's state-theoretical approach, I have adopted a modernisation- and subject-theoretical approach to show how the dialectic of emancipation has depleted the normative foundations of the democratic project as emancipatory eco-movements had still conceived it, triggered a profound legitimisation crisis of democracy, and prompted democracy's radical reconfiguration so as to accommodate further increasing claims to self-determination and the

determined defence of *our freedom, our values, and our lifestyles* – which are well known to be socially and ecologically exclusive and destructive. Against this backdrop, the democratically legitimated environmental state is confined to organising the new politics of exclusion and societal *adaptation* to sustained unsustainability. Democracy is not only the glass ceiling to the socio-ecological transformation that ecologists demand but, in its updated form, it is a constitutive element of modern societies' politics of unsustainability and their resilience to its unavoidable implications.

When in the 1970s Jürgen Habermas (1975) predicted a *legitimation crisis of late capitalism*, he was convinced that in order to sustain itself, modern capitalism requires democratic support, and that by eroding the redistributive welfare state, capitalism would progressively destroy this support – and eventually itself. When much more recently Wolfgang Streeck (2011, 2014) diagnosed a *crisis of democratic capitalism* he, too, argued that the 'stability and survival of capitalism' depends on 'non-capitalist foundations' that it rapidly depletes (Streeck 2014, p. 50). Streeck acknowledged that, in the era of hegemonic neoliberalism, capitalism, to a significant extent, has emancipated itself from the need for democratic legitimation. But he believes that the unresolved tension between the logic of democratic self-determination and the rule of the market will result in 'a long and painful period of cumulative decay' (Streeck 2014, p. 64) of both capitalism and, in particular, democracy. Going beyond both Habermas and Streeck, the diagnosis of the *legitimation crisis of democracy* takes into account that contemporary consumer societies are witnessing the repackaging of democracy's normative core. It recognizes that the ongoing dismantling of the redistributive welfare state, the dramatic increase in social inequality and the ongoing destruction of bio-physical systems are, contrary to the predictions of Habermas, Streeck and many ecologists, are not necessarily perceived as a major societal problem, but continued and accelerated as a metastatic politics of unsustainability. It acknowledges that in the wake of a still-ongoing value and culture shift, democracy is getting ever more deeply entangled in 'complicity' with unsustainability.

For the diagnosis of this legitimation crisis of democracy, the observation of a *multi-dimensional dysfunctionality* of democracy has been an important stepping stone. By way of conclusion, it may be helpful to clarify that as regards *emancipatory dysfunctionality*, in particular, there is no intention to make any normative argument for, or even defence of, the value and culture shift conceptualised here as second-order emancipation. Instead, the objective is to explore what this shift, to the extent that it has actually taken place, implies for contemporary democracy and eco-politics. Thus the diagnosis of an emancipatory *dysfunctionality* is made only from the perspective of those understandings of freedom, self-determination, and self-realisation that, according to Inglehart, Bauman, Reckwitz and

many others, have become prevalent in contemporary consumer societies. It is made for analytical purposes only, and does not imply any normative endorsement. After all, the objective of this analysis has been to better understand, not to reinforce, the glass ceiling to the eco-state and a socio-ecological transformation to sustainability. The diagnosis it presents is not itself based on the norms of second-order emancipation, but on the well documented empirical observations: that a radical socio-ecological transformation has, as yet, not occurred; of the decline of confidence in democratic institutions and the spread of anti-democratic sentiments; and of the right-wing populist repackaging of democratic ideas. From the perspective of second-order emancipation and the threatened majority this repackaged democracy might, once again, appear much more functional and legitimate. Yet, it is evident that this democracy is not only the glass ceiling to any sustainability transformation, but actively reinforces the politics of unsustainability.

For critical environmental sociology, the dialectic of emancipation, the multi-dimensional dysfunctionality and the parabola of democracy represent a fundamental problem. In much of the literature so far, the discussion has been framed as the struggle between alienating capitalist unsustainability and emancipatory democratic sustainability, and as the choice between democratic and authoritarian pathways to sustainability. In contemporary consumer societies, however, in the wake of second-order emancipation, the project of a socio-ecological transformation has, *de facto*, been abandoned, and the remaining choice seems to be between a democratically legitimated (majoritarian) and a non-democratic (expertocratic, authoritarian) politics of social and ecological unsustainability. Critical sociology thus seems stuck – as radical eco-activists are – between a rock and a hard place. For the time being, it continues to replay its well-known narratives of alienation and emancipation, democratic renewal and societal transformation. Understandably, from the perspective of the critical tradition, the idea of a democratic politics of unsustainability is unbearable. Yet, the refusal to acknowledge the legitimation crisis of democracy and the ongoing repackaging of its normative core is itself turning into a major obstacle to understanding modern consumer societies' eco-political conundrum.

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