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Chapter Author(s): Daniel Hausknost

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When the lifeworld colonises the system: the uncertain political prospects of eco-social transitions

Daniel Hausknost

Introduction

As the climate crisis is unfolding, it becomes clear that industrialised states so far have failed to initiate the 'fundamental societal and systems transformations that would be required for limiting warming to 1.5 °C' (IPCC, 2018, p 45). While some states are making limited progress in pushing sectorial transitions of their energy systems ahead and some advanced economies are beginning to show signs of 'absolute decoupling' from greenhouse gas emissions (Hubacek et al, 2021), the overall dynamic and depth of change is insufficient to stop humanity's journey on the 'highway to climate hell' (UN, 2022), and modern states remain stuck underneath a structural 'glass ceiling of transformation' (Hausknost, 2020).

In light of this lack of progress, scholars, activists and policy makers are increasingly putting their hopes in new strategies that combine social and environmental policy goals in order to make climate policy both more popular and more effective. Dominant versions of this overall strategy, like the European Commission's (2019) European Green Deal, trust in the pursuit of 'inclusive green growth' and put the focus on combining traditional welfare and labour market policies with more rigorous climate measures in an 'attempt to reconcile economic growth and ecological demands' (Laruffa, 2022, p 823). In academic and activist circles, however, more radical versions of an 'eco-social nexus' approach are being debated which aim at a deeper integration of social and ecological objectives and which, crucially, should allow societies to do without further economic growth. According to this view, a profound socio–ecological transformation is more likely to become feasible if states provide for a new type of 'sustainable welfare' (Koch and Mont, 2016) that embeds society in a 'safe and just operating space' (Raworth, 2012) that secures a 'good life for all within planetary boundaries' (O'Neill et al, 2018). The 'safe and just operating space' is defined by an outer and an inner boundary (or ceiling and floor), where the outer boundary can

be derived by the calculation of per-capita energy and resource use in line with biophysically defined planetary boundaries. Quite clearly, a global and equitable observance of the outer boundaries would mean a rather substantial downscaling of consumption levels in advanced capitalist countries. To make such a perspective socially and politically feasible, it is important to define an inner boundary, in the sense of a minimum or sufficiency level of needs satisfaction, which would allow everyone to lead a decent life. For this purpose, scholarship on sustainable welfare typically resorts to theories of human basic needs that are seen as 'objective' measures of well-being (Koch and Hansen, 2023, p 3). Following Max-Neef's (1991) Human Scale Development methodology, human needs (like subsistence, protection, affection and leisure) are universal and therefore objective, whereas the respective 'satisfiers' of those needs are culturally and historically specific and can be more or less environmentally sustainable. The task is now to define eco-social policies that guarantee 'needs satisfaction for everyone at minimal environmental impacts' (Büchs, 2021, pp 325–326).

Following this logic, the scholarly and activist community discusses such eco-social policy proposals that are directed towards safeguarding the upper boundary (for example, caps on income and taxes on wealth or meat) and others that are aimed at guaranteeing the floor (universal basic income, universal basic services, the reduction of working hours or voucher systems) (Bohnenberger, 2020; Coote and Percy, 2020; Koch, 2022a). Some proposals, like the reduction of working hours and the provision of a universal basic income, are believed to work in both directions by providing social security and at the same time limiting spending power.

The trouble with the eco-social nexus

In terms of strategy, the eco-social literature builds on its superior normative rationale: as soon as one accepts the existence of planetary boundaries and commits to the idea of global justice, one almost automatically arrives at some notion of 'collectively defined self-limitation' (Brand et al, 2021) in terms of a purposively defined 'operating space' or 'corridor' (Fuchs et al, 2021; Bärnthaler and Gough, 2023) within which a universal mode of existence is possible. Despite its normative appeal, however, the sufficiency-oriented eco-social approach so far has not gained much popularity beyond specialised academic and activist circles. In a survey testing the popularity of several eco-social policy measures in Sweden, Max Koch found that participants rejected measures in particular that are geared towards setting the ceiling. He concludes that there is indeed 'a considerable gap between the far-reaching measures that scientists consider necessary to meaningfully address climate emergency … and the measures that citizens of an advanced welfare state such as Sweden are presently prepared to support' (Koch, 2022a, p 454). In

another study, Paulson and Büchs state that 'the idea of downscaling overall production and consumption … was seen by most as an unnecessary and undesirable impingement on freedom and progress' (2022, p 7).

Despite this apparent lack of popular support, proponents of the eco-social literature typically defend the political viability of their project with a view to ongoing power struggles and changing norms and values: its lack of popularity today does not mean it cannot become hegemonic in the future. Max Koch, in particular, points to the 'thorough inculcation of the growth imperative in people's minds, bodies and day-to-day social practices'. This 'inculcation', in turn, can be undone gradually by engaging in bottom-up struggles that 'expand already existing spaces, where alternative, sustainable and cooperative forms of working and living together are tested' (Koch, 2022a, p 454). Building on materialist state theory in the wake of Nicos Poulantzas, who regards the state as the material condensation of social forces, Koch argues that the shape and contents of the state depend strongly on the social struggles that are going on at its fringes: 'If mobilisation by socio-ecological and growth-critical groups reached a critical momentum …, the existing state apparatus could be used to initiate a transition that breaks the glass ceiling of current environmental states' (Koch, 2020, p 127). Ultimately, a sustainable welfare state could be achieved by dismantling the ideological and praxeological inculcation of growth and productivism in people's minds and bodies through collective struggles and prefigurative practices in civil society. And, one would need to add, by the inculcation in people's minds, bodies and day-to-day practices of a *new* love of societal boundaries, self-limitation and 'social freedom, defined as the right not to live at others' expense' (Brand et al, 2021, p 264).

It is this explanation of the empirical and political weakness of the eco-social nexus approach that this chapter takes issue with. At the core of this explanation lies the critical-materialist fallacy that if the state is the material condensation of social forces, then any hegemonic order can, in principle, be replaced by any other hegemonic project, given that it articulates a strong enough base of support in civil society. This view mistakes the state for a neutral or constitutively 'empty' terrain that is shaped by the struggles between social forces. It claims that capitalist, growth-dependent democracy can be turned into a sufficiency-based, solidary and sustainable democratic state by way of articulating and practising a new *common sense* in society. Another implicit claim is that such a democratic sustainable welfare state could remain politically stable in the longer run. Against this view, it is important to caution that not all hegemonic projects are equal in terms of their chances of success and longevity, which implies that hegemony is not a neutral term that can be filled with contingent contents. I argue instead that the capitalist growth model is hegemonic because it allows for a certain way of constructing social reality (see the following discussion), and not because

capital interests manage to inculcate the growth imperative in our minds and bodies. Arguably, the eco-social counter-hegemonic project would not have comparable means of reality construction at its disposal and would therefore always fight an uphill battle against disintegrative dynamics. In what follows, this argument will be unpacked.

The political precedence of the lifeworld over the (earth) system

The problem with the critical-materialist ontology of state resides with its privileging of social struggle as the key variable to determine the contours and contents of social order: if only emancipatory forces managed to engage enough people in their cause they will be able to gain power and reshape the institutional and political-economic order according to their emancipatory ideals. The stability of the resulting order will result from hegemonic power (through the construction of a common sense in both ideological and praxeological terms). What helps in the process of constructing the new common sense is the emancipatory project's normative superiority: once people realise that they have been blinded by consumerism and the growth ideology, they will happily join in the project of collective self-limitation simply because it is the right thing to do: freedom is the 'right not to live at others' expense (Brand et al, 2021, p 264) according to the solidary doctrine. This perspective, while normatively compelling, obstructs the view to underlying mechanisms of social reality construction that may be analytically more essential to the understanding of social order and stability than the claim to normative superiority and human solidarity. The social–constructivist perspective, offered here as an alternative, shares the normative objectives of the critical–materialist project but aims at providing a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms of societal self-stabilisation. These mechanisms are located in a different register than normative thinking as they organise the social *perception* of reality, not its *judgement*.

In a first step, the function of the environmental welfare state is reinterpreted through the phenomenological lens of the *lifeworld* (Schütz and Luckmann, 1973). As a heuristic, I propose the analytical distinction of *lifeworld sustainability* (LWS) and *system sustainability* (SYS) (Hausknost, 2020). In Schütz and Luckmann (1973), the lifeworld constitutes the sphere of everyday reality – the realm of perception, practice and social interaction. The lifeworld is central to the understanding of human societies as it is the sphere through which more abstract levels of reality, like our institutions and theoretical constructions, are mediated: we cannot ultimately escape the lifeworld we inhabit. Politics, despite its various theoretical underpinnings, is ultimately anchored in the lifeworld as it relies on resonance with peoples' everyday experiences, perceptions, emotions and judgements. The concept

of LWS is therefore directly linked to the notion of well-being (Dean, 2012; Hirvilammi et al, 2023), as it captures a desirable state of the lifeworld that citizens aspire to or aim to sustain. LWS certainly includes important environmental qualities or 'need satisfiers' like clean air and water, intact stretches of nature for physical and mental recreation, healthy food and other qualities that can be summarised under the name of environmental health (Moeller, 2011). But LWS arguably also includes, in contemporary societies, notions of material wealth, consumer choice, individual mobility and hedonic pleasures. In short, LWS is a compound category that does not refer to a specific, scientifically determined state of nature, but to a subjectively desired state of the lifeworld of individuals and groups.

SYS, by contrast, refers to the 'objectively' determinable characteristics and dynamics of the earth system, as encapsulated in the 'planetary boundaries' concept. Its scope is not local and subjective but global and objective in terms of quantifiable limits to human activity. The point of the distinction is to show that the political logic of the environmental (welfare) state has so far been geared towards LWS at the expense of SYS and that the resulting decoupling of LWS from SYS since the 1970s has led to the entrenchment of their functional separation. The environmental state (in the OECD world) has created an environmentally refurbished lifeworld for its citizens that is epistemically separated from its own systemic unsustainability: the everyday perception of clean air, safe water and lush nature in many OECD countries hides from our view the highly unsustainable social metabolism these countries entertain with other parts of the world and with the earth system. For example, the environmentally reformed lifeworlds of advanced consumer societies are tele-coupled with countries like Brazil, Indonesia, Nigeria, China or India via highly destructive resource flows that are responsible for vast embodied greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification and human exploitation. These destructive flows contribute decisively to LWS in the global North: they reinforce the subjective perception of a reality in which air and water are clean and forests are lush while clothes, meat, electronics, gasoline and many other amenities of consumer societies are affordable and abundantly available. Or, as Hirvilammi et al (2023, p 10) put it, 'the current state of wellbeing in welfare states has been achieved by deteriorating the wellbeing of impoverished populations, other species, and future generations worldwide'.

While the political logic of the environmental welfare state has thus been to prioritise LWS at the expense of SYS, the eco-social or 'sustainable welfare' state (Koch, 2022a) would need to turn this priority around, or at least to satisfy LWS without encroaching on SYS, with consequences for institutional stability that have not been sufficiently addressed in the eco-social literature. Shifting the priority of the state to SYS would mean to let SYS set the boundaries within which LWS can be achieved. This would

constitute a radical break with the logic of modern statehood as we know it. To date, SYS has been the dependent variable of LWS, which means that measures towards systemic sustainability could only be implemented to the extent that they did not negatively impinge on citizens' lifeworlds. Climate policies, for example, had to be designed in such a way as to have an invisible effect on the lives of citizens. Any allusion to self-limitation had to be couched in terms of individual responsibility and ethical consumerism, not as a political project.

This project of a *reversal* of state priorities from LWS to SYS would arguably run into a massive legitimation crisis, which would arise, paradoxically perhaps, precisely *because* of the new priority's normative superiority. While not to live at the expense of other people, species or generations is an incontrovertible moral proposal, it would contradict the modern state's inherent logic of drawing its institutional stability from practices of living at the expense of the outside world. The belief in a reversal of this logic simply by force of the construction of a counter-hegemonic common sense may turn out to fall short of a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that stabilise social order.

The 'passive legitimacy' of the modern state

Elsewhere, I outlined what I believe to be some of the key mechanisms of societal self-stabilisation under the name of *passive legitimacy* (Hausknost, 2023). While active legitimation refers to activities that justify acts of power or institutional order, passive legitimation results from strategies to *avoid* the very need for active legitimation. Where active legitimation reacts to problematisations of entities (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), the aim of passive legitimacy is 'the absence of questions about or challenges to an entity' (Tost, 2011, p 692). An institutional order remains stable to the extent that it manages to exempt large parts of social reality from the need for active legitimation, that is, to render the very question of legitimacy as much as possible a 'muted issue' (Conolly 1984, p 3) that is not relevant to everyday political life. To apply an astrophysical metaphor, passive legitimacy is like the invisible 'dark matter' that constitutes the largest part of the universe and without which the cohesion of galaxies cannot be explained (Hausknost, 2023). The key to understanding social order, according to this view, is to understand the mechanisms through which the need for active legitimation is effectively confined.

There are three such key mechanisms: *reification*, *exclusion* and *performance*. Reification refers to the ability of an institutional order to externalise the production of social reality, that is, to separate the locus of institutionalised power from the sphere from which the facts of reality are perceived to emerge. In distinction from the Marxist tradition, where reification has a

normative implication in terms of making something virtual appear real at the expense of a deeper layer of reality that is hidden (like in 'commodity fetishism'), the social–constructivist reading of the term makes no such ontological claims but focuses on its ordering function: it simply refers to the construction of a source of facticity that is situated outside the institutional order and therefore outside the controvertible sphere of *wilfulness*. For Berger and Luckmann (1966), reification is an indispensable feature of *any* social order in that it renders certain strata of humanly constructed social reality an 'inert facticity' (1966, p 89) that hides their constructed character. That way, it 'immunizes' (Berger, 1967, p 87) the institutional order from its own contingency and thus from constant problematisation. The key stabilising function of reification is thus that institutionalised (political) power is not perceived as the *source* of reality, but as a *reactive medium* that administrates a reality that is exogenously given. Historically, the most effective mechanism of reification has been the construction of a divine and thus supra–human source of reality that renders secular power its mere executive agency (Berger, 1967). Throughout modernity, however, a comparably effective mode of reification could only be achieved through capitalist market relations. Through the eclipsing of social causality in the price mechanism and the subjection even of labour, land and money (Polanyi, 1944) to the logic of commodification, capitalism is able to create an epistemically separated source of reality that functions as a sphere of coercive facticity in relation to which the political sphere of institutional power is positioned as a managerial, reactive and administrative medium. Reality is not generated in parliaments, but parliaments have the function to administer a reality that is perceived as emerging from an exogenous black box. The secret of liberal statecraft is never to jeopardise this separation of reality into a generative (exogenous) and an administrative (endogenous) sphere that shields the institutional order from the need of active legitimation. Whatever crisis there may be, let it be perceived as an exogenous reality against which the political realm offers protection; conversely, never let the political sphere be perceived as the causal origin of a problematic reality!

As a source of passive legitimacy, however, reification rarely works alone. Exclusion is a second powerful mechanism. It refers to the delimitation of the range of individuals in relation to whom active legitimation is required. The smaller the group of people in front of whom a reality must be justified in the first place, the smaller the risk of profound discord. Typically, the main instrument of exclusion is the limitation of citizenship. Slavery is perhaps the most drastic example. The majority of individuals living within the confines of ancient democratic Athens, for instance, were slaves to whom burdensome and unpleasant labour was downloaded without granting them the possibility of holding those powers accountable that determined their fate (Anderson, 1974). Limiting citizenship of the 'demos' to male

Athens-born individuals with a certain pedigree had the clear stabilising function of confining the very scope of contention within the democratic order to such issues that were relevant to the privileged few: warfare and external affairs as well as economic planning and legal issues. Modern mass democracies, of course, have other ways of excluding relevant individuals (and non-human species) who do the 'dirty work' for the citizens or who suffer the consequences of their privileged lives – primarily through the limitation of citizenship to populations within spatially defined boundaries. Our 'slaves' live in distant lands, or they live as immigrants in our midst, or they are non-human species to which we download the 'externalities' of our highly entropic lifestyles (Brand and Wissen, 2021; Valdez, 2023). While exclusion in the eco-social literature mainly figures in its normative guise as a matter of injustice, the social-constructivist perspective is interested primarily in its function for societal stabilisation. Institutionally, its main function consists in the separation of the realm of *politics* proper from the realm of *ethics*. While those *included* in terms of possessing political citizenship are in the position to advocate for their own interests, those *excluded* depend on a proxy at the inside for their interests to be represented. For example, the interests of workers in France or Germany can be represented by their own organisations and parties within their respective polities, while the interests of child labourers in Bangladesh or smallholders in Peru, who supply German and French workers with cheap clothes and coffee, can only be represented in Germany or France through NGOs or parties that (purport to) speak in their names. Put differently, while the interests of the former can be translated directly into *political power* in representative institutions, the interests of the latter can be translated only into *moral pleas* to constrain ourselves in favour of the institutionally absent and unrepresented. The excluded lack power by definition. That way, universalist demands (for example, concerning the self-limitation of the included to a corridor of material prosperity in the name of global justice) are necessarily relegated from the register of politics to that of ethics.

The third dimension of passive legitimacy concerns the performance of the institutional order. The logic here is simply that as long as institutional power is perceived to deliver certain highly regarded goods and services, there will be fewer inconvenient questions and challenges that problematise that power. For example, as long as a government provides for job security, consumer choice, affordable housing and public health services, certain questions about the ways in which or at whose expense these goods have been produced will have less political salience and probably only concern an intellectual minority. Political sociology since Max Weber (2019) has analysed the performance of political power as a prerequisite to muting unpleasant questions regarding the legitimacy of authority. While performance may be the mode of passive legitimation that is most amenable to the eco-social

literature and its approach to provide for a strong 'floor' or lower boundary in terms of needs satisfaction, one should not forget that historically the performance of welfare states has been intimately tied to mechanisms of exclusion in terms of imperialism, the global appropriation of labour and resources and the downloading of externalities into global commons (confer Koch, 2022a). Severing this structural tie between performance and exclusion may undermine the state's ability to perform at the required level.

From this perspective, the problem now is that as a project designed to satisfy universalist normative objectives, the eco-social state would arguably have to relinquish critical capacities of passive legitimation that prevalent liberal capitalist states standardly rely on. Firstly, it would have to roll back the reifying properties of the market, as it would need to make collective decisions on many questions of production and consumption that would affect prices and consumer choice. Thus, governments would be perceived as directly accountable for many socio-economic facts that were hitherto generated exogenously in the global market system. Secondly, the eco-social state would not be able to rely substantially on exclusion anymore as its very purpose is to organise *internal* (lifeworld) reality according to principles of *global* (systemic) sustainability and justice. This would mean that externalised burdens and ills would have to be politically internalised and – for lack of reification – accounted for. The abdication of exclusion would, thirdly, affect the state's performative capacities, which would weigh all the heavier in a situation where this lack of performance cannot be compensated by a higher level of reification. Although it may be possible for an eco-social state to provide certain basic need satisfiers within planetary boundaries, it is unlikely that the level and quality of these satisfiers would satisfy the demands of contemporary industrial citizenries. It is likely that any such 'floor' would instead be perceived as a regression towards more basic standards of provisioning for which political authorities would be directly accountable.

In sum, the eco-social state would need to actively legitimise a much larger share of social reality, while at the same time faring worse in terms of performance. Through its prioritising of SYS over LWS, it would arguably lose much of its passive legitimacy and in turn enter a legitimation crisis as social reality would be perceived as politically created (instead of externally given) to a very large extent. The pressure to actively justify a plethora of social facts that are variously perceived as problematic and liberty-constraining would possibly overburden the capacity of the state to secure institutional stability.

Conclusion

The social-constructivist perspective on the eco-social state may be a sobering one as it dims the hope for an eco-social counter-hegemony that

thrives on normative persuasiveness and successful social struggle. Against the view of the state as the material condensation of social forces (Poulantzas, 2014), the concept of passive legitimacy provides an explanatory framework for the functional conditions under which an order akin to hegemony can emerge. None of these conditions is particularly favourable to the eco-social project.

By way of conclusion, however, I would like to sketch one or two scenarios in which a transformation towards an eco-social state may be feasible after all, albeit at a cost. The first scenario builds on a dynamic progress of the planetary crisis. To the extent that climate crisis and ecological collapse begin to invade the lifeworld of industrialised societies, the public may expect the state to manage that crisis and to halt the rapid decay of their lifeworld. This is a complicated situation for the state as expectations will not be homogenous and probably not fully in line with the normative requirements of the eco-social state. On one hand, governments may perceive an increasing mandate to build the 'floor' of sustainable welfare, that is, to 'decommodify' some systems of provision and to provide for social security and perhaps for some universal basic services. In a situation of an ever more tangible climate crisis 'at home', governments may even see scope for the introduction of some upper limits to excess consumption in terms of 'emergency measures'. However, the pressure will also rise for governments to ramp up certain forms of exclusion within that dynamic, as the public may not be willing to share scarce resources like water with neighbouring countries or to relinquish an already threatened standard of living for the sake of global justice. Also, there might be an increasing temptation to apply stronger forms of domestic exclusion, that is, to define who gets to be *above* the 'floor' and who is pushed *underneath*. Ultimately, an eco-social state emerging in a dynamic reaction to climate emergency may well develop frightening similarities to an eco-fascist state. It is impossible to tell *ex ante* if a democratic mode of governance could be sustained under conditions of an accelerating climate crisis that undermines socio-economic stability.

Democracy, and deliberative democracy in particular, is a key normative feature in all visions of the eco-social state (Koch, 2022b; Bärnthaler, 2024). Another – and arguably less likely – scenario would thus be the emergence of a novel type of democracy that is functionally adapted to the challenges of the eco-social transformation rather than to the administration of a growing capitalist economy. If the functional premises of passive legitimacy are accepted, then a transformative type of democracy would have to rely less on representation and more on direct forms of decision making, perhaps in combination with deliberative instruments. This is because representative institutions are coming under enormous legitimation pressure when being perceived as the source of unpalatable facts like high prices or scarce goods,

whereas a direct decision by the public does not lead to a legitimation problem for the institutional order. The same caveat as above also applies to this scenario, however: there is no guarantee (perhaps not even a great likelihood) that democratic decisions would go in the direction of the eco-social normative aspirations; the temptation for many citizens to revert to modes of exclusion that secure their own standard of living at the expense of others may be too high and democracy may be used not to realise universalist human aspirations but particularistic and national objectives. This does not rule out the emergence of some features of the eco-social state as outlined in the literature, but it may be selective features that focus more on establishing the floor than observing the ceiling for the citizens of the new state.

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