



Environmental Politics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fenp20>

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Version of record first published: 13 Feb 2013.

To cite this article: Ingolfur Blühdorn (2013): The governance of unsustainability: ecology and democracy after the post-democratic turn, *Environmental Politics*, 22:1, 16-36

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2013.755005>

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The governance of unsustainability: ecology and democracy after the post-democratic turn

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Starting from the diagnosis of a profound reconfiguration since the second half of the 1980s of the normative foundations of contemporary eco-political discourses, the *theory of post-ecologist politics* has conceptualised eco-politics in advanced modern consumer societies as the *politics of unsustainability*. How the politics of unsustainability is organised and executed in practical terms is explored and the theory of post-ecologist politics is extended to suggest that, in the wake of a modernisation-induced *post-democratic turn*, democratic values and the innovative modes of decentralised, participatory government which, up to the present, are widely hailed as the key towards a genuinely legitimate, effective and efficient environmental policy are metamorphosing into tools for managing the condition of sustained ecological and social unsustainability. Analysis of this *governance of unsustainability* reveals a new twist in the notoriously difficult relationship between democracy and ecology.

Keywords: post-ecologism; post-democracy; politics of unsustainability; politics of simulation; governance

Introduction

Since the late 1980s, affluent post-industrial consumer societies have experienced a modernisation-induced value- and culture-shift which has reconfigured the normative frame of reference for ecological communication and eco-political practice in a way that essentially precludes the realisation of ecologist values and the transition of these societies towards sustainability. This is the core hypothesis of the *theory of post-ecologist politics* (e.g. Blühdorn 1997, 2000) which comprises, firstly, the theory of the *post-ecologist turn* (e.g. Blühdorn 2002, 2004) and, secondly, that of the *politics of unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2007a, 2011, Blühdorn and Welsh 2007). The theory of post-ecologist politics – aspects of which have been presented in this journal at various stages of its development – does not promote any specific ecological values or engage in political campaigns. Adopting a descriptive-analytical approach and exploring contemporary

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eco-politics from a social-theoretical perspective, it aims, first and foremost, to explain why the tireless efforts of activist movements, eco-political intellectuals, Green parties, academic sustainability research, technological innovators and government agencies from the local to the global level have so far failed to fundamentally alter the developmental trajectory of advanced modern societies. And based on its analysis of the socio-cultural norms which determine the way in which eco-political issues are being framed and addressed in these societies, it also suggests that the prospects of such efforts effecting any radical change in the foreseeable future are rather unfavourable.

Some ecologically committed commentators have rejected the theory of post-ecologist politics as politically disabling and a counsel of despair. They have castigated it for downplaying the achievements of techno-managerial efficiency innovation and ignoring the indicators for, as some believe, noticeable value and culture changes towards more sustainable lifestyles. They have criticised it for making romanticising assumptions about an alleged *golden age* of ecologism, for providing insufficient empirical evidence for its claims about a post-ecologist turn and for overlooking that modern citizens do not themselves *want* to become post-ecologist but are *brainwashed* and *forced* into post-ecologism by the consumer industry, corporate interests and the neoliberal state (e.g. Barry 2004, 2012, Hausknost 2008, Humphrey 2009). Others, who have made a more rigorous distinction between eco-political campaigning and socio-political analysis, have found the theory a powerful tool for the critical investigation of a broad array of eco-political issues (e.g. MacKenzie 2003, Newig 2007, Petersen 2007, Saarikoski 2007, Death 2010, 2011, Teräsväinen 2010, 2012, Zeyer and Roth 2013). In any case, the model has firmly established itself as a common point of reference in eco-political debates and has also been taken up in a variety of academic disciplines beyond environmental sociology such as environmental education research (e.g. Nikel and Reid 2006, Læssøe 2010), literary studies (e.g. Clark 2010) and mainstream political studies (e.g. Walter 2010, Bull 2010, 2011, Barnickel *et al.* 2012).

However, being, as it is, a critical extension of the theories of modernisation-induced value change proposed, *inter alia*, by Ronald Inglehart (1977, 1997, Inglehart and Welzel 2005), the theory of post-ecologist politics has so far remained incomplete in that it has given little attention to the second important dimension of Inglehart's *silent revolution*: democratic values. After all, Inglehart had suggested that in the early post-industrial societies of the 1970s environmental values, concerns and demands came to the fore as part of a much more comprehensive shift in popular value priorities. In fact, the *post-materialist* value orientations he was talking about were, first and foremost, emancipatory, self-expressive and elite-challenging values, i.e. they related to the *democratisation* of post-industrial societies much more directly than their *ecologisation* (Inglehart 2007). Therefore, it is to be expected that the further modernisation-induced value-shift claimed by the theory of post-ecologist politics has also reconfigured democratic values: the assumed *post-ecologist turn* will most probably have a *post-democratic*

counterpart. The recent debate on the ‘erosion’, ‘crisis’, ‘death’ or even ‘hatred’ of democracy (e.g. Rancière 2006, Greven 2009, Keane 2009) and on the rise of ‘post-democracy’ (e.g. Rancière 1996, Wolin 2001, Crouch 2004, Blühdorn 2013) suggests that such a reconfiguration of democratic values has indeed taken place. And closer analysis of this *post-democratic turn* can, arguably, provide important insights into how the politics of unsustainability works in practical terms.

To rethink the widely perceived *crisis* or at least *transformation* of democracy from the perspective of the theory of post-ecologist politics and to investigate the changing relationship between ecology and democracy are the objectives of this article. Its core argument is that in advanced modern consumer societies a modernisation-induced reconfiguration of democratic norms has fostered a new *governmentality*¹ which refashions democracy and the decentralised, participatory modes of civic self-rule that had once been the very core of the social movements’ eco-democratic project into a tool for governing the condition of sustained unsustainability. The next section briefly restates the ideas of the post-ecologist turn and the politics of unsustainability. Working towards a critical reconceptualisation of the relationship between democracy and ecology the third section then reviews both the great confidence that is widely invested in participatory procedures and the mounting concerns about the eco-political failure of democratic structures. The fourth and fifth sections spell out how the reconfiguration of democratic norms in contemporary consumer societies rearranges the relationship between ecology and democracy. They suggest that the *post-democratic turn* fosters a new governmentality that mobilises democratic values and redeploys decentralised, stakeholder-engaging forms of governance as a tool for legitimising and stabilising the politics of unsustainability.

Post-ecologism and the politics of unsustainability

The theory of post-ecologist politics proceeds from the assumption that although environmental movements in Europe and the United States have always comprised a variety of different currents and have blended seamlessly into a range of other social movements, the environmental movement(s) of the 1970s and early 1980s shared a common theme, a common underlying experience, which was a diffuse but profound disenchantment with industrial modernity. They were powered by a more or less explicit concern that modern industrial societies had reached a critical point in their evolution at which an economic, an ecological, a political, a social and a cultural crisis all coincided to necessitate a fundamental rethink of further societal development. This profound unease with industrial modernity was articulated most explicitly by radical political ecologists who mobilised the Marxist and post-Marxist inventory of critical thought for their conceptualisation and explanation of the multiple crisis. But the intuition that (post)industrial consumer societies were in social as well as ecological terms deeply alienating, destructive and heading for catastrophe underpinned also the wide range of much more moderate movements. Indeed this intuition of ‘a crisis

of culture in the broadest sense' (Eckersley 1992, p. 19) resonated well beyond the social movement sector for it echoed the much older critique of the *pathologies of modernity* which, ever since Rousseau, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, had been discussed by both the progressive-emancipatory left as well as the bourgeois-conservative right.

Thus, what the theory of post-ecologist politics conceptualises as the *ecologist* critique is, firstly, much more than a purely *environment*-related critique of modern society and, secondly, by no means exclusive to those radical pockets of social movement activity which Andrew Dobson (2007), for example, labels *ecologist*. It was powerfully expressed, in varying shades, in the writings of Barry Commoner (1971), *The Ecologist* (1972), the German Green Party (Die Grünen 1980), Jonathon Porritt (1984) and many others. This ecologist critique was complemented by the vision of, and desire for, a comprehensively different society (and modernity), featuring very different economic structures, social relations, forms of politics, attitudes towards nature and facilitating, overall, a much more self-determined and fulfilling way of life. Once again, political ecologists were most radical and explicit when it came to outlining what exactly such an alternative society might look like, yet the diffuse belief in a much better alternative to the established order was shared in the social movements at large and was part of the 1970s' and 1980s' *Zeitgeist* well beyond the social movement sector. Up to the present both this ecologist critique and the ecologist vision are echoed in the discourses of sustainability, in campaigns such as the *Occupy*-movement, in the new debates about slow-growth or no-growth, and in the narratives of *alternative hedonism*, *slow food* or *transition towns*.

This said, the theory of post-ecologist politics holds that since the late 1980s the normative foundations of eco-political communication have comprehensively changed. It suggests that in contemporary capitalist consumer democracies both the ecologist critique of modernity and the ecologist belief in a comprehensively different society have become largely exhausted. This exhaustion of the ecologist belief system is, arguably, due to a comprehensive value- and culture-shift, the *post-ecologist turn*, triggered, *inter alia*, by: the gradual normalisation of the environmental crisis; the depoliticisation of the ecologist critique and the techno-managerial reframing of environmental issues within the paradigm of *ecological modernisation*; the diversification – and thus relative weakening – of eco-political values and imperatives; and the becoming prevalent of ideals of identity, self-determination and self-realisation. These ideals are profoundly incompatible with the norms underpinning ecologist thinking in that they are: to an unprecedented extent based on ever accelerated consumption; highly complex, flexible and open to internal contradiction in way that is incompatible with any notion of *ecological virtues* or an *ethics of ecological duty or responsibility*; and inherently anti-egalitarian and exclusive, and therefore represent a permanent source of social conflict.²

Thus, a profound value- and culture-shift has considerably weakened the societal appeal and political impact of the ecologist critique and vision. The

normative frame of reference of ecological communication has comprehensively changed. Of course, there has never been a time when all environmentalists and society at large were jointly preparing the ecologist overthrow of consumer capitalism. Nor has radical ecologist thinking in contemporary consumer societies entirely disappeared. But the theory of post-ecologist politics suggest that, borrowing Andrew Dobson's words, 'a technological, affluent, service society' is indeed more than ever 'a fair description of the twenty-first-century political aspiration to which most people would probably subscribe' (Dobson 2007, p. 5). Scientific-technological-industrial modernity and its urban, consumerist lifestyles have been more firmly embraced than ever before. Accordingly, the ecologist critique of modernity has ever less resonance, and the ecologist visions of an entirely different socio-economic order retain little of their earlier attractiveness. On the contrary, in contemporary consumer societies, the ever expanding needs in terms of, for example, mobility, technology or shopping opportunities have become essentially non-negotiable. Prevalent notions of *well-being* and *quality of life* demand that ways *must* be found to meet them.

At the same time, however, an unprecedented level of awareness of the multiple sustainability crisis is also constitutive of contemporary eco-political communication. Public debates on private as well as public debt, climate change, peak oil, economic standstill, social inequality or the *broken society* provide evidence just how deeply the recognition of a profound unsustainability crisis has penetrated mainstream societal discourse. Arguably, the urgency of a radical culture change and structural transformation of modern capitalist consumer society – if major ecological and social disaster is to be avoided – has never been as widely accepted. However, despite continuously reiterated declarations to the contrary, this does not soften the adamant resolve to defend the established value-preferences, lifestyles, aspirations and socio-economic structures. The theory of post-ecologist politics conceptualises this peculiar simultaneity of incompatible commitments as the *post-ecologist paradox*. This paradox is a phenomenon specific to advanced consumer democracies where scientific research has accumulated unprecedented knowledge about environmental change and where several decades of environmental campaigning have established an unprecedented societal awareness of the multiple sustainability crisis, but where the value- and culture-shift outlined above effectively blocks the political will and ability to initiate commensurate change.

As the resolve to sustain, at least for the time being, what is widely recognised as unsustainable is the central characteristic that distinguishes contemporary eco-politics from earlier phases, the theory of post-ecologist politics conceptualises eco-politics in advanced post-industrial societies as the *politics of unsustainability*. Whatever its declared commitments, this politics of unsustainability is no longer powered by the ecologist attempt to change individual lifestyles and societal structures in such a way that environmental integrity may be sustained and ecologist visions of authentic social well-being achieved. Instead, its primary concern is to manage the inevitable consequences, social and ecological, of the resolve to sustain the established order. Rather than trying

to suspend or even reverse the prevailing logic of unsustainability, its main pre-occupation is to promote societal *adaptation* and *resilience* to sustained unsustainability. In putting the spotlight on this tacit shift of priorities, the theory of post-ecologist politics calls to mind that there is a third scenario between the commonly juxtaposed alternatives of ecological and social collapse, on the one hand, and ecological and social sustainability, on the other. At the same time it calls to mind that as long as eco-political research does not engage in exploring this third scenario, i.e. the mechanisms by which conditions of unsustainability are being sustained and their social and ecological implications managed, it remains one-dimensional – and indeed very ideological.

For their politics of unsustainability, so the theory of post-ecologist politics suggests, advanced post-industrial societies are relying, in particular, on strategies of *simulation*. These strategies entail the production and maintenance of societal self-descriptions in which modern societies portray themselves as having fully recognised the seriousness and urgency of the sustainability crisis, as having a clear understanding of what remedial action is required and as commanding the political will and ability to implement it. These societal self-descriptions provide reassurance that the problem is taken seriously, that it is being researched and addressed with all available expertise, and that appropriate counter-strategies are being pursued with undivided determination. They create discursive spaces in which individuals, collective actors and society at large can present and experience themselves as ecologically virtuous and committed without compromising the post-ecologist value preferences which condition their thinking and behaviour otherwise. These narratives of reassurance include, for example, the above-mentioned stories of ecological modernisation and the Green New Deal, the story that a ‘science of sustainability’ can ‘provide the rock-solid foundations upon which the structures of sustainable development’ can then be raised (Porritt 2006, p. 21), the narrative of *political consumerism* rendering post-industrial consumer capitalism socially and ecologically benign (e.g. Aburdene 2007, Green and Bishop 2011), or the story that new cultures of ‘alternative hedonism’ (Soper 2008) are already emerging, and internationalising social movements will help to spread them across the globe.³

Individually and collectively these narratives all perform the theoretical possibility and the practical determination to suspend and reverse the logic of unsustainability. Their construction and maintenance engages a wide range of actors from all levels of government, civil society, science, the private sector and so forth. Public institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Green parties, academic researchers, international bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), businesses and consumers all entertain a shared interest in providing evidence that they have fully recognised the problem and are committedly working towards its solution. Given the dilemmas of the post-ecologist paradox, there is a huge societal demand for such narratives and much willingness to engage in their (re)production. In contrast to political practices which, following Edelman (1964, 1971), are

commonly described and criticised as *symbolic politics*, the post-ecologist politics of simulation, therefore, has a strangely inclusive and participatory quality.⁴ This inspires the term *governance of unsustainability* (Blühdorn 2011, pp. 43–55).⁵ The concept suggests a link between participatory, decentralised modes of policymaking and the agenda of sustaining unsustainability that challenges established assumptions about the connection between democracy and ecology. This link will now be investigated more closely, firstly by recalling that the relationship between ecology and democracy has, in fact, always been much more ambivalent than democratically committed environmentalists might like to admit, and secondly by exploring how the modernisation-induced reconfiguration of participatory-democratic values impacts on the democracy-ecology connection.

Democracy and sustainability

Since the post-materialist value shift of the 1970s which, according to Inglehart (1977, 1997, 2007), underpinned the new social movements' emancipatory project, environmental and democratic values are widely regarded as inseparably connected to each other. For the social movements, the proponents of political ecology and the emerging Green parties the struggle for environmental integrity and that for authentic democracy were indeed just two sides of the same coin. Both campaigns centred on the ideal of freedom and *autonomy* (e.g. Eckersley 1996), i.e. on the full *subject*-status that was to be granted to modern citizens as well as nature. Moreover, the lack of democratic self-determination and the subjugation of citizens' authentic needs and identities were perceived as the primary cause of the environmental crisis. Accordingly, a radical shift of power from the representatives of the established order towards those who had so far remained largely excluded from the political process seemed not only a democratic but also an ecological necessity.

Already in the 1980s, however, radical democracy and democratisation lost in relative significance as an eco-political instrument. With the rise of *ecological modernisation* as the dominant eco-political paradigm, scientific experts, innovative efficiency-technologies, the regulating state and market mechanisms gained importance as the central pillars of successful environmental policy. Yet, for all their undeniable achievements, the depoliticised, techno-managerial policy approaches of ecological modernisation have never delivered anything like the profound structural transformations which are required for sustainability. Hence, democracy and democratisation have recently once again shifted into the focus of attention. Leggewie and Welzer (2009, p. 136), for example, posit that the dysfunctional politics of the established policy networks can be corrected only if the political sovereign 'powerfully brings them to accountability'. Hamilton (2010, p. 223) asserts: 'The climate crisis is upon us because democracy has been corrupted'. In his view, 'reclaiming democracy for the citizenry' is the only way to mitigate the effects of climate change and 'ensure that the

wealthy and powerful cannot protect their own interests at the expense of the rest'. The German Greens recently reconfirmed: 'Only with democracy can we tackle the big questions of the future' (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2011, p. 15); 'democracy is the only appropriate way to achieve good solutions' for the problems confronting post-industrial consumer societies (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2011, p. 16). Accordingly, they see a new 'campaign for democratisation' (*Demokratieoffensive*) as 'the key to the multiple challenges' of the sustainability crisis (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen 2011, p. 17).

Whilst the implicit criticism of the prevalent techno-managerial approaches to eco-politics is perfectly justified, this new enthusiasm for grass-roots democratic approaches seems strangely unconcerned about the eco-political limitations of democracy which some had highlighted already in the early 1970s (e.g. Ehrlich 1971, Heilbroner 1974, Ophuls 1977). Also, the new proponents of democratisation strategies seem curiously unreflective of the academic controversies about ecology and democracy which have been ongoing since the 1990s (e.g. Lafferty and Meadowcroft 1996, Doherty and de Geus 1996, Mathews 1996, Humphrey 2007, Shearman and Smith 2008). One of the most profound concerns about *liberal* democracy, in particular, is that the principles of individual freedom, choice and self-determined self-realisation conflict with the ecologist belief in categorical environmental imperatives (e.g. Plumwood 1996, Westra 1998). Closely related is that democracy regards all norms as negotiable and dependent on political legitimation – which is incompatible with the ecologist belief in the intrinsic value of nature, the assertion of non-negotiable ecological necessities and supposedly pre-political notions of human needs and a fulfilled life (e.g. Ophuls 1977, pp. 7–8). Furthermore, democracy is, 'however contested a concept, . . . if nothing else, anthropocentric' (Dryzek 2000, p. 147). Its abilities to represent future generations, non-human species and everything else that has no political voice are very limited. Also, as already Plato and Aristotle had pointed out, democracy has a strong fixation on the present; it tends to prioritise the interests of today and is structurally inclined to discount those of tomorrow (cf. Kielmansegg 2003). Its interest group politics, Plumwood (1996, p. 142) and many others have noted, 'cannot create stable measures for the protection of nature and is unable to recognise that nature is not just another interest group . . . , but the condition for all our interests'. Moreover, when it comes to the need for fast and decisive action, democracies are hampered by their time- and resource-consuming procedures.

All these concerns had been articulated by eco-political sceptics of democracy very early on. They took authors like Paul Ehrlich (1971) or Robert Heilbroner (1974) into eco-authoritarian terrains. In 1975 Wolfgang Harich (1975, p. 8) considered a 'strong, rigorous allocation state', an 'ascetic distributive state', as the only way out of the looming environmental crisis. William Ophuls (1977, p. 159) believed that this crisis 'may require the sacrifice of equality and majority rule' and that 'democracy *must* give way to elite rule'. Hans Jonas suggested that democracy 'is at least temporarily unsuited' and that

‘a well-intentioned, well-informed tyranny’ might be the most promising solution (Jonas 1984, pp. 151, 147). Radical environmental movements have always challenged such elite-centred approaches insisting that ‘when citizens are actively involved in ... open and multi-level social discussions on the overall reduction of consumption levels and the value of earth-friendly lifestyles, they will recognize the advantages of a different attitude towards wasting resources and treating nature with greater care’ (de Geus 2004, p. 96). Even those who conceded that ‘there is no logically and conceptually necessary connection between democracy and environmentalism’ still believed that ‘there is a better *fit* between environmentalism and democracy than between environmentalism and anti-democratic authoritarianism’ (Ball 2006, p. 131). Yet, in contemporary internationalised and hyper-complex consumer societies, it is more difficult than ever to deny the eco-political ‘failure of liberal democracy’ (Westra 1998, pp. 53–80, Plumwood 1996, Shearman and Smith 2008).

Hence, in the late 1990s Laura Westra (1998, pp. 198–199), for example, re-activated the idea of a global regulatory authority implementing targets set by an ecological expert committee. More recently, Giddens (2009, p. 5) demanded stronger reliance on an ‘active interventionist state’ as the all-important eco-political actor. He explicitly calls for the depoliticisation of climate policy which, he argues, should be institutionalised in a way that is separated from party political competition (Giddens 2009, p. 7, pp. 113–114). Giddens (2009, p. 56) suggests that the new social movements’ commitment to participatory democracy is ecologically counter-productive. Instead, he advocates centralised planning (Giddens 2009, pp. 91–128) and an ‘ensuring state’ which can guarantee delivery of substantive policy results (Giddens 2009, pp. 7–8). More explicitly, still, Shearman and Smith (2008, p. 121) demand that environmentalists end their ‘love affair with democracy’. In a neo-survivalist manner they propose an ‘intensive care management government’ (Shearman and Smith 2008, p. 136) modelled on the ‘authoritarian management structures ... of a hospital’s intensive care unit’ (Shearman and Smith 2008, p. 135). Like Westra, they believe that ‘not liberal capitalism’, but ‘democracy itself’ is the problem (Shearman and Smith 2008, p. 4). And like her, they suggest ‘a Platonic form of authoritarianism based upon the rule of scientific experts’ (Shearman and Smith 2008, p. 2).

None of these authors explain in any detail how their envisaged expertocracy is supposed to be institutionalised, how it may obtain and sustain political authority, how it will acquire and stabilise its noble commitment to ‘working for humanity without fear or favor’ (Shearman and Smith 2008, p. 136), how it may confront the modern predicament of radical uncertainty, or how it will overcome barriers to effective policymaking such as the fragmented nature of the international community. In short, none of those favouring non-democratic policy approaches to the tightening sustainability crisis provide plausible reasons to believe that their strategies will really be more effective. Yet, it is also evident that, borrowing Humphrey’s (2007, p. 83) words, ‘the positing of a necessary relationship between green politics and liberal democracy ... constitutes an

example of wishful thinking on the part of ecological political theorists' and their activist counterparts. Indeed, as this brief review illustrates, the relationship between ecology and democracy has always been much more problematic than the politically comfortable mainstream narrative of their inseparability suggests. In advanced post-industrial consumer societies, a critical re-investigation of the ecology–democracy nexus is more urgent than ever. A key parameter in any reconceptualisation of this relationship must be that the ongoing process of modernisation has reconfigured not only ecological values but democratic values as well.

The post-democratic turn and simulative democracy

Building on Lipset's (1960) suggestion that economic development is conducive to the establishment and deepening of democratic structures, Inglehart and many others argued that the ongoing process of modernisation makes 'democracy increasingly likely to emerge where it does not yet exist, and to become stronger and more direct where it already exists' (Inglehart and Welzel 2005, p. 15). The 'emancipatory impulse' (Inglehart and Welzel 2005, p. 21) – the steady rise of elite-challenging and self-expressive values – is believed to render even well-established democracies ever more responsive to citizens' interest and more participatory in terms of their governance structures. However, whilst the new social movements since the 1970s and 1980s have undoubtedly achieved a considerable democratisation of established democratic systems, recent concerns about the 'crisis of democracy' and the rise of neo-authoritarian 'post-democracy' (e.g. Putnam 2000, Wolin 2001, Crouch 2004) provide evidence that Inglehart's analysis has tight limitations. The relationship he stipulates between modernisation and democratisation applies only to a certain point beyond which the further process of modernisation, rather than improving the prospects for further democratisation, impoverishes them, or at least triggers a profound redefinition of democracy.

This is because in a number of respects modern representative democracy as well as idealist visions of a more radical and *authentic* democracy are based on assumptions and resources (e.g. the modernist norm of the *autonomous identical individual*; the existence of an externally demarcated and internally homogenous *demos*; the ability to negotiate and articulate a general will and common good) which democratic systems cannot themselves (re)produce, but at which the ongoing process of modernisation is continuously chipping away (cf. Greven 2009). Most importantly, perhaps, the process of modernisation and the 'emancipative impulse' Inglehart is referring to do not leave the very core of the democratic project – the modernist norm of the *autonomous identical subject* – unaffected. The changing patterns by which modern individuals articulate and realise their subjectivity and identity have already been touched upon above. In the present context, the crucial aspect of the ongoing modernisation of subjectivity and identity is their progressive differentiation, fragmentation, liquefaction

and eventually perhaps liquidation. In line with Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) paradigm of *liquid modernity*, this ongoing transformation might be described as the rise of *liquid identity*. This oxymoron aims to capture that in advanced modern societies the bourgeois-modernist ideal of a unitary, stable identity which supposedly evolves and matures throughout a person's lifetime has been superseded – or at least supplemented – by the intrinsically contradictory ideal of a multiple, fragmented and flexible identity.

In line with the tradition of critical theory, this change in the prevalent ideals of subjectivity and identity has been described as the 'corrosion of character' (Sennett 1998). Yet, taking into account its emancipatory drivers and potentials, this ongoing cultural shift can also be framed in terms of the *second-order* or *reflexive* emancipation from earlier ideals of subjectivity and identity which under contemporary conditions of complexity, uncertainty, competition and consumerism have become counter-productive and a burden. Inglehart's analysis does not account for this reflexive twist of the 'emancipative impulse'. Yet, for contemporary democracy this reflexive emancipation from the traditionally modern ideal of the subject has profound implications: it initiates what might be called a *post-democratic turn* implying, firstly, that democratic categories such as participation, representation and legitimacy need to be comprehensively redefined (cf. Blühdorn 2013, ch. 4). Secondly, the notion of the post-democratic turn raises the question to what extent democratic norms are at all still desirable for contemporary individuals. After all, democracy has never been a purpose in itself. It has always been a tool for the realisation of the specifically modernist notion of the subject.⁶ Yet, if in the wake of modernisation-induced, second-order emancipation the established understandings of subjectivity and identity are being revised, it cannot simply be assumed that modern liberal democracy – let alone the grass-roots democratic visions of the new social movements – is still an appropriate strategic tool. Quite the contrary, such norms and structures might easily appear distinctly unappealing. Not only do the plethora of seductive opportunities for self-realisation, the frantic struggle against mounting uncertainties and the management of increasingly complex personal lifestyles reduce the time and energy available for democratic participation and social responsibility. More importantly, many of the most urgent problems in advanced modern societies – and conditions of personal self-realisation – can, it seems, be addressed more effectively in non-democratic ways: stimulating the economy, generating and securing jobs, providing affordable consumer goods, consolidating public finances, securing access to important natural resources, mitigating climate change, protecting biodiversity, and so forth. Furthermore, at a time when the economic, ecological and social limits to growth have become more evident and uncontested than ever before, whilst the prevalent forms of self-determination and self-realisation are more firmly than ever based on steadily expanding and accelerating consumption, the egalitarian and redistributive values of democracy are turning into a serious problem. The resolute dismantling in most established democracies of the redistributive welfare state, the advancement of the principle of liberty vis-à-vis that of equality or the de facto suspension of

democratic principles in effectively bankrupt countries such as Greece or Italy provide powerful evidence that established democratic norms are increasingly perceived as a burden rather than a promise.

The notion of the post-democratic turn offers a new perspective on the much-debated crisis of democracy. Elsewhere, the term post-democracy has been used polemically in order to mobilise fresh support for the democratic project (e.g. Crouch 2004). In contrast to this, the notion of the post-democratic turn suggests that the democratic norms which Crouch and many others are aiming to revive might have become exhausted and in some sense outdated. It does not assert that there has ever been 'a romantic Golden Age of democracy when all the town hall meetings were packed, all the voting booths were overflowing, and all the citizens were above average' (Norris 2002, pp. xi, 7). But it does suggest that the normative foundations which have always underpinned mainstream notions of liberal representative democracy as well as the new social movements' vision of a *more authentically* democratic order have become questionable.⁷ Yet, in a seemingly paradoxical manner, the post-democratic turn also entails a radicalisation of democratic norms and expectations. Indeed, popular demands for political self-determination are articulated in an ever more uncompromising manner; declared commitment to democratic values continues to rise. Accordingly, it would be a gross misunderstanding to regard advanced modern societies as *anti-democratic*. Instead, the paradoxical simultaneity of two seemingly incompatible trends towards a weakening and a radicalisation of democratic expectations is a distinctive feature of democracy in advanced modern consumer societies. In analogy to the post-ecologist paradox discussed above, it may be conceptualised as the *post-democratic paradox*.

This post-democratic paradox results from the fact that, on the one hand, the ongoing process of modernisation weakens the norm of the modernist subject and thereby undermines the normative foundation of modern liberal democracy. At the same time, however, this same process further inflates the individual's claims to freedom, self-determination, self-realisation and centrality. In line with modernisation's trajectory of individualisation and subjectivisation, contemporary citizens are ever more assertive in their demands for participation, representation and government responsiveness. From the perspective of political institutions, this post-democratic paradox implies that policymaking needs to detach (emancipate) itself from the *melting* democratic subject (individual and collective), whilst at the same time it needs to maintain and even intensify the principal/agent relationship claimed in the notion of representative democracy. From the perspective of contemporary citizens, the post-democratic paradox materialises as the dilemma that, on the one hand, citizens want to conceive of themselves, and be recognised, as autonomous subjects, an end in themselves, the political principal and the democratic sovereign – which would require them to comply with the modernist norm of the identical subject – while at the same time they also want to (and must) embrace the freedom, promises and imperatives of the *opportunity society* and liberate themselves from restrictive

democratic norms so as to optimise their strategic position in liquid life and a relentlessly competitive modernity.

Thus the widely observed erosion of democracy and the rise of post-democracy are not simply, as Crouch and many others have suggested, imposed onto modern society by the 'wealthy and powerful', but in a seemingly paradoxical manner they are also the result of an emancipatory-progressive struggle. Yet, this presents advanced modern societies with the formidable challenge of having to *manage* the post-democratic paradoxes and dilemmas which, just like their post-ecologist counterparts, cannot be *resolved*. Just as in the case of contemporary eco-politics, practices of *simulation* are, arguably, the primary strategy by means of which advanced consumer democracies are doing so. Simulation, it was noted above, is about performing something, bringing to imagination and allowing some kind of experience of something that is highly desirable but does not and must not have empirical reality. (Ab)using Hanna Pitkin's (1967, p. 9) famous definition of political representation, one might say simulation is 'the making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact'. Or borrowing Jean Baudrillard's (2001, p. 170) words, simulation may be defined as the performative resuscitation of something that *no longer* exists whereby 'signs of the real' are substituted 'for the real itself'. Applied to the present context this means that in a condition where the ongoing process of modernisation has, on the one hand, exhausted the project of democracy but has, at the same time, radicalised democratic demands, practices of simulation may be said to assert, perform or make imaginable the validity of democratic values, commitments and trajectories which for contemporary individuals and society are indispensable and non-negotiable – but at the same time outdated and counter-productive.

So, *simulative democracy* is the performance of democracy beyond the post-democratic turn. It is, *inter alia*, about upholding the belief that there is political freedom and equality, about cultivating the promise that government is inspired by, and responsive to, the values and needs articulated by the demos. It is about stabilising the idea that there *is* a more or less homogenous demos which can generate and articulate something like a general will, about reassuring citizens that despite the overwhelming power of global corporations, credit rating agencies and systemic imperatives, democratically elected governments are still in control of the social order and societal development. Put in more general terms, simulative democracy is about producing narratives and arenas which respond to the *democratic needs* of contemporary citizens – but without compromising their equally powerful *non-democratic needs*. It provides societal self-descriptions which, if they can claim at least some degree of plausibility, will readily be accepted. For like in the case of simulative eco-politics, the post-democratic turn, the post-democratic paradox and its related dilemmas generate a strong societal demand for exercises of simulative democracy. As in the eco-political case, any normative critique that in advanced modern societies democracy is no more than 'an illusion' or a 'façade' (Beck 1997, pp. 136–139, Crouch 2004, p. 22, Greven 2009, p. 96)

erected to deceive the disempowered citizenry is simplistic, to say the least. It fails to recognise that after the post-democratic turn *only* practices of simulation can adequately respond to the inherently contradictory value-preferences and needs of contemporary citizens, and *only* simulative democracy can manage the dilemmas of the post-democratic paradox. It is exactly for this reason that citizens not only *passively put up with* the narratives and practices of simulative democracy, but themselves *willingly engage in* the performance of democracy.⁸

Post-ecologist governmentality

The reconceptualisation of the widely perceived *crisis of democracy* in terms of a post-democratic turn sheds a radically new light on the sustainability of democracy, both in the sense of the future prospects of democracy itself and in the sense of democracy as a contested tool for the societal transition to sustainability. With regard to the former we may at this stage conclude that, whilst Inglehart and others have argued that the ongoing (post)modernisation of contemporary consumer societies will incrementally render them ever more authentically democratic, the analysis presented here suggests that in its advanced stages the ongoing process of modernisation metamorphoses from a motor for into a threat to the democratic project – as the social movements had conceived it. Yet, despite all warnings about the crisis and erosion of democracy, there is little to suggest that its predicted ‘end’ or ‘death’ is really imminent. Democracy has time and again proven its great ‘adaptability to processes of social and political change’, and this adaptability has been said to make it ‘stronger and not weaker’ (Kaase 2007, p. 793). Indeed, the emerging forms of simulative democracy may very well prove themselves to be much stronger and more resilient than their critics might like to believe.

As regards the ability of democratic structures to organise the transition of modern consumer societies towards sustainability, the modernisation-induced value- and culture-shift outlined above suggests that in advanced modern consumer societies *more democracy*, i.e. policy approaches which are more directly determined by and responsive to prevalent citizen demands, may well imply even *less sustainability*. Second-order emancipation and the post-democratic turn shed radical doubt on the ecologist belief that a genuinely participatory and egalitarian democracy will ‘offer the best protection for nature’ (Plumwood 1996, p. 137). In the post-democratic constellation the eco-political limitations of democracy that have always been known are powerfully reinforced by new, inherently unsustainable norms of subjectivity and identity which more effectively than ever frustrate any hopes for a democratic transition to sustainability. Against this backdrop, a comprehensive rethink of the connection between democracy and ecology is overdue. More specifically, a plausible theory of contemporary ecopolitics will need to capture the relationship between democracy beyond the post-democratic turn, i.e. simulative democracy, and ecology beyond the post-ecologist turn, i.e. the politics of unsustainability. Put differently, it will need to

understand the new *governmentality* that is distinctive of the post-ecologist *cum* post-democratic constellation and that underpins the politics of unsustainability.

Significant in this regard is, *inter alia*, how in contemporary consumer societies democratic norms are being mobilised for the defence of value-preferences and lifestyle choices which are quite visibly socially exclusive and ecologically ruinous. Democracy has traditionally been regarded as progressive, emancipatory and egalitarian. It was a political vehicle for the social redistribution of power and wealth. Yet, with the cultural change described above, democracy is no longer progressive in the traditional sense but, if anything, only in the revised contemporary sense of the individualised struggle to secure an optimal strategic position for succeeding in liquid, competitive and inherently unsustainable modernity. Whilst for the rapidly growing new underclass it entails ever less of a promise, project or perspective, the still-included are claiming democracy as a tool for the stabilisation and legitimisation of lifestyles which, more visibly than ever, can be sustained only at the cost of increasing social injustice and accelerated environmental exploitation. This is powerfully illustrated, for example, by US foreign policy, which has mobilised democratic values to justify a whole series of recent military interventions that had ‘little or nothing to do with democracy, and much or everything ... with the perceived material interests of the dominant power, such as oil resources or geographical advantage’ (Keane 2009, p. 807). At the level of domestic politics, the American Tea-Party movement demonstrates how democratic values are being invoked to defend established lifestyles of unsustainability. In the name of democratic freedom, Tea-Party activists are joining force with neoliberal elites and industry-sponsored think-tanks to fight any extension of public welfare provision and to deny climate change, alarmed that it might ‘provide a rationale for the government to “intrude” everywhere, curtail consumer choice and property rights, and increase the state’s size and surveillance’ (Antonio and Brulle 2011, p. 197). In Europe, the democratic populism of the far right illustrates how democracy is metamorphosing from a progressive into a reactionary tool. Much more subtly than the far right, UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s *Big Society* project (e.g. Cameron 2010) appropriated the rhetoric of civil society and democratic empowerment to orchestrate a massive austerity programme aimed, in particular, at the bottom half of the social scale.

Already in the 1960s it had been suggested that democracy, rather than facilitating equal representation of all citizens, favours those commanding the highest level of education and income (Schattschneider 1960). In the 1970s, leftist critics of the new environmental movement were suspicious that its affluent middle-class supporters ‘fundamentally, though of course not consciously, want to kick the ladder down behind them’ (Crosland 1971, p. 5). At the turn to the new century Robert Putnam once again emphasised that democracy does not deliver ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’ but ‘the greatest goodies for the best-organised few’ (Putnam 2000, p. 340). Indeed, there is now a broad academic consensus that the new participatory forms of politics once

pioneered by the new social movements disproportionately benefited (empowered) the already privileged middle class (Dalton *et al.* 2004). The neoliberal appropriation of these new forms of *governance* that refashions them into a means of devolving central responsibility, reducing state expenditure and avoiding political blame further exacerbates these inequalities. Quite legitimately, neoliberal *reform* governments have been criticised for remoulding structures which had once been envisaged as ‘tools for local people to control central government’ into ‘tools by which central government controls local agencies’ (Parkinson 2004, p. 382). Yet, this critique disregards that the underlying facilitator for both the proliferation of governance structures and their appropriation for purposes radically opposed to those of the new social movements is, arguably, the cultural shift outlined above.

As highlighted earlier, the post-ecologist and post-democratic turn give rise to irresolvable paradoxes and dilemmas which generate a strong societal demand for arenas and practices of simulative politics. The new, apparently non-hierarchical, decentralised and engagement-seeking forms of *governance* are responding to exactly this demand. Whilst they appear to fully embrace the norms and objectives which the emancipatory social movements had been campaigning for, they provide excellent opportunities for post-ecologist and post-democratic priorities. These new modes of governance are rarely based on codified and transparent rules, tend to be selective as regards which actors are accredited stakeholder status and allowed to participate, are ill-defined in terms of the nature of the representation they offer and the legitimacy they generate, and their political objectives and priorities often remain ambiguous. Overall, they disperse political responsibility and obscure chains of accountability. As critical observers have rightly pointed out, these innovative arrangements of stakeholder governance ‘are fundamentally Janus-faced’ (Swyngedouw 2005, p. 1993). Yet, the critique that they are inherently ‘contradictory’ because whilst ‘appearing to empower civil society’, they in fact contribute to a ‘substantial democratic deficit’ (Swyngedouw 2005, pp. 1999–2001) misses a crucially important point: exactly these qualities, i.e. their contradictory, Janus-faced character, render these flexible structures of governance exceptionally attractive for the post-democratic condition and suitable for the politics of unsustainability.

These opaque networks and fuzzy (ir)responsibilities of modern governance ought, therefore, to be seen, not as ‘the Trojan Horse’ that the neoliberal enemy secretly introduces to ‘diffuse and consolidate the *market* as the principal institutional form’ (Swyngedouw 2005, p. 2003), but as the contemporary phenotype of the new social movements’ *new politics*. This new phenotype emerges from the modernisation-induced exhaustion of traditional-style centralised and elite-centred government, on the one hand, and the equally modernisation-induced outdatedness of the social-movements’ *new politics* ideal, on the other. From the perspective of second-order emancipation, these new forms of ‘organised irresponsibility’ (Beck 1998, p. 58) are not to be criticised for their ‘perverse effects’ (Swyngedouw 2005, p. 1999) but commended for their ability to manage the

post-ecologist cum post-democratic paradox, i.e. to perform the continuation of emancipatory-progressive politics (ecological and democratic) whilst facilitating the pursuit of socially exclusive and ecologically destructive agendas. Indeed, these new forms of governance are an indispensable tool for the management of sustained unsustainability: they give legitimacy and stability to the politics of unsustainability. In a seemingly paradoxical sense they *democratise* the politics of unsustainability and thereby substantially increase societal resilience to sustained unsustainability.

Thus the analysis of the post-democratic turn and of the qualitative transformation of democracy it entails represents an important extension of the theory of post-ecologist politics. Because it conceptualises the governmentality which underpins this politics and begins to explore how the effort to sustain the unsustainable is organised in practical terms, it makes a significant contribution to understanding the politics of unsustainability. Many of the objections which critics have levelled against the theory of post-ecologist politics (see above), may be applicable to this extension as well. Clearly, more work is required to theoretically refine and empirically substantiate what I have here only tentatively sketched. But the hypotheses presented here open up a major field for further eco-political research – and they reveal an important twist in the ecology-democracy relationship that eco-political researchers as well as policy communities will find extremely difficult to address.

Notes

1. Deviating from Foucault's understanding of the concept as techniques for the exercise of power (Foucault 1979), the term here denotes a set of culturally embedded social norms and patterns of thought that facilitate and justify specific modes of political organisation and conduct.
2. For a much more detailed analysis of this post-ecologist value- and culture-shift see, in particular, Blühdorn (2007a, 2011).
3. For a detailed discussion of social movements as 'theme parks of radical action' see Blühdorn (2006, 2007b).
4. For a comprehensive comparison of *simulative politics* to what is commonly referred to as *symbolic politics* see Blühdorn (2007a).
5. Governance is understood here as a form of political agenda-setting, decision-making and policy-implementation that fuses elements of traditional-style, state-centred *government* with the social movements' *new politics* ideal of autonomous, grass-roots democratic self-rule.
6. This applies even to Athenian democracy which was based on very *modernist* values, even though they could not be categorised as such at the time.
7. For a more extensive elaboration of the distinction between Crouch's polemical *weak* notion of post-democracy and the emancipatory *strong* notion suggested here see Blühdorn (2013, ch.3).
8. The widespread critique of *democratic deficits*, vociferous demands for *radical change* and ostentatious promises of *citizen empowerment* may all be seen as contributing to the project of simulative democracy (cf. Blühdorn 2006, 2007b).

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