

Call for Papers



Normalisation – Adaptation – Acquiescence?

Transmutations of the Eco-Emancipatory Project

International Research Conference

13-15 September, 2023

Institute for Social Change and Sustainability (IGN)

Vienna University of Economics and Business

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Climate and earth system scientists, together with new climate movements, have helped to establish unprecedented international agreement on the necessity and urgency of a socio-ecological transformation of societies in the Global North, in particular. Yet, as the world is said to be standing *at the edge of an abyss* (Antonio Guterres), many observers – also within the social sciences – are diagnosing *the end of illusions* (e.g. Krastev, Reckwitz), new *post-apocalyptic* forms of environmentalism (e.g. Cassegård and Thörn, de Moor) and the progressive *de-problematisation* of developments which had so far been regarded as entirely unacceptable (e.g. Block). *Resilience, adaptation* and *survival in the ruins of the liberal world* are said to replace critique and transformation as lead concepts of an emerging new era (e.g. Graefe, Wakefield, Staab). The rise of *libertarian authoritarianism* (e.g. Amlinger and Nachtwey, Swyngedouw) radically challenges the beliefs underpinning eco-emancipatory movements.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the autocratic-authoritarian turn even in well-established democracies and China's claim for global leadership, the ideal of *a democratically negotiated good life for all within planetary boundaries* seems to be moving into the distant future. In fact, despite all reassurances to the contrary, this project may be about to be abandoned. At the very least, the key parameters of the eco-emancipatory project are – once again – being comprehensively reframed and repackaged.

Societal differentiation and complexity, intra-societal polarisation and international tensions undermine the belief that a *reinvention of politics*, the mainstreaming of *subpolitics* (Beck) and the empowerment of civil society will create powerful levers for a reflexive modernisation and a socio-ecological transformation. The new geological era, the Anthropocene, unhinges the very foundations of modernist understandings of politics and policy, and turns experimental politics into a new mode for managing a condition of *ecological ungovernability* (Blühdorn) rather than a means of transformative *earth-system governance*. Calls for top-down decision-making by a strong state, which had been abandoned in favour of participatory and experimental collaborations of civil society and the state, are becoming more vocal again – demanding *inter alia* that the state must finally *listen to the science*. Yet, the accelerating spiral of crises and the complexity of modern societies and international relations severely limit the state’s political capacity to act as well as its steering capacity.

At the same time, the validity and legitimacy of climate science, eco-activism and infrastructure projects for decarbonisation are being contested from almost all directions: from market liberals, the increasingly normalized far right as well as from parts of the left, which resuscitate earlier arguments about socio-ecological transformation being an *anti-social agenda of societal elites*. Indeed, eco-emancipatory movements are now widely being criticised for having prioritised agendas of identity, diversity and recognition favoured by specific communities over projects of social inclusion and struggles for material equality and redistribution. Hostility to disruptive protests by climate activists is widespread, with fundamental changes in societal conditions and public debate, giving rise to unexpected new discourse alliances and a redrawing of social and political conflict lines. In this constellation agendas of normalisation, adaptation, resilience and acquiescence seem to be coming to the fore, pushing earlier agendas of mitigation, sustainability and collective transformation to the back. Although there is a new wave of climate activism after the pandemic, even eco-activists are increasingly uncertain about the rhetoric of *now or never* and *radical transformation* that has been so essential to the mobilisation strategies and identities of environmental and climate movements, stressing in contrast the need for deep adaption, coping with trauma and healing.

Since its foundation, the IGN has been engaged in researching the societal shifts obstructing the project of a socio-ecological sustainability transformation and conditioning its continuous reframing. The Institute has facilitated a series of international conferences and high-profile publications.¹ Further pursuing this work and research agenda, this conference aims to explore the transmutations of the eco-emancipatory project which the most recent crises have accentuated and rendered particularly visible. Focusing specifically on so-called *advanced-* or *late-modern* societies where a radical socio-ecological transformation is most urgently required, but where the determination is adamant to defend lifestyles that are regarded as *emancipatory achievements*, we invite conceptual papers and theoretically informed empirical studies under three main headings:

¹ Such as the Special Issues [Revisiting the Promises of Eco-Political Experimentation](#), *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, 2023, 23 (1), partially already published online; [The Dialectic of Emancipation](#), *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2022, 25 (1); [Prefiguration - Co-optation - Simulation: Movements and Activism beyond Post-Politics](#), *Social Movement Studies*, 2021, 20 (3); [Democratization beyond the Post-democratic Turn](#), *Democratization*, 2020, 27 (3); [Beyond the environmental state?](#) *Environmental Politics*, 2020, 29 (1).

A) Conceptualising Transmutations of the Eco-Emancipatory Project

Although – or because? – socio-ecological and political crises of late-modern societies intensify, the transformative project appears to be approaching certain limits. How can these limits be conceptualised and explained? To what extent is it appropriate (or misleading) to speak of *the end of illusions*? Is there evidence of *de-problematisation* and *post-pessimism*? Has the project of a socio-ecological transformation for *a good life for all within planetary boundaries* become outdated? In what respects is the transformative-emancipatory project being abandoned and/or how may we conceptualise and explain its current reformulation? What does this mean for its normative foundations and social resonance?

B) Redefinitions of the Relation between the State and Civil Society

The global pandemic marks the comeback of the strong state. Participatory and emancipatory trends as well as the willingness to experiment are questioned in favour of top-down governance and reactive legislation focusing on the nation state. How is the state's reactive yet authoritarian role being perceived within civil society and how do changes in political values, public priorities and social problem perceptions affect the relationship between the state, civil society and democracy? What does this mean for the ideas of global solidarity and collaboration? How does this fit with the conditions of the Anthropocene and the project of *earth system governance*?

C) New Contestations, Conflict Lines and Discursive Alliances

In the ruins of the liberal world and times of multiple crises the nexus between the ecological and the social question is being challenged. How are narratives regarding the social costs of ecological policies being reframed? What new contestations of the sustainability project, conflict lines and discursive alliances can be discerned and how can they be explained and interpreted? What does this mean for emancipatory principles such as autonomy, equality, social inclusion and (global) solidarity?

To allow for intensive discussion, the number of participants is restricted. Some of the attendees will contribute by invitation. This call for papers addresses itself to scholars from all academic subject disciplines who are engaged in original and innovative work on the topic. Full draft papers need to be submitted and will be circulated in advance. In line with established IGN practice, revised papers will be published with a major academic press and/or as special issues of fully reviewed international journals. Participants are expected to attend the full workshop. There is no conference fee. Limited travel/accommodation support might be available.

Schedule for submitting abstracts (400 words) and full draft papers (7.000 words):

Deadline for abstracts:	28 February 2023
Notification of acceptance:	17 March 2023
Deadline for full draft papers:	18 August 2023
Please send your abstracts to:	ign@wu.ac.at