



# The quest for solutions: Taking stock of clashing realities within eco-social discourse

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Ever since we started to work on the European Green Deal (EGD) in 2019, we repeatedly find ourselves discussing a rather general observation on eco-social discourses – one that goes well beyond the papers within this special issue. To put it bluntly: The question of *how the requirements of the ecological reproduction of a habitable planet can be reconciled with the requirements of maintaining or working towards a societal constellation that enables human wellbeing* is increasingly considered across a variety of literatures. As one of the most pressing issues of our time, this conundrum is addressed from different points of view that bring their respective expertise to this multifaceted and polycritical problematic. To our confusion, however, we often struggle to draw conclusions from joining these bodies of literature. Instead, the expertise they respectively provide at times seems to stem from – and speak to – clashing realities. Naturally, overly complex problems rarely allow for unified and simple solutions, but it is nonetheless crucial for us to ask: what are the respective lessons that have to be drawn from insights that depart from very different starting points and that respectively describe differing and maybe contradicting realities? While neither original nor particularly innovative, we want to make a very simple argument that we find worth repeating: To grapple with these complex

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realities, we need a political sociology that pays attention to their discursive interplays and reflects on the power dynamics that accompany an eco-social discourse marked by a scarcity of attention and the struggle for recognition. In the following, we sketch out three such clashing realities that often appear in publications on eco-social challenges and briefly point out how an analysis of Global Social Policy, in our opinion, has to take them into account – neither to amalgamate them nor to gloss over their contradictions, but to learn more about the clashing realities involved in the eco-social challenge and to force us to take their respective objective implications into account.

### **Earth system reality: ‘climate change is coming. More has to be done’**

Ever since the *Limits to Growth* (Club of Rome, 1972), a hard scientific and objectivist body of literature produces scientific appeals to recognise the unsustainable nature of modern societies’ mode of production. For instance, as a recent and ambitiously comprehensive example of such earth system science, Johan Rockström and colleagues (2009) proposed the ‘planetary boundaries framework’ as a way of understanding, measuring and tracking human impacts on the earth system. Observing the transgression of such boundaries generates a considerable body of research, by now also expanding to ‘safe and just earth system boundaries’ (Rockström et al., 2023) and ‘planetary commons’ (Rockström et al., 2023, 2024), all pointing towards the urgently needed consideration of ‘earth system justice’ (Gupta et al., 2023) beyond the nature sciences’ framework. By design, this proposition is science-driven, meant as ‘an expert assessment and synthesis of the scientific knowledge’ (Steffen et al., 2015) that serves as a ‘guide for political responses’ (Biermann and Kim, 2020: 499). Going beyond a specialist discourse, earth system literature delineates the social, legal and institutional conditions that would be necessary to keep life on earth within a ‘safe operating space’ (Rockström et al., 2009). As such, this type of expertise informs about the hard scientific reality of earth system’s habitability, leading with descriptive information on the spatio-temporal urgency of climate change, followed by an appeal to ‘global law and governance’ (Rockström et al., 2024: 1). In social scientific papers, in turn, these insights provide urgency and at times indeed promise a renewed interest in how to deal with transforming societies. As a discursive resource, earth system science provides information on *how much more transformational change is necessary in reality*.

### **Societal reality: ‘transformation hinges on what is socially feasible’**

Social sciences and humanities increasingly adopt the notion of climate urgency and respond to the appeal – that someone is to somehow govern the eco-social challenge. Shedding a spotlight on their respective areas of expertise, they subsequently address how the climate crisis affects psychological, aesthetic, religious and secular social orders (Chakrabarty, 2020; Ibrahim and Rödder, 2022; Palsson et al., 2013). Social policy scholarship – including us and this special issue – also heeds the call to better understand

how a ‘just’ and ‘fair’ transition of fossil economies can be implemented (Zimmermann and Gengnagel, 2023). This mobilises social scientific knowledge on welfare systems, viable policies and their respective path-dependencies. As deeply rooted in the practicalities of social reform, social science scholars not only have a sense for modern institutions’ transformative capacities (Bourdieu, 2004: 93–127; Seeleib-Kaiser, 2008) but also for what is politically and culturally realistic. Consequently, this body of literature delineates the kind of capabilities for a *socially feasible transformation that is possible within the objectively existing socio-political realities*.

### **Real utopias: ‘a good life is possible’**

The Limits to Growth (Club of Rome, 1972) are also often highlighted as albeit not the first, but one of the most significant works pointing towards the problematic relationship between economic growth and environmental protection. In light of this, an expanding body of post-growth and degrowth literature advocates for transformative change towards a new system through peaceful, inclusive and democratic processes (Schmelzer and Eversberg, 2017). Beyond their advocacy at various civil societal and political levels – with the idea of ‘beyond growth’ having even reached the European Parliament (Kallis et al., 2024) – the growth-critical literature also constitutes a specific type of expertise. Scholars develop complex and detailed designs for a transformed future where both a social floor (i.e. basic social needs) and an ecological ceiling (planetary boundaries) are acknowledged (Brand et al., 2021; Gough, 2017; Raworth, 2018). By this, they provide a real utopia of a better and more sustainable life, envisioning what a reality already transformed for the better might look like. Serving as a discursive reminder of how much more transformational change is possible, this calls for an extension of what is deemed realistic in terms of modern societalisation. Consequently, this literature provides *a real utopia against which any socio-political compromise in the eco-social realm has to be measured*.

Each of these three perspectives – earth system realities, societal realities and real utopias – offers a particular understanding of the eco-social challenge and contributes crucial insights. Earth system literature provides the hard scientific evidence of planetary limits and the urgency of action, the social sciences illuminate the socio-political and institutional pathways for feasible transitions, and growth-critical literature imagines what a transformed, sustainable, and equitable society could look like. However, as perspectives rooted in distinct disciplinary frameworks, each also necessarily carries its own blind spots: Earth system science, while essential for highlighting the urgency of planetary boundaries, is less equipped to fully grasp the complexity of social systems and the intricate dynamics of societal change. By now, we have planetary boundary overshoot prominently communicated in the United Nations and COPs (Conference of the Parties; Aykut et al., 2022) – while at the same venues business deals are negotiated for record amounts of fossil extraction, regardless of all awareness raised and urgency substantiated with great PR. Similarly, social science perspectives, focused on the feasibility of incremental policy changes, may underestimate the ecological imperatives and the scale of transformation required to address the crisis. By now, we have governments setting up eco-social strategies and departments – but they are required to operate within a narrow

set of promises of green capitalist modernization (Gerstenberg, 2024), incapable of threatening fossilist privileges and turning Green New Deal hopes (see Schepelmann, 2022) into Green Deal ‘moonshot-economy missions’ (Gengnagel and Zimmermann, 2022). Growth-critical approaches, though visionary in imagining sustainable futures, can struggle to account for the entrenched socio-political and economic dynamics that resist radical change. By now, the EU parliament hosts ‘Beyond Growth’ conferences and invites figures like Greta Thunberg – yet moments such as the ‘Woodstock of Degrowth’ (Arnold and Vacher, 2023) and Thunberg shaking hands with Jean-Claude Juncker often devolve into a paternalistic acknowledgement of social movements, signalling their domestication rather than a substantive embrace of their transformative proposals (Gengnagel and Zimmermann, 2022: 275–276, 290–293).

Recognising these strengths and limitations, it is essential to foster a deeper engagement across the different paradigms – not to resolve their tensions or gloss over their contradictions but to leverage their collective insights. Only by grappling with their divergent realities and blind spots can we begin to chart a course towards meaningful responses to the eco-social challenge. Interdisciplinary dialogue must go beyond polite academic exchange and continually address the tensions, contradictions and power imbalances that often arise when competing realities and priorities are brought to the table.

### **When realities clash, it’s time for political sociology**

Usually, at this point, our conversation turns to a practical problem: We have to ensure that such engagements remain productive – rather than just frustrating. As political sociologists, considering the conflictive nature of these clashing realities demands a critical lens on the political and discursive dynamics that shape these interactions. Here, a neo-Gramscian perspective can help illuminate how gaps between paradigms are sometimes obscured or ‘resolved’ rhetorically, without substantive engagement. Drawing attention to how power and hegemonic interests shape the framing of eco-social challenges, this perspective can uncover mechanisms of climate obstruction – both overt and covert – where dominant actors resist or slow down meaningful action, framing incremental changes as sufficient or misrepresenting the scale of transformation required (Brulle et al., 2024; Ekberg et al., 2022). This dynamic is particularly evident when comparing policy frameworks like the European Green Deal (e.g. Eckert and Kovalevska, 2021; Haas et al., 2022) to metrics such as the planetary boundaries framework. While the EGD positions itself as ambitious, its solutions often remain domestically and economically focused (Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2020; Plehwe et al., 2024). These omissions allow policies to appear adequate in addressing an overcomplex crisis, while they fail to grapple with the broader, interconnected demands of ecological sustainability and global equity. This also involves the selective prioritisation of certain perspectives or the imposition of consensus narratives that obscure deep structural conflicts. For instance, the notion of a ‘fair and just transition’ is frequently invoked as a unifying goal, but who gets to define its terms, and whose voices are amplified in these discussions? Such discursive realities shape the boundaries of what is considered sayable, actionable, and achievable in reconciling ecological and social necessities.

Instead of avoiding or downplaying these discursive realities and related tensions, it is crucial to foreground and interrogate the fault lines that emerge when different realities intersect. By exposing these lines of conflict – whether between the urgency of planetary boundaries, the pragmatics of policy feasibility, or the transformative aspirations of growth-critical perspectives – we have to challenge the tendency to prematurely reconcile these competing frameworks. From a political sociology perspective, this requires a willingness to resist overly simplistic narratives of integration and reconciliation, and instead to explicitly address the dimensions of complexity, conflict, and plurality that define the eco-social challenge.

To navigate the complexities of academic scholarship, we need a political sociology that critically examines how the distinct perspectives on the eco-social challenge are constructed, framed, and negotiated within and across disciplines and socio-political structures. This requires an ongoing conversation:

Reflexivity takes on its full efficacy only when it is embodied in collectives which have so much incorporated it that they practise it as a reflex. In a research group of that kind, the collective censorship is very strong, but it is a liberating censorship, which leads one to dream of the censorship of an ideally constituted field that would free each of the participants from the ‘biases’ linked to his or her position and dispositions. (Bourdieu, 2004: 114)

How do ecological limits to growth appear in growth-driven eco-social policy proposals? How do the democratic and socio-political limits to eco-social transformation manifest in both post-growth scenarios and climate change predictions? Spanning from electoral cycles to both empirical and normative concepts of the Anthropocene: Are the time horizons of the three realities connected, or even compatible? In terms of global social policy, are (supra-)national welfare regimes discussed as elements of climate policy obstruction, or as advancing the eco-social challenge of global climate change? There are no easy answers to these kinds of questions, but a discussion on how the respective realities clash with each other (or appear within each other) is necessary to keep track of an escalating and currently unsolved dynamic.

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