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Green deservingness, green distinction, green democracy? Towards a political sociology of a contested eco-social consensus

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The immediate and increasingly urgent challenge of climate change is, amongst other disciplines, also a task for the social sciences (Dunlap & Brulle, 2015; Youssef & Rödder, 2022). This research note argues that Political Sociology offers concepts that help us to better understand how the efforts for an urgently needed eco-social transformation have to resonate with a socio-political understanding in the very societies that cause the incoming climate catastrophe in the first place (Page, 2008). In the context of a Political Ecology (Gottschlich et al., 2022), sociology must go beyond a “techno-managerial perspective”, in which “strategies are ‘formulated and implemented’, seemingly without conflict” (Bryant, 1991, 164). Reflecting on and adding to the repeatedly established scientific insight that a transformation is objectively necessary (Lade et al., 2020), our material had us wondering about the precarious legitimacy of the eco-social challenge. In the context of empirically working with everyday takes on climate-change politics, we find it instructive to turn to a Political Sociology that points out that the transfer of this scientific imperative into societal practice hinges on several conditions: In western democracies, eco-social policies have to be deemed adequate and proportionate, the imminent social change taking place during a “green” social transformation has to be legitimate beyond progressivist milieus and, finally, the democratic legitimacy of an eco-social governmental project is contingent on a socio-political discourse in which the eco-social challenge is broadly understood as a universal goal.

In the following, we will briefly sketch out how a sociological understanding of legitimacy motivates our research. As we work with our empirical material – interpreting discussions in focus groups in Italy and Germany, as well as statements in German newspapers (see below) – we increasingly realize the necessity to under-

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stand climate change as a construct of quite fleeting meaning. Journalists as well as everyday people of different socio-economic statuses and value-orientations do not derive their ideas on climate change directly from insights produced e.g. by earth system science (Steffen et al., 2018). Instead, popular discourses give social reality to the concept as people participate in the construction of an eco-social nexus in societal power relations, of which scientific expertise is but one element. In a similar vein, attitudes towards eco-social policies do not immediately align with their functional content, but are much more tied to everyday practices of sense-making, cultural distinctions and gut-feelings that carry contradicting expectations of a just transition. Contestations of eco-social policies, then, are a constitutive element of a democratic discourse in which the immediacy and catastrophic urgency of climate change have to be relatable. Consequently, we add a Political Sociologist perspective to those stemming from sustainability and transition studies (Köhler et al., 2019, 6), policy analysis and agenda-setting (Pralle, 2009), social psychology and communication studies (Moser & Dilling, 2007) to understand why – despite all scientific knowledge and widespread calls for action – we are still far away from implementing effective measures to save the planet.

As our project takes the people's own perspectives and perceptions of legitimate or illegitimate eco-social policies as a starting point, we draw on a broader set of sociological insights that structure our ongoing inquiry: "Green" agenda-setting and its political implementation have to 1) address groups that are deemed as *deserving* to meet the public perception, 2) overcome the divisive use of greenness as a new *distinction* that perpetuates an exclusionary new high culture, delegitimizing and antagonizing whole social groups. Finally, if anti-eco-social tendencies are to be overcome, green deservingness and distinction 3) have to develop in a *democratic* discourse. For "green democracy" to gain traction in this context, we assume, scientific arguments have to be heard but must not substitute socio-political debate. In this rather big picture of the democratic challenge for eco-social transformation, a look into the sociology of welfare and social policy is instructive. Beyond the rather "sunny" mood of the recently dominant sustainability framework, as Rebecca Elliott (2018, 304) points out, looms the less optimistic anticipation of processes of "disappearance, destruction, dispossession, depletion" associated with climate change. A Political Sociology of climate change thus needs to consider the socio-political tensions and struggles over loss of growth-dependent welfare and take into account the perspective of those who expect to become the green transformation's losers – and who may thus put up a fight against future eco-social policies.

Our insights on *green deservingness*, *green distinction*, and *green democracy* combine sociological theory with empirical snapshots from an ongoing research project. In the project "The social legitimacy of welfare measures in the 'green transformation'" we bring together an analysis of newspapers with qualitative focus groups to analyse people's attitudes towards social policy measures in the "green transition" in Germany and Italy. The media analysis, which focused on Germany only, covered

conservative and liberal publications (both moderate and radical). The focus groups in Germany and Italy were conducted by a professional research agency (IPSOS) that recruited participants alongside socio-economic criteria and basic value orientations (again differentiating heuristically between conservative and liberal value orientations) and professionally moderated the groups also using statements from the media analysis to prompt participants' opinions and group discussions. Both in Italy and in Germany, six online discussion groups with mostly six participants per group took place; four of them were homogeneously composed with regard to participants' socio-economic situation and value orientation, and two were heterogeneous. In the following, we discuss *green deservingness*, *green distinction*, and *green democracy* in greater detail as salient dimensions that help interpreting the material and provoke further research.

1) Considering green deservingness

Questions of *green deservingness* come up in times of new (or renewed) distributive conflicts. The eco-social transformation faces crucial challenges of distributing scarce – or increasingly scarcer – resources. This is not only true for degrowth and sufficiency approaches highlighting the need to massively reduce the exploitation of natural resources (Ossewaarde & Ossewaarde-Lowtoo, 2020): Even if paradigms of eco-modernization were right in their promises that economic growth can be aligned with environmental (or at least climate) protection (European Commission, 2019), such green growth would entail “prospective losers” (Schmitz, 2015, 179) – in addition to already negatively impacted groups such as climate refugees that require accommodation in the welfare systems of more indirectly affected countries. New “green social risks” (i.e. social risks in the context of the climate crisis and green transformations; e.g. energy poverty, job loss, health problems; cf. Zimmermann, 2022) might emerge and will especially affect already vulnerable groups who contribute the least to the climate crisis (Page, 2008). In this context, we might also observe new social cleavages, such as young generations versus older generations, or workers in fossil sectors versus knowledge economy workers.

These questions of potential new social risks, new vulnerabilities and new cleavages bring the core question of welfare state research back to the agenda: “Who should get what and why?” (van Oorschot, 2000). As the well-established body of literature on deservingness teaches us, the answer to this question is, in the eyes of the public in Europe, fundamentally tied to specific deservingness perceptions that draw on five different criteria (“CARIN”; see van Oorschot et al., 2017, xviii): control (do welfare beneficiaries have control over their neediness?), attitude (the more compliant and grateful, the more a claimant is seen as deserving), reciprocity (the more a person has contributed, the more deserving she is deemed), identity (people “closer to us” are seen as more deserving) and need (people with greater need are seen as more deserving). Studies show that older people and children, who don't

have control over their situation and are especially needy, are usually perceived as most deservingness, while immigrants and unemployed (who are seen as “farther away from us”, respectively as being more in control of their situation) are judged as less deserving (van Oorschot et al., 2017).

Now, facing the climate crisis and green transformations, our empirical data suggests that these deservingness perceptions might experience some revisions: First of all, new target groups come into focus which are particularly affected by “green social risks”. For instance, the claim that young generations have the right (and duty) to call for action, as they face a “dark future” is frequently observable in (more left-leaning) newspapers, like in this quote from the German *tageszeitung (taz)*: “It is a matter of correcting the sick and fatal developments of our affluent world. Otherwise, future generations will curse us. We have the duty to take a step back.” (*taz*, 2.7.2022). Similarly, in our focus groups, some articulate a devaluation of the needs and expectations of their contemporaries who are accused for not thinking

“about the real problem (the planet). When thinking about something big, about an environmental future, one should not think about the concept the citizen has now, the current idea, but think about what will be done for the children, the children’s children and so on.” (IT-G2, Loris, p. 8)

Like this shift in perception of intergenerational deservingness, also the prospect of people losing their house or harvest, or experiencing climate-related health issues are discussed as stemming from causes beyond individual control and might thus become new deservingness target groups in the eyes of the public. Furthermore, in our focus groups, we also observe a revision of the usage of deservingness criteria: unemployed who lost their work in the context of energy transitions are repeatedly deemed as not having much control over their situation (and hence are seen as more deserving):

“If it is decided by the state that a branch is dying out, like coal or nuclear power, then it is also the state’s responsibility to put those people back to work in some form of adequate employment.” (DE-G6, Eva, 229)

Another revision might be observable with regard to the attitude criterion, when environmentally sustainable behavior is perceived as legitimate and lawful, while people with environmentally harmful behavior are seen as less deserving:

“Those who have made a nice life for themselves at the expense of the environment, earn well and have a great retirement, should have about another 2 % taken away from them.” (DE-G5, Jannik, 177)

2) Considering green distinction

Such attributions of legitimate and illegitimate lifestyles are not evenly distributed across our focus groups, but point towards the increasing relevance of *green distinction*: lower- and upper class, liberal and conservative milieus both construct deservingness differently and address different social groups – and the practices attributed to them – as deserving or problematic. This fits well with social structural analyses, for instance in the format of milieu studies (Eversberg & Fritz, 2022) and

macro-sociological studies (Mau et al., 2020), which point towards a split between a new and an old middle class (Reckwitz, 2021), i.e., between cosmopolitan and conservative attitudes that are grounded in objective class positions. Beyond classical attitudinal research, it is sociologically relevant to trace how “protest movements for or against sustainability can be contoured in terms of social structure” (Neckel, 2020, 83; own translation). This contouring of the potential for conflict around the socio-ecological transition is based in milieu-specific ideas of social order and information practices: What Neckel has succinctly labelled the “dispute over lifestyle” (ibid.; own translation) is often fought out in latent form in terms of supposedly apolitical questions of lifestyle and distinction practices.

Our focus groups clearly show such practices of green distinction. In several groups, participants early on (when they realized what the general topic was about) pitched their environmental-friendly habits to the group – although referring to different ecological practices in different socio-economic groups (e.g. avoiding plastic-wrapped cucumbers vs. avoiding long-distance flights). They also expected others to act environmentally friendly but accepted financial reasons as an “excuse” from individual ecological responsibility:

“I also like to go for a walk, and I use reusable bottles instead of disposable ones. I also prefer to use cloth bags rather than plastic ones... There are already a few things you can implement yourself. But I also understand those who simply can't always afford the organic meat at the bottom line.” (DE-G4, Oliver, 164).

At the same time, especially in the moderate and radical conservative/right-wing publications of our media analysis, we also observed pronounced distinctions from a “green hegemony”, as illustrated by this quote from the radical right-wing journal *Compact*:

“A crispy Thuringian sausage from the grill, the juicy Christmas goose, the crispy steak with melt-in-the-mouth herb butter, even the working-man's sausage from the petrol station – everything that tastes good and has made the likes of us big and strong could be banned in the beautiful climate-neutral world of tomorrow. Instead of fish and meat, there'll be tofu sausage, seitan schnitzel and indefinable grey Beyond-Meat-mush, instead of real milk only oat drink, instead of bacon and egg, soon, insect porridge. A feast for the eyes? More likely: close your eyes and through.

The push for a major reboot of our eating habits comes – how could it be otherwise – from the same climate protectors and world saviours who want to make driving a car, travelling and, more recently, heating one's own four walls impossible for the average citizen.” (Compact 12/22, 25)

In our focus groups, such “anti-green” distinctions were not as bold as in the newspapers, but especially in one of the German groups (with a lower socio-economic and conservative profile), participants also grumbled about green politics and green lifestyle:

“...the coal miners; their jobs are being destroyed and students are pampered. Climate policy means for the little man that mining jobs will not be preserved. A minority policy is being made for a green clientele. The ordinary man falls by the wayside”. (DE-G3, Florian, p17).

“We are supposed to freeze and Habeck [Robert Habeck; German minister for economic and climate protection; Green party] tells us it is best to shower only twice a week... What is wrong with him?” (DE-G3, Brigitte, p6).

Interestingly, such practices of devaluation, demarcation and distinction were less pronounced in Italy. There still were glimpses of a cultural cleavage, however, e.g. when discussing stereotypes:

“One can think of those people who are fixated, convinced environmentalists who don’t have TV, and have candles in their homes. [What is required, is] take more of the opinion of normal, middle-class people, not the fixated!” (IT-G2, Monica, p7)

Apart from such occasional rifts, Italian participants – especially from higher socio-economic groups – also highlighted facets of their ecological lifestyles, but it was much lesser pronounced. In general, the discussions in almost all Italian groups were more focused on politics than on lifestyle. Consequently, public responsibility was also stressed as being more relevant than individual responsibility (“Politics has always the lion’s share; 80 % responsibility is on them”; IT-G1, Mario, p4; “the state needs to intervene more directly, because it is a big problem and it needs to be solved; IT-G1, Elena, p2).

These cross-country differences suggest, we argue, that both support of and resistance to green modernisation is also rooted in the objective constitution of the welfare state (Manow, 2018), and its interaction with the individual affected by structural change and economic transformation (Dörre et al., 2020). Findings from studies such as Otto’s and Gugushvili’s (2020) analysis of data from the European Social Survey on public support for social and environmental policies show that there are indeed remarkable cross-country differences, but that these also differ with regard to socio-economic groups:

“[E]nvironmental devotees’ are most likely young women living in big cities, with a good income, a high level of education, high levels of trust in public institutions, and strong preferences for egalitarianism. Conversely, the electorate which is opposed to both environmental and welfare agendas is more likely to be financially insecure people, rural residents, males, elderly, people with very low educational qualifications and those who oppose equality in living standards.” (ibid., 13).

Here, we currently pursue the argument that the question of social security, the design of the political economy, and its interaction with economic green transition processes (Zimmermann, 2022) all have a direct influence on the evaluation of a socio-ecological transformation and concrete climate policy measures – but also on the prevalence of regressive resistance, or on the aversion against identity politics that are perceived as “green”. At the same time, it is striking how a green lifestyle is presented as a universal value by its proponents, and how traditional lifestyles are problematised. Our discussants are generally aware of a relational tension, and debate often evolves around ways to overcome cleavages. The following sequence is indicative of this, as Eva acknowledges an ecological hierarchy of value-orientations and expresses the wish for a collective perspective beyond green distinctions. Taking up on this, Gert responds by also problematising policies by particular political

parties that, seemingly arbitrarily, direct the transformation's impact on specific groups (i.e., attribute deservingness):

Eva: If I say it in a bad way, the traditional values of the little people have brought us to where we are now with the climate. That's not so nice from a climatic point of view either. But everyone has to be taken along [...].

Gert: Politics has to get everyone in the same boat [...]. It all has to be in unison, otherwise there will be social unrest. That is a very clear story. If one party says this has to be changed now and you are the ones affected – then the others are going to rebel! This must be promoted in harmony by politics for all.

(DE-G6, 300–301)

3) Considering green democracy

Since the acknowledgement of general socio-cultural and specifically ecological hierarchies often is accompanied by attempts to envision collective responsibilities, but also collective benefits, we are interested in how the universality of a green transformation is imagined and performed in discussion. Ultimately, the dynamics of both an emerging green deservingness and green distinctions play out as elements of a struggle over the legitimacy of the transformative project itself. Due to the inherent justificatory and legitimating nature of the arguments made (with statements against climate-change policies usually more on the defensive, except in one focus group, in which a counter-hegemony is established), we discuss these tensions in terms of *green democracy*. As our empirical data confirms, the lines of conflict between “engaged eco-social” and “anti-ecological” mentalities is not only a potential division along socio-economic deservingness or cultural distinctions (Fritz & Eversberg, 2022, 14; 17). Instead, the cultural and economic factors underlying these polarised values are comprehensively woven into questions of socio-political control and the politicisation of scientific expertise and its counter-narratives (Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2022). While Greta Thunberg’s “I want you to listen to the scientists” (*The Guardian*, 2019) appears to some as a legitimate call for evidence-based political action and accompanied the founding of the socio-ecological movement “Fridays for Future”, it appears to others as an act of aggression of a “left-green wokeness dictate”, which is to be countered with the founding of “Fridays for Hubraum” (“Fridays for Engine”, o.t.; *Der Spiegel*, 2019; *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2019), among others. In addition to all the polemics between populist references to “the people” and high cultural performances of “anti-populist appeals to expertise” (Westheuser, 2020, 259), this is also about the contested distinction between justified concerns and irrational fears (Gengnagel & Schmitz, 2018).

In our empirical material we observed different shades and degrees of politicisation of scientific expertise. Both in Italy and in Germany, some participants described science as “pure” (DE-G1, Christine, 438; IT-G3, Alice, p6) and independent, while others pointed towards a certain interweaving and (inter)dependency of science with economics and politics (“the scientists are somewhat restricted, in my

opinion because of an economic issue”; IT-G6, Alessandra, p11). In Germany, in particular, a delegitimation of specific scientific positions was frequently expressed (as in the statement by Florian quoted below), but also – particularly in the groups with a conservative profile – a general critique of scientific knowledge, expertise and scientists was observable (as expressed by Bernd in the quote below).

“If you take a look at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Research [German very renowned climate research institute], there’s a very radical climate hysteric. On whom does his highly remunerated job depend? If he were to suddenly say that everything is not so bad, then he could lock the door of the institute. This Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is also staffed by dubious and one-sided hysterics.” (DE-G3, Florian, p21)

“I rarely hear a scientist who looks at both sides, who is objective and says that we can do it this way, but that has such and such consequences, and if we don’t, that has such and such consequences. I only ever hear scientists who say what the politicians think with a raised forefinger.” (DE-G4, Bernd, p8)

For Italy, our data shows some concerns about science being dependent of funding and politics – but by far not such a widespread critique and general science scepticism. Instead, science was perceived not only as a crucial tool in combatting climate change, but also in helping to address a major concern that appeared in several Italian groups: dysfunctional public services and state failure.

Science could solve things – in a country where the resolution of so many issues is viewed with distance and revulsion [...] Why has the waste problem never been solved in the big cities? (IT-G4, Gennaro, p3)

It often comes down to region-state-municipalities clashing over energy and climate policies, for example over the construction of plants for reasons of visual impact and other infrastructure. Often the region opposes this. The different powers fail to have clear and unanimous guidance. (IT-G5, Riccardo, p2)

In such contexts, climate-politics appear embedded in general discourses on governmental agency and the overall relationship towards the state. Eco-policies, here, are seldomly discussed in specific terms, but are understood as extensions of abstract socio-political tensions, which are in turn based on questions about commodification or redistribution of public goods, about collective or individual responsabilisation, about (de)legitimised knowledge systems or (supposed) lack of alternatives to constraints. In everyday-discourse, these tensions are not openly negotiated, but often expressed in the perceived polarisation of value attitudes. Implementing the socio-ecological transformation as a democratic project, we argue, requires therefore not only asking about the cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of the actors, but also taking into account their ideas of a) socio-political control and b) the role of expertise. This leads to two complimentary interpretative directions, which we currently pursue in another round of coding and point us towards an extension of our research:

- a) In the societal negotiation of the eco-social transformation, nation-state systems and especially their welfare state constitution play a central role, as they fundamentally frame the relationship between economy and society. In recent decades, European welfare states have experienced a fundamental transformation which has emphasised the individual responsibility of citizens while reducing

the protective dimension of social security (Palier, 2010; Lødemel & Moreira, 2014; Lessenich, 2008). The role of the state in the relationship between the economy and society is shifting: it is no longer the guarantor of civil rights vis-à-vis market forces, but should enable citizens to strengthen their market positions (Hansen, 2019). The sensitisation and activation of the individual, the conditionalisation of state services and the introduction of quasi-markets are governance instruments that accompany this shift and extend far beyond the welfare state systems (Heidenreich & Graziano, 2014; Zimmermann et al., 2014). For the “active subjects” (Lessenich, 2008, 122) in a market-oriented society, questions of socio-political governance then often appear as optimisable factual questions – which are subject to a relative lack of alternatives and are to be weighed up rationally by means of expertise (Séville, 2017). This is currently renegotiated under the auspices of green deservingness and distinction, especially as the relationship between and representation of personal responsibility and political mobilisation are expressed.

- b) Under these circumstances, carried by an undercurrent of post-political expectations (e.g. when our interviewees agree to disagree over socio-political matters on the grounds of “needing more data”), scientific expertise becomes politicised: the negotiation of factual issues and the expertise brought to bear in the process acquire political explosiveness as emotionally charged arguments in which political disputes are fought out. Knowledge thus becomes a central arena for the negotiation of the social shaping of climate change (Beck, 2010) in which science provides figures as “weapons” for socio-political disputes (Davies, 2019). At the same time, normative political passions cannot be decided on a scientific factual level, which is why the increasingly claimed scientific expertise itself is becoming more and more the object of politicisation and instrumentalisation (Gengnagel, 2021). Since it serves to legitimise moral demands and must risk its own legitimacy in the process, the debate about “post-factual” counter-expertise also represents a debate about in whose name scientific universality may be invoked (Bogner, 2021; Lockie, 2017).

Broadly speaking, these two analytical perspectives do not only structure our analysis of everyday takes on eco-social policies, they at the same time represent the two major crises current social democracy is confronted with: new labour’s socio-political third way legacy and the expertocratic and depoliticizing discourses it reinforced (Offe, 1984, 113f.; Gorz, 1993). We find this return to critical welfare studies instructive, as the question of a socially just political economy arises again under the auspices of the global climate crisis (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013). In light of the two fundamental legitimacy issues of modern democracies, our project seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the precarious acceptance and contested legitimacy of the “green transition”. A successful climate policy must not only address new *green deservingness* by cushioning material risks of population groups affected by structural change (e.g. jobs in coal mining) as well as unequal burden sharing of

new consumption models (e.g. energy prices), it must also recognise socio-cultural processes of *green distinction* and related cleavages. Furthermore, in addition to their concrete output legitimacy, climate policy measures are also negotiated in a broader socio-political context in which they must find democratic recognition. As our current analysis shows, in everyday as well as journalistic articulations, expectations towards eco-social transformation as a collective societal project are discursively performed. These position-takings are located relationally in a broader socio-political and cultural context – by appealing to common causes, but also by ascribing specific (dys)functions to different lifestyles, practices and identities. Despite the specificity and often contradicting nature of these ascriptions, arguments are presented as offering common ground and universal justification: In aligning green deservingness and green distinction for achieving a *green democratic consensus*, questions of socio-political governance as well as the politicisation of expertise play a central, albeit rarely explicitly thematised, role. With our analysis of the outlined media analysis and the focus groups – and further cross-country comparative material we plan for the future – we seek to situate the “green transition” within a broader socio-political context.

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