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Introduction to the special issue

Global moonshots, European responsibilities: Governance and contestation of ecosocial transformation

After decades of neglect by social scientific mainstream (Dunlap & Brulle, 2015; Lever-Tracy, 2008), climate change is finally recognised as a global challenge that requires a rethinking of ecology and infrastructures (Degens et al., 2022), making climate governance on all governmental levels necessary (Tosun & Peters, 2021), including EU climate governance (Domorenok et al., 2020). This uptick in academic exposure was only heightened by the EU's declaration to become climate-neutral by 2050. In a way, the European Green Deal sounds too good to be true: Fully committed to the paradigm of ecological modernisation (Machin, 2019), the EGD promises an all-encompassing decarbonisation while maintaining a green market economy that is both competitive as a global capitalist power and socially just (Gengnagel & Zimmermann, 2022; Mandelli et al., 2021; Lamura, in this issue). There are good reasons to remain cautious in the face of these claims, and any European modernisation project, especially when claiming to be motivated by concerns for the global ecological system, should be subjected to a healthy dose of scrutiny. Surely, the European Green Deal also has to be analysed in a context of "climate colonialism" (Bhambra & Newell, 2020; see Claar, in this issue) – contrasting Eurocentric politicians who claim that a "global climate conscience" would have been born in Europe (Gengnagel & Zimmermann, 2022). But, all these valid criticisms aside: if the EGD's plan of a reduction of fossil-based industrial production is followed through, this would prove a cornerstone in European history (for an assessment of 2008ff. as a "lost decade", see Schepelmann's essay, in this issue). After all, as Max Weber, the observer of the European origin of the spirit of capitalism, noted:

> *"The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt." (Weber, 2001 [1920], 123)*

If contemporary societies in fact would achieve the goal of decarbonisation – regardless of the many more planetary boundaries (Lade et al., 2020) that yet have to be accounted for in governmental discourse, it would certainly merit speaking

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of a new spirit of capitalism, at least as fundamental a change as Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) "new spirit of capitalism". In this context, the urgency of the ecological question might lead to reformation, modernisation, and a renewed sense of legitimacy of European market economy, but it might also stir social conflict. Will the EGD (re)vitalise the European project with a "new green spirit" (Lenz, in this issue), or will it highlight the EU's critical flaws (Haas et al., in this issue)? Beyond an evaluation of the EGD's efficacy, integrating ecological conflicts into the formulation, implementation, and legitimisation of its agenda (for European monetary policy, see Preunkert, in this issue) certainly represents a crystallisation point for efforts to win over disparate social forces and generations with this new European agenda. President von der Leyen's moon-shot remark – pointing out the EGD's potential to become "Europe's man-on-the-moon-moment" – is indicative of this (Gengnagel & Zimmermann, 2022, 270ff.).

Applying a Weberian notion of legitimacy (Lepsius, 2017), European institutions are not only measured against their functional capability to deliver on the EGD goals, but also against the extent to which they facilitate the participation of societal stakeholders in democratic procedures. In other words, the EGD implementation relies on input and "throughput legitimacy" (Schmidt, 2013), insofar as societal dynamics are taken into account in the process of policy formulation and the institutionalisation of an EGD framework. Correspondingly, the EGD also participates in the construction of a cohesive societal framework. Relying on "normative power", the EU already extended its normative reach to all of humankind (Manners, 2002, 253, 243). The current iteration of legitimatory knowledge production links the European project not only with universal human rights, but with a responsibility for the planetary ecosystem. In general, the EU as a political project aims at establishing normative, market and knowledge power (Young & Ravinet, 2022), which we understand as elements of the symbolic power of EU governance (Gengnagel et al., 2022). With the EGD, this power is once more put to the test: On the one hand, there is an increasing and increasingly undeniable pressure of an objectively changing climate; on the other hand, there are now political claims that Europe might provide a viable solution to tackle climate change by means of an EU-facilitated "mission economy" (Mazzucato, 2021) that promises to care "for a climate-neutral yet prospering continent" (Gengnagel & Zimmermann, 2022).

While the added legitimacy of planetary responsibility may prove a strong motif for EGD implementation and EU governance in general, any opposition towards its policies and modes of governance may also be put in an antagonistic discursive opposition to the future of mankind and the planet itself. In line with tensions in the socio-political fabric of Europe (Fligstein, 2008), this may inhibit genuinely political discourse between alternative agendas and widen the gap between a cosmopolitan "new middle class" and the remnants of an increasingly pressured "old middle class" (Reckwitz, 2020) prone to nationalist regression, climate change denial, and anti-European sentiment (Sommer et al., 2022). In an increasingly

unequal and contested Europe (Beckfield, 2019; Lahusen, 2019), the EGD policy debate at the same time could also provide opportunities for a new European social contract and foster alliances between societal actors that provide specific epistemic authority on welfare, ecology, and innovation (e.g., alliances between the social third sector and environmental organisations – or rifts between compensating and activating roles of social and employment policies). These conflicts and coalitions may gain traction differently, depending on the respective institutional setup in terms of eco-welfare (Zimmermann & Graziano, 2020), or on political landscapes and varieties of populism (Font et al., 2021; Manow, 2018).

Ultimately, in the eyes of interested publics, the fate of the EGD is closely tied to the legitimacy of a European bureaucracy providing both rational solutions and a representation of a normative core. At the same time, it also relates to the underlying issue of the EU as driven by the single market paradigm and the question of Europe as a social union (Gengnagel, 2021, 25f.; 266ff.) – an unresolved but explosive question inherent to the institutional structure ever since Delors' initiative (Scharpf, 2002). These points of contention crystalise in expert debates and the technocratic semi-publics around policy formulation and implementation, in which both the visions and contestations of the EU's transformation agenda occur as "an ongoing process of the institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation of guiding principles" (Lepsius, 2017, 40). This issue aims at contributing to this general discourse by providing a venue for voices that address rifts and gaps in the EGD's ambitious rhetoric and begin to map out if and how its institutionalisation might gain traction across Europe.

In this issue

In the first part of the special issue, three original research articles address this process of institutionalisation of the EGD's eco-social agenda and, more generally, how the ecological challenge takes hold in EU governance. In the first article, "The digital spirit of green capitalism. How the European Union tries to save ecological modernisation", *Sarah Lenz* shows how political, economic and civil society actors are working to legitimate a digital-green modernisation of the economy. Her empirical analysis of actors' justifications shows how – in light of moral criticism of both global digital capitalism (for unsustainable extractivism and increasing surveillance) and green growth (for creating social inequalities and not sufficing to cure ecological problems) – a "twin-strategy" of green-digital capitalism finds not only instrumental plausibility but is also increasingly considered as "morally right" for humanity and the planet. In so doing, the paper illustrates the emergence of a "digital green spirit of capitalism" and underlines the normative power that lies within the EU modernisation project.

Moving from the legitimacy to the governance dimension of EU green endeavors, the second paper – „European monetary policy: Between market neutrality

and climate change" by *Jenny Preunkert* – also engages with the establishment of environmental sustainability as a guiding principle. Analysing speeches of the European Central Banking (ECB) Council, Preunkert shows how the ECB increasingly recognises climate change as a necessary imperative for its agenda. Moving from a marginal position as a mere price risk for financial markets, the climate crisis is now regarded as a threat to price stability itself. This has brought climate protection to the centre of Europe's financial power, as the ECB now pursues an active monetary policy to fight climate change. From a governance perspective, this is also accompanied by a shift from market neutrality to the more interventionist principle of market efficiency.

The third article, "Energy poverty across Europe: Problematisation and policy measures through the lens of energy justice" by *Maddalena Josefin Lamura*, also engages with the governance of European green capitalism, albeit from a social policy perspective. The article analyses how the social outcomes of energy transitions are governed – or planned to be governed – in different EU member states. The article draws on an original conceptualisation that adopts an energy justice perspective. Studying in an in-depth manner the National Energy and Climate Plans in Austria, Denmark, Poland, and Italy, Lamura finds that the countries' problematisations of energy poverty and energy justice differ significantly; corresponding to different energy and welfare policy setups. The analysis of social justice conceptions that are incorporated in energy poverty approaches very well illustrates, from a broader perspective, how legitimacy for a green transition in Europe is sought to be established via social integration.

In the second part of the special issue, three essays then focus on the European Green Deal from different critical lenses. In the first essay, titled "The European Green Deal and the limits of ecological modernisation", *Tobias Haas*, *Felix Syrovatka* and *Isabel Jürgens* adopt an approach fundamentally critical of capitalism and discuss the EGD's eco-modernisation agenda from a materialist perspective. They highlight that – albeit the EGD is semantically close to the historical New Deal and Green New Deal discourses – the social dimension in the EU's green growth package is weak and does not fundamentally address power relations. Instead, the EGD relies on technical modernisation and the stabilisation of global power relations. This strategy, the authors argue, runs the risk of reproducing and renewing social inequalities within the EU and at the global level. Hence, the essay focuses on ecological hegemonies and their relation to social inequalities.

The second essay also addresses inequalities related to the European Green Deal but adopts a critical colonialism perspective. In her piece "Green colonialism in the European Green Deal: Continuities of dependencies and relationship of forces between Europe and Africa", *Simone Claar* argues that the European Green Deal establishes a new EU-Africa strategy that reproduces dependency structures and might thus be an enabler of "green colonialism". The essay discusses the EU-Africa

strategy on hydrogen and biodiversity in greater detail and confronts it with alternative socio-ecological transformation methods in Africa, e.g., the South African Climate Justice Charter. With this, the essay joins the previous text in contributing to our knowledge on ecological hegemonies and their relation to social inequalities, albeit from a global and colonial perspective.

The third essay then adds a critical implementation perspective to the analysis of the EGD. *Philipp Schepelmann* presents, in his essay "Towards a Green New Deal. Lessons after a lost decade", an assessment of the EU's current green modernisation agenda vis-à-vis a concrete "Green New Deal for Europe" outline that had been presented in 2009. Adding a specific policy-learning focus, Schepelmann joins the other two essays in their evaluation of the shortcomings of the EGD. The author argues that while the EGD can be regarded as a historic milestone in terms of pushing forward ecological considerations within mainstream economic policy, it suffers from major deficits and can be interpreted as an insufficient attempt to take advantage of the rapidly closing windows of opportunity for a peaceful transition towards sustainability.

The special issue then concludes with two research notes. In the first, titled "Green deservingness, green distinction, green democracy? Towards a political sociology of a contested eco-social consensus", *Vincent Gengnagel* and *Katharina Zimmermann* present preliminary findings from an ongoing research project on the social legitimacy of the eco-social transformation and embed these empirical insights in reflections on political sociology. They argue that political sociology is vital to understand transformation conflicts and point out that, in the context of the climate crisis and green transitions, new socio-economic deservingness ascriptions and perceptions as well as new cultural demarcations and distinction practices emerge. These are strongly politicized and have to develop in a democratic discourse if anti-eco-social tendencies are to be overcome.

In the final research note, *Matteo Mandelli*, *Katharina Bohnenberger*, *Tuuli Hirvilammi* and *Katharina Zimmermann* then present a freshly founded academic network on Sustainable Welfare and Eco-Social Policies. The European network aims to bring together not only scholars from different (sub)disciplines working on the interaction of social and environmental topics, but also link academic research to stakeholders and political practice. The authors outline the core activities of the network: a bi-monthly colloquium, the establishment of a young scholars' colloquium, a newsletter, and a stakeholder dialogue format. The network, open to all interested scholars and stakeholders, is a timely initiative that is very welcomed in the emerging field of eco-social research.

As editors of this special issue, we are also thankful to our highly engaged reviewers – not only are we impressed by the amount of thought given to the manuscripts mentioned above, but also by the general feeling of a necessary discourse that needs to be developed further and to which this issue hopefully may contribute.

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