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POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY AND THE CULTURAL FRAMING OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE:

Depoliticisation, Repoliticisation and the Governance of Unsustainability

Introduction

The UN COP15 summit in December 2009 marked a watershed in contemporary eco-politics. Prior to that summit huge expectations had been building up that in Copenhagen an encompassing and legally binding international agreement would be forged that would put the world – and the industrialised countries, in particular – on a trajectory of sustainability. The Stern Review (Stern 2007), the IPCC's fourth assessment report (IPCC 2007) and a wide range of leading figures in international politics had firmly established the view that if major disaster is to be avoided, global warming must be limited to about 2°C above pre-industrial levels, that global greenhouse gas emission trends need to be reversed within 10 to 15 years, and that by 2020 the industrialised countries need to reduce their CO₂-emissions by 25-40% as compared to 1990.

Yet, the Copenhagen summit was a resounding failure. A year after the meeting, public and media attention to the climate issue have noticeably declined. According to the latest assessment by the World Meteorological Organisation the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere is at its highest ever (386.8 ppm and thus 1.6 ppm higher than in 2008). A whole series of recent studies has revealed that global warming is advancing at an even faster pace than the IPCC had so far assumed. 'Rather than decarbonising the world is carbonising at an unprecedented rate' (Hamilton 2010a: 5). Yet promising strategies for reversing the trend are nowhere in sight. No significant hopes had been placed in the COP16 summit in Cancun (Mexico). Indeed the whole project of a binding international agreement is on the verge of being abandoned, and bilateral voluntary agreements are now being presented as the most promising way forward (e.g. Victor 2010). For the time being, the pre-Copenhagen target of limiting global warming to 2°C has not fully disappeared from public discourse, but scenarios of 4-7°C warming by the end of the century, i.e. scenarios which prior to Copenhagen were described as scenarios of catastrophe and disaster, are now widely regarded as much more realistic. So, a turning point Copenhagen most certainly was, but not a turning point towards the achievement of sustainability, but a turning point towards what elsewhere I have conceptualised as the politics of unsustainability (Blühdorn 2002, 2007, 2009, 2010; Blühdorn & Welsh, 2008).

At this important juncture the question of the framing of environmental discourses becomes important because at the transition to the politics of unsustainability eco-political communication and the packaging of eco-political issues are undergoing fundamental change. For example, the transition from the politics of sustainability to the politics of unsustainability implies a shift of focus and effort from mitigating and reversing climate change to adapting to it and mobilising social resilience. Living with environmental change, indeed, living with catastrophe and disaster is, explicitly or not, the new agenda.

Eco-political diagnoses, objectives and strategies are being reformulated in this light. The politics of unsustainability distinguishes itself by the profound unwillingness and inability to embrace the structural change that would be necessary to achieve, for example, the targets defined by the IPCC. It distinguishes itself by the firm resolve to sustain what is known to be unsustainable and to accommodate the social and ecological implications of this resolve. And at this juncture, it is essential to call to mind the centrality of cultural values and cultural framing in eco-politics.

Strictly speaking, it should, of course, hardly need calling to mind that environmental politics is, ultimately, always about socially framed norms and perceptions, not empirically measurable physical conditions as such (Fischer & Hajer, 1999; Fischer, 2003; Pettenger, 2007). Specific conditions in the physical environment are never *eo ipso* problematic. Environmental problems are never objectively measurable conditions, but always socially constructed perceptions, violations of established social norms and expectations. Therefore, the continuous cultural coding, de-coding and re-coding of environmental problems and normalities must be at the very centre of any enquiry into contemporary eco-politics, its potentials and its constraints. The bulk of sustainability research, however, mainstream natural science-oriented research, in particular, has been bending over backwards to describe environmental problems as well as the goal of sustainability in supposedly objective scientific terms. It desperately seeks to avoid any form of value judgements – because such judgements are notoriously problematic. As regards political sociology and environmental sociology, on the other hand, one might expect that these disciplines systematically explore the social constructedness and normative foundations of environmental discourses. Yet, for decades significant parts of political and environmental sociology, too, have focused their efforts on denying the irreducibly cultural nature of environmental issues. They have focused on depoliticising environmental issues and reframing them as technological, managerial and economic issues. And in doing so, environmental sociology has substantially contributed to the rise of the politics of unsustainability.

But from the perspective of those trying to hold on to the agenda of sustainability, the limitations of these depoliticised policy approaches are increasingly evident. It is increasingly evident that science, technology and the market (economic instruments) are in themselves insufficient. For the transition towards sustainability they are important tools, but ultimately, these tools are always only as strong and effective as political regulation can make them. And political regulation, in turn, is only as strong and effective as the cultural norms, values and preferences prevailing in the polity which needs to legitimate and implement the political rules. In other words, it is increasingly clear that if we want to reinstate the agenda of sustainability and make progress towards sustainability, we need profound value and culture change. Basic social norms and values need to be repoliticised and renegotiated. And to pave the way for this, we first of all need to bust the powerful and tranquilising myth that science, technology and economics can solve the problem. We need to refocus attention on the irreducibly cultural foundations of environmental discourses, on the normative core of eco-politics. In other words, for political and environmental sociology the first task and objective in focusing attention on the cultural framing of environmental discourses is an eco-political objective: to stem the turn towards the politics of unsustainability, to reinstate the agenda of sustainability and to facilitate, if at all possible, the culture change required for achieving this goal.

The second task and objective is already implicit in this; it is to explore the cultural conditions for and obstacles to such culture change. In a sense, this is again a political task, because the exploration of obstacles normally aims at facilitating their removal. But it may well be that these cultural obstacles cannot easily be removed, that the conditions for

the required culture change cannot be generated. In this case, i.e. if environmental and political sociology cannot facilitate value and culture change towards sustainability, focusing on the cultural framing of environmental discourses is still essential because we may at least be able to explain why such change cannot be achieved.

And the third task and objective in focusing sociological attention on the cultural framing of environmental discourses is to explore the cultural conditions, the cultural parameters, which determine the new politics of unsustainability. It is to reveal what processes of reframing are ongoing at the transition towards the politics of unsustainability, to expose what forms of recoding facilitate the governance of unsustainability and underpin the politics of adaptation and resilience. As the established politics of sustainability has become exhausted and we are moving into the politics of unsustainability various forms of repoliticisation are occurring, i.e. processes of reframing are ongoing, and environmental and political sociology can explore and expose what kind of cultural norms are now being forged and mobilised.

Having outlined these three tasks for environmental and political sociology I want to use the remainder of my time to explore in a bit more detail how environmental sociology itself has actively engaged in reframing of eco-political issues in a way that has substantially contributed to depoliticising them, to obscuring the cultural and normative substance of environmental politics, and to derailing earlier agendas of culture change. This entails a brief investigation of political ecology, ecological modernisation and ecological industrial policy.

Political Ecology

Sociology started to deal with environmental issues in the modern sense at a fairly late point in time. Social theory, for example, the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, had in some detail dealt with the relationship between nature and the human Self, human identity, before, but environmental sociology only in the 1980s established itself as an independent academic sub-discipline. At that time the environmental issue was firmly in the hands of political sociology and the dominant frame in which environmental issues had gained recognition in the political arena and made it onto political agendas was the frame of political ecology. Political ecologists were taking a radically critical view of capitalist consumer society and the established logic of modernity and modernisation. Taking up the Marxist theme of alienation as well as conservative concerns about the demise of the individual in modern industrial mass society, political ecologists explicitly demanded a different Self and identity beyond the individualised and predominantly materialist consumer identity, a different lifestyle beyond the alienating treadmill of competitiveness and efficiency, different social and natural relations beyond social and ecological instrumentalisation and destruction, and a different form of political and economic organisation beyond the only formally democratic and only economically profitable order of consumer capitalism (e.g. Commonor, 1971; The Ecologist, 1972; Marcuse, 1972; Schumacher, 1973; Gorz, 1975; Die Grünen, 1980; Boockchin, 1982; Porritt, 1984). Under the bottom line they demanded a comprehensively different modernity beyond the scientific-technological-industrial risk society (Beck, 1992).

Political ecology was essentially a project of emancipation and liberation. This framing of environmental issues was about the liberation of anything that had been oppressed and mutilated by traditional modernity and capitalist industrialism: women, minorities, emotions, cultural diversity and nature. The central norm and value underpinning the early Greens' critique of the 'rape of nature' (SFP, 1980: 20), of the 'social and psychological mass suffering' imposed by consumer-capitalism (SFP, 1980: 5, 6) and of the 'exploitation of nature and mankind by mankind' (SFP, 1980: 4, 6), was the

modernist notion of autonomy. Accordingly, political ecology is actually much better understood as the politics of autonomy than the politics of ecology. This core value of autonomy comprised, firstly, the authentic self-determination and self-realisation of human beings and, secondly, the integrity of nature, whereby both nature and the human being were to be liberated from their present status of mere objects of exploitation and accredited full subject status.

Figure 1: Two dimensions in the Greens' emancipatory project

AUTONOMY Green value/ concern self-determination/self-realisation of human beings
integrity of nature industrial consumer capitalism alienation/exploitation of human beings
exploitation/destruction of nature Green agenda/ project emancipation/liberation of the
authentic Self emancipation/liberation of nature

This conceptualisation, this cultural framing of environmental discourse, was based on the assumption that the established socio-economic order of capitalism, economic growth and consumerism was fundamentally incompatible with ecological objectives, i.e. that this order had to be removed wholesale for ecological goals to be realised. Thus political ecology gave rise to a politics of radical antagonism, and it was this antagonism and the concern about the likelihood of political deadlock that made environmental sociologists rethink and reframe the environmental issue.

Ecological Modernisation

In particular, environmental sociologists were keen to reconcile the goal of environmental protection and the established logic of modernity and modernisation. They insisted that for the achievement of ecological goals the kind of radical culture change and structural change to modern society which political ecologists had demanded were not necessary. They explicitly stated that there is no need 'for a fundamentally different organization of the (capitalist) economy', that modern society does not have to 'move beyond a modern market economy' and does not need to 'dissociate itself from a capitalist organization of production and consumption' (Mol & Jänicke, 2009: 19, 23; also see Hajer, 1995: 25).

In order to sustain this argument; in order to overcome the radical tension between the ecological issue and the established logic of modernity and consumer capitalism, environmental sociologists reframed the ecological issue as an issue of natural resources and resource efficiency. In this process, the very core of the radical critique launched by political ecologists essentially disappeared. The whole issue of liberation and emancipation, the issue of autonomy and integrity was expelled from environmental discourse. Instead, the paradigm of ecological modernisation (Hajer 1995; Blühdorn 2000; Mol and Sonnenfeld 2000; Mol et al. 2009) which from the mid-1980s incrementally became hegemonic and today determines institutionalised environmental policy around the globe, reframed ecological issues as technological issues, as managerial issues and economic issues.

The paradigm of ecological modernisation implied a comprehensive depoliticisation of the ecological issue. Ecological modernisation separated environmentalism from the critique of modernity and from cultural norms such as autonomy, integrity and emancipation. It claimed to accept the diagnosis of a profound ecological crisis, yet it did not accept political ecologists' critique of the logic of modernity. Instead, environmental sociologists promoting the paradigm of ecological modernisation claimed that modern society needs to and can modernise its way out of the environmental problem. Technological innovation, resource efficiency, market incentives, the internalisation of costs etc. became the buzz words and strategies of environmental policy. Ecological

modernisation worked with an economic model and assumed that everything environmentalists get concerned about can be expressed in terms of economic costs. If these costs would be fully internalised by the market, the ecological problem would be fixed. In other words, whilst for political ecologists technology, the capitalist growth imperative and the market were the fundamental problem, the proponents of ecological modernisation presented just these as the most promising solution.

Towards the turn of the century, however, it became increasingly clear that the proponents of ecological modernisation could not keep their promises. Their market and technology-oriented policy strategies had helped to address a plethora of specific environmental issues, yet they have done little to change the overall picture of ongoing environmental exploitation and degradation. On the whole ecological modernisation remained fraught with 'inherent limitations' (Jänicke, 2008: 557):

- For key environmental problems (e.g. habitat destruction, soil erosion, bio-diversity loss) marketable technological fixes are simply not available;
- environmental efficiency gains are persistently over-compensated by rebound effects and ongoing processes of growth (York & Rosa, 2003; Jänicke 2008);
- EM-approaches are based on two concepts, resource and efficiency, which are not intrinsically meaningful but must first be enriched with politically negotiated content (York & Rosa, 2003; Blühdorn, 2007b);
- EM-strategies ultimately just renew and extend the logic of growth and consumption which early political ecologists, the critics of the treadmill of production (e.g. Schnaiberg, 1980; Schnaiberg and Gould, 1994) and even the much more moderate UN Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) saw as the underlying cause of industrial society's unsustainability (c.f. Barry & Doran, 2006; Schlosberg & Rinfret, 2008; Jackson, 2009); and perhaps most importantly,
- the effectiveness of all techno-managerial strategies of EM remains dependent on political regulation which in turn can only be as tight as politicians and electorates are willing to make it. Thus with their paradigm of ecological modernisation, environmental sociologists not only comprehensively reframed the environmental problem, but their promise of depoliticisation was a false promise. In fact the proponents of ecological modernisation helped to establish the belief that the norms of modernity and capitalism which political ecologists were rightly attacking, are entirely non-negotiable. And by insisting that fundamental culture change and structural change is not necessary, they helped to sustain what already in the early 1970s had been known to be unsustainable.

In a recent article the American sociologist Robert Brulle notes pointedly:

The approach of ecological modernization has been subjected to extensive scientific analysis. The net conclusion of more than a hundred empirical studies is that this approach does not work [...]. Rarely does a scientific consensus speak so consistently against a political argument. [...] while championing ecological modernization may [...] make for appealing messages, it is bad environmental policy. (Brulle 2010: 88)

Ecological Industrial Policy

Yet, despite its proven ecological dysfunctionality, the ecological modernisation approach has recently, rather than being abandoned and replaced by renewed emphasis on the repoliticisation and renegotiation of central cultural norms underpinning the established order of unsustainability, been further developed into an ecological industrial policy (Blühdorn 2010: 215-218). This term, ecological industrial policy, was first introduced by the German Ministry for the Environment in 2006 (BMU 2006; Gabriel 2007; Machnig 2007; BMU 2008). But its substantive content gained international prominence in a different guise, namely rebranded as the so-called Green New Deal. From 2006 this idea of a Green New Deal experienced an amazing international career in the international environmental policy debate (e.g. German Federal Ministry for the Environment, 2006; Gabriel, 2007; Friedman, 2007; The Green New Deal Group, 2008; UNEP, 2008; Stern 2009). Harking back to Franklin D. Roosevelt's policies to counter the 1930s' Great Depression, the proponents of this concept were promising that a green reincarnation of the New Deal can today secure recovery from the global economic crisis and at the same time resolve the other major challenge the world is confronted with: the climate and environmental crisis. Indeed, from 2008 the crisis of the global financial system and the economy was widely portrayed as a unique opportunity to pave the way towards a genuinely sustainable society (e.g. Ki-Moon, 2008; Obama, 2009; Jackson, 2009).

In the present context the Green New Deal is interesting firstly because it implies yet another reframing of the environmental issue, secondly because it yet again extends the life time of the established order of unsustainability, i.e. it is an important tool for the politics of unsustainability, and thirdly because even internationally leading eco-political actors such as the German Green Party have firmly embraced this concept, thus providing evidence how firmly rooted and hegemonic the politics of unsustainability has become.

From the paradigm of ecological modernisation, the idea of the GND takes up the basic belief that the modern capitalist economy and the concerns of ecology, rather than being at conflict with each other, are thoroughly compatible. In fact, going beyond the paradigm of ecological modernisation the thinking of the GND suggests that ecological concerns and economic concerns are not just compatible with each other, but that the former are actually conducive to the latter. In their 2009 election campaigns (federal election, European Parliament) the German Greens, who had once been the proto-typical political ecology party, radically critical of the capitalist consumer economy, were enthusiastically describing how a Green New Deal would stimulate new economic growth (e.g. FEP, 2009: 25), boost consumer confidence and indeed trigger a 'new industrial revolution' (FEP, 2009: 14). They were talking about a Green New Deal enhancing the international competitiveness of the economy, opening up future export markets (FEP, 2009: 24-59), and creating one million new jobs within four years (FEP, 2009: 29-32).

Just as much as EM wanted to modernise its way out of the environmental crisis, thereby denying that the established logic of modernity is the fundamental problem, the proponents of the GND asserted that modern societies can grow their way out of the environmental problem, thereby denying that the logic of growth and consumption is the fundamental problem. Indeed, in the thinking of the Green New Deal growth and consumption are the very solution. If the GND can be regarded as an environmental policy tool at all, it is firmly relying on the economic solution to the problem. But ultimately, the GND is no more than a policy of economic recovery. In the case of EM one might still say that this approach sets out to address an ecological question, albeit an ecological question that in comparison to that which political ecologists had raised had been substantially reframed. But for EM, further 'modernisation', i.e. 'technological innovation', 'resource efficiency' and 'economisation' were still tools of ecological policy. In the thinking of the

GND, in contrast, this has substantially changed. For the GND the primary problem is no longer the environmental problem but the economic problem that growth has ground to a halt and somehow needs to be reinvigorated. In this context, the environmental crisis then appears as a welcome tool that can be used for the purpose of stimulating new economic growth. What the term Green New Deal somewhat shamefully hides, namely that it is first and foremost concerned with economic policy, is much more transparent, of course, in the term ecological industrial policy.

Thus, even for the German Greens, who were once the prototypical political ecology party, the ecological issue has gradually metamorphosed from a radical challenge to the capitalist economy into a motor for economic stabilisation and recovery. On the way from political ecology via ecological modernisation towards ecological industrial policy the ecological issue has been reframed, repackaged, in such a way that technology, capitalism, competitiveness, efficiency, growth, consumerism and the economic thinking of modernity have turned from the actual problem into something that is entirely non-negotiable and indeed an indispensable part of any eco-political solution, if such a solution exists at all. And in the process the ecological issue has been completely depoliticised, i.e. placed into the hands of technocrats, managers, science and economists whereby the fact that environmental issues are ultimately still culturally framed has been entirely eclipsed. After all, both the IPCC and Stern were making deeply political and normative judgements, even though they were both depoliticising climate change – one via science, the other via economics. Yet cultivating 'benign fictions' can be comforting in an often unfriendly world, yet such fictions become dangerous delusions when they are clung to despite overwhelming evidence. (Hamilton 2010: 5)

And as in the wake of sustained unsustainability the benign fictions are crumbling, different forms of repoliticisation are evolving. The normative foundations of established eco-politics are indeed being questioned. Processes of cultural reframing are going on. But the key issue that remains to be explored is whether these new projects and processes of cultural reframing are indeed pursuing the target of sustainability, or whether what we are witnessing is the cultural reframing of environmental discourses for the politics of unsustainability. For me this is one of the key questions which I hope this workshop and this research network will help to unpack and address.

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