

Introduction

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In light of the aggravating climate crisis, the issue of social and environmental well-being has gained prominent attention from both academia and policy makers. In this context, scholarly research on the interaction between social and employment policy domains has flourished (Bohnenberger, 2023; Hirvilammi et al, 2023), reflecting on the ecological and social risks and costs of climate change (Gough, 2020), sustainable welfare (Fritz and Lee, 2023), new social movements prompted by green transitions (Sovacool and Dunlap, 2022) and public opinion with regard to the potentially conflicting environmental and social goals (Gugushvili and Otto, 2023). Part of this debate has focused on the evolution and challenges of the welfare state in view of emerging environmental and climate issues (Koch, 2022), along with the increasing social costs and concerns for the so-called green state (Gough, 2016) and the emerging eco-welfare regimes (Zimmermann and Graziano, 2020; García-García et al, 2022). A particularly rich research strand has developed around the European Green Deal, exploring the EU's strategy for just transition in terms of policy design and implementation of its most relevant instruments, that is, the European Just Transition Mechanism and the Just Transition Fund, the Social Climate Fund and the Recovery and Resilience Facility within the NextGenerationEU plan (Crespy and Munta, 2023; Mandelli et al, 2023; Sabato and Mandelli, 2024).

As most studies acknowledge, the interplay between social and ecological dimensions represents a universal challenge which remains to be further unpacked and elaborated upon from both theoretical and operational policy perspectives. From a normative stance, environmental sustainability and social equity are deeply interconnected and must be dealt with together for holistic and long-lasting solutions. Ecological problems often stem from social systems that prioritise economic growth and resource exploitation over equitable distribution and environmental protection. This dynamic results in practices that degrade the environment and disproportionately affect marginalised populations, exacerbating social inequalities. And just as social inequities can drive ecological degradation, ecological crises can worsen social inequities. Environmental events like climate extremes, pollution and resource depletion often hit the most vulnerable populations hardest, deepening existing social divides and creating new forms of social injustice. Integrated policy approaches, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals,

call for the combining of social and ecological goals. Addressing poverty, inequality and economic development is seen as inherently linked to sustainability, climate action and environmental protection.

However, as – for instance – the chapter by [Hirvilammi and Kortetmäki](#) in this volume illustrates, the normative reading of the ‘eco-social interconnection’ does not imply that such a link has consolidated, either in academic research or extant public policies. This apparent paradox can be explained by different factors: as for academia, although interdisciplinarity is advocated, an eco-social approach is very difficult to realise for both organisational and professional reasons. More specifically, universities and organisations of knowledge production are still following traditional disciplinary boundaries where social and environmental fields are separated. Whereas socio-economics is more established, to our knowledge no Eco-Social Department exists. From a professional perspective, given the nature of academic recruitment, scholars either specialise in social politics and policies or in environmental policies and politics, which are underpinned by different theoretical and analytical approaches. The only contexts where the eco-social nexus is present is in Schools of Public Affairs or in Political Science Departments particularly focused on public policy analysis.

However, even with highly integrated eco-social approaches, there will inevitably be winners and losers. Policies that promote environmental sustainability and social justice can result in disparities where certain groups benefit while others bear the costs. For example, transitioning to renewable energy might create jobs in one sector while leading to unemployment in fossil fuel industries. Recognising and addressing these trade-offs and power dynamics within societies is key to understanding the nexus between the ecological and the social question.

While the number of studies concerned with this nexus between the social and the environmental domains has been rapidly growing over the last decade, involving different analytical angles and disciplines ([Cotta, 2024](#)), the theoretical and conceptual landscape of this recent strand of research still appears to be patchy and extremely heterogeneous ([Mandelli, 2022](#)). Against that backdrop, this volume provides a comprehensive and critical overview of the so-far fragmented scholarship on the eco-social linkage, illustrating the main theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the current political and academic debates, identifying the major research gaps and reflecting on possible future research pathways across a variety of disciplines and policy areas.

By collecting a wealth of contributions that depart from different theoretical, analytical and empirical angles, the volume aims to unpack the multifaceted nature of eco-social policies, politics and polity, reflecting on how consolidated institutions, policies and societies transform in the

endeavour to cope with the twofold eco-social challenge of climate change. Since the extant literature has been primarily focusing on European cases and the eco-social nexus has become particularly salient from the political and social perspectives, the volume reflects this academic state of the art and privileges this geographical area. However, the scholarly debates covered in the book are of broader relevance, and some chapters (for example, the one by [Ruiz-Campillo](#)) do cover non-European countries.

Given the nature of the volume, from a methodological perspective most chapters have relied on extensive literature review and desk research, although some authors have also conducted original analysis on policy documents and statistical data.

In addition to providing a full range of original theoretical and conceptual insights that help analytically frame and unpack the eco-social linkage, the book presents a plentiful array of empirical findings that could be valuable for practitioners to understand the practical implications of reconciling environmental and social goals, including political and ideological conflicts, policy overlaps and inconsistencies, as well as costs, benefits and risks across a variety of policy sectors.

The book is organised into four sections. [Part I](#) introduces the main normative and theoretical perspectives on the eco-social linkage in the current debate, while [Part II](#) explores eco-social politics, including institutional actors, movements, democratic challenges, public participation and support. [Part III](#) covers the policy dimension, analysing policy strategies, instruments and governance settings of eco-social policies at the European, national and local levels across a range of sectors, such as energy, housing, industry, food and labour, to mention a few. [Part IV](#) addresses the eco-social link from a global perspective, considering macro-comparative views on international organisations, Global South and Global North perspectives, as well as urban- and micro-level viewpoints.

This state-of-the-art volume provides a guide to the current eco-social debates and studies and offers several ideas on how to proceed with this research agenda. First, and foremost, it argues that a common conceptual (if not theoretical) framework should be shared by scholars in order to bridge the gap between various academic disciplines and provide real added value to studies exploring in detail the eco-social nexus. Second, broader debates regarding the link between eco-social politics and policies and the development of capitalist economies (and their leading neoliberal paradigm) should be further explored in order to better grasp the political and economic factors which are connected to the rise (and in some cases fall) of the eco-social nexus. A more fine-grained understanding of the preferences of actors in multilevel settings would be extremely beneficial for a better understanding of eco-social conflicts and decision making. Third, the geographical coverage of eco-social studies has so far been limited mainly to Europe and some

other ‘Western’ cases (US, Australia, and so on). More research is needed to cover both the international level (as mentioned by Cigna et al in their chapter) and places where we do not register fully fledged eco-social policy implementation but do see environmental and social conflicts which could be better understood by adopting eco-social lenses.

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