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Social movements and eco-social transition

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Introduction

Social movement mobilisation for social and environmental justice and, in more general, for sustainable welfare is an inherent part of contemporary societies facing the climate emergency. Bridging the nexus of social and environmental issues has not, however, always been straightforward for movement activists. While some ecological movements (for example, the anti-nuclear power movement) were already seen as essential social change transformers in the 1970s, the conservationism-oriented movements were less focused on the issues of social change at the time (Brulle, 2000; Rootes, 2004). Due to their specific primary goals of preserving nature and neglected attention to social justice, as well as the lack of representation of vulnerable social groups, there were animosities between the ecology and environmental justice movements in the early 1980s (Di Chiro, 1996; Diani, 1995). Since then, however, there has been growing attention to combining the environmental, ecological, workers' rights, welfare and social justice claims by social movement activists in the US, Western Europe and beyond. The disagreements over combining climate change and climate justice claims have not entirely disappeared among some environmental activists (Pezzullo, 2022). Still, within the context of an increasing number of 'ecological distribution conflicts', we can talk about the existence of the global environmental justice movement (Martínez-Alier et al, 2016). With the economic crisis of the 2010s, the climate crisis, the global health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020s and the new escalations of military conflicts (for example, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the war between Israel and Hamas since October 2023), the mobilisation for socially just environmental and climate policies have become particularly important. We have also seen new waves of protests mobilised by young climate activists concerned not only for the future of society's environmental and social well-being but also for the possibilities of achieving eco-social transformation and an ecologically sustainable society (de Moor et al, 2021b).

This chapter will provide a short overview of social movements that have been of particular importance in the mobilisation across the ecological and social nexus in various geographical locations and transnationally. We focus on historical development, some significant lines of division, mobilising strategies and the eventual political consequences of movements that mobilise for environmental and climate justice, as well as degrowth. Additional information about environmental and eco-social movements in different regions can be found, for example, in Grasso and Giugni (2022) and Snow et al (2019). Further discussion about labour unions and their concerns for just transition, sustainable welfare or climate justice from the perspective of trade union movements can be found in the Chapter 7 by Fabris and Pochet in this book.

Different movements for eco-social transformation

The most typical examples of movements aiming at ecological sustainability relate to the ideas of 'act locally, think globally'. These are movements belonging to various networks of global and environmental justice movements. The beginning of the environmental justice movement is usually dated to 1982, when civil rights and environmental activists joined forces to mobilise protests against the disposal of toxic waste at a landfill in Warren County, North Carolina, in the US (Schlosberg and Collins, 2014). These developments were also characterised by the central 'conflict' within environmental activism because of the diverse views on conservationism and eco-social transformation (see also Doherty, 2002). Over time, the movement unified a diverse set of actors, ranging from urban environmental groups to occupational health and safety activists, as well as the Indigenous land rights and various social and economic justice movements. The emerging coalition for environmental justice called for more attention to be paid to the broader societal consequences of environmental damage, bringing forward multiple claims often used by the Indigenous, African American and poor communities: ecological unity, vulnerability and ecological racism (Bullard 2000). The claims of environmental justice also travelled geographically outside of the US – to Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe and South East Asia (see, for example, Carruthers, 2008; Carmin et al, 2011). Today, we can, for example, observe the conflicts over environmental injustices via the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice (https://ejatlas.org; see also Temper et al, 2018).

Content-wise, the significant addition to the movement was the development of the 'climate justice' frame in relation to the first Climate Justice Summit during the COP6 meeting of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2001 (Schlosberg, 2012). Still, the previous tensions between different views on conservation and social transformation did not

disappear, and the discussions of 'climate justice' and 'systemic change' added another layer to the debates. Often, these differences were related to the diverging understanding of what has to be changed in the economic and political systems in order to achieve the goals of climate justice. Although the use of the climate justice frame allowed the environmental movement to turn back to its initial goals of achieving change via local action and reconnecting to other movements (della Porta and Parks, 2014), the adoption of the climate justice frame among the activists has taken time. For example, it has been shown that only relatively few participants of the protests related to the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference (COP15) in Brussels, Copenhagen or London adhered to the frames of 'climate justice' (Wahlström et al, 2013). According to a recent social media analysis, between 2018 and 2021, the climate strike Twitter discourse in English focused more on the themes related to responsibility for the use of fossil fuels (13 per cent) and diverse policy issues (13 per cent) than on climate justice (4 per cent) (Chen et al, 2023). Svensson and Wahlström (2023) examined the prevalent frames of the participants of the global climate strikes in 2019. They used the term 'civic system change' to connect the climate justice frame to the discourse of 'civic environmentalism'. It calls for a transformation of modern capitalist society with the aim of reaching an equitable and sustainable climate future (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2007). Svensson and Wahlström (2023) show that even in 2019, climate strike participants more frequently used frames that focused on regulatory actions of the government or individual behaviour rather than frames of 'system change'.

In the context of Western Europe, the focus on social transformation and sustainability was certainly not new, even though much of the scholarship discusses such mobilisation in the framework of 'new social movements' (Buechler, 1995). Many movements of the 1970s focused on the transformation of economic relations and emphasised the idea that the social system built on constant economic growth is not ecologically sustainable. As a solution, they saw local, decentralised alternative economies and a more vital welfare state (Hajer, 1997). The development of the European movements' interest in the broader socio-ecological transformation cannot be seen in isolation. There was a growing global civil society mobilisation, which involved the establishment of large international NGOs such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and several international summits that combined the interest in social and environmental issues: for example, the 1974 World Food Conference in Italy, the 1985 UN World Conference of Women in Kenya, and the 1992 Rio Conference on the Environment and Development (Pianta, 2001). One could suggest that different local grassroots mobilisations that combined the concerns for ecological, environmental and socio-economic transformation and eventually built up the ties to develop the *global justice movements* (GJMs)

in the late 1990s and 2000s (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; della Porta, 2007) were the first indicators of the transnational movement over the eco-social nexus. The specific developments of various movements within the GJM network addressing the environmental and social questions in Europe, for example, the mobilisation of the Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions and Citizen's Action (ATTAC), are well described in Fillieule and Accornero (2016). While many of the European environmental movements struggled with the internal divisions of conservationists and supporters of political ecology in the 1970s and 1980s, the intense networking during the 1990s helped to change their agenda so that the majority of the larger groups, such as Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth, acknowledged the importance of economic issues and sustainability for solving environmental problems (see more in Rootes, 2014).

After the peak of global (social justice) mobilisation in the early 2000s, many of the movements turned back to the local level. Eventually, each country, both in Europe and beyond, also had its local communities that used the claims of eco-social transformation. These have become evident in relation to increasing alternative solidarity activism after the recent economic crisis of the 2010s (Kousis and Paschou, 2017). For example, in the Italian context, we can talk about 'sustainable community movement organisations' that use various alternative forms of economic activism and political consumerism (Forno and Graziano, 2014). These movements, which could also be labelled as *environmental alternative action organisations* (EAAOs; see also de Moor et al, 2021a), aim to create new economic and cultural spaces, providing a framework for collective action and enabling the deployment of alternative lifestyles that promote eco-social transformation. In a comparative analysis of nine European countries, Kousis and Uba (2021) have shown that EAAOs, and particularly the movements of alternative consumption, are also present in France and Spain, to a much lesser extent in Greece and almost not at all in Sweden or Poland. Still, there has been a general emergence of groups that combine the concern for sustainable welfare and eco-social transformation with direct action at local food cooperatives, solidarity or community-supported agriculture, community gardening, repair cafés, bike kitchens, libraries of things and co-housing projects (Butzlaff and Deflorian, 2021). These movements, sometimes also labelled as 'lifestyle movement organisations' (Haenfler et al, 2012), usually focus on the change in individual behaviour and lifestyle. These are the goals that might seem easier or faster to achieve than the significant political or economic changes needed for eventual social transformation.

Before turning to the specific strategies of movements aimed at eco-social transformation, it is essential to introduce probably the most typical strand among the collective action for sustainable welfare – the mobilisation for degrowth. While for a long time constant economic growth was seen as

almost a precondition for the development of stable democracy and the welfare state, the growing need for economic expansion and, especially, the increasing need for natural resources have shown that such a process is not environmentally sustainable. Although the critique of economic growth had already appeared in the 1970s, the critical analysis of Western development aid programmes in the 2000s, the Great Recession of the 2010s and the emerging climate crisis have intensified the discussions about the problems of economic growth (Petridis et al, 2015). The movements for degrowth argue for 'an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions of the local and global level, in the short and long terms' (Schneider et al, 2010, p 512). Even though some observers suggest that 'green growth' and a renewable energy-based economy could be a solution to climate and environmental concerns, the proponents of the degrowth movement are mobilised around the argument that this type of growth is also unsustainable (Polimeni et al, 2008). Their imagined radically transformed society is not only free from 'growth addiction' but is also concerned with justice, democracy, biophysical limits and environmental degradation of the Earth (Petridis et al, 2015).

While there is no single degrowth movement mobilising for a simpler, just, democratic and ecologically sustainable society where the 'consumer' is replaced by the 'citizen', the ideas of degrowth have been adopted by the various social movements all around the world. In addition to the solidarity networks or alternative action organisations mentioned above, well-known movements such as Indignados in Spain have also adopted the ideas of degrowth and social-ecological transformation (Asara, 2020). Other examples of movements emphasising the opposition to economic growth, extractivism and industrialism are found in France (Demaria et al, 2013), Germany (Treu et al, 2020), as well as in South Asia and Latin America (for example, Rodríguez-Labajos et al, 2019).

Even some parts of the recent youth movement for climate, especially Fridays for Future (FFF), have adopted claims reflecting environmental and climate justice and degrowth under the slogan 'System change, not climate change!'. In the case of the FFF protest participants in Sweden, Emilsson and colleagues (2020) have shown that some activists, mainly with a trade union background, did prioritise economic growth as much as environmental protection, while for other protesters, the environment came before the economy. Other recent climate movements, such as Extinction Rebellion, also support the degrowth frame, but they more frequently emphasise individual responsibility and change (Buzogány and Scherhaufer, 2023). Nevertheless, like the initial disagreements between conservationism and social transformation, there are still internal tensions between more radical ideas of degrowth and more pragmatic claims for ecological modernisation prevalent in the contemporary climate and environmental movements

(Cassegård and Thörn, 2022). Some of these tensions are reflected in the scholarly debates of how radical or pragmatic contemporary environmental activism should be for achieving its goals (see more in de Moor et al, 2021a), and there are also cross-national differences which most likely reflect the diverse opportunities and movement practices (Svensson and Wahlström, 2023).

The repertoires of action

While contentious actions in the form of more or less disruptive protest tactics are the typical repertoires of action for social movements, eco-social movements combine different strategies: direct action and campaigns for changing public opinion, as well as peaceful protests and acts of civil disobedience. Direct action or, more specifically, collective action, which aims at directly transforming some specific aspects of society rather than just demanding changes from the targets such as the state or business (Bosi and Zamponi, 2020), has been an integral part of the early eco-social movements. Although non-violent direct action could take the form of civil disobedience with primarily conservationist goals (for example, anti-logging forest blockages or community mobilisation against extraction; see, for example, Almeida et al, 2024), in relation to eco-social mobilisation, it is more common to think of it as grassroots activists setting up small eco-villages or environmental communes – a practice growing since the 1970s.

With the increasing importance of individualistic and post-material values, more people opted for do-it-yourself types of activities and various lifestyle changes to advance eco-social transformation. One well-known strategy here is 'political consumerism', which assumes that 'consumers potentially can and in certain circumstances do collectively influence societal developments through what they decide to purchase [buycott], what they decide not to purchase [boycott], and how they relate to consumption in general through discourses and lifestyle projects' (Boström et al, 2019, p 14). Hence, those motivated by goals of eco-social transition or sustainable welfare often opted for actions such as supporting community agriculture and local food collectives, boycotting specific products or mobilising against consumer culture (Lorenzini, 2019). Such 'lifestyle' environmental activism with transformative goals and the development of alternative economic institutions became particularly visible at times of different crises, especially in relation to the economic recession of 2008–2010 (Kousis, 2017).

Similar to the tensions mentioned above around the goals and level of ambition of environmental mobilisation, the choice of strategies is also discussed in different environmental and climate movements as well as by scholars. The focus is on the potential intended and unintended consequences of using particular strategies. While some radical or reformist strategies are

complementary, others might lead to conflicting outcomes. For instance, Balsiger (2016) has shown that some market-related tactics such as movements collaborating with producers to introduce new labels in relation to sustainable clothing or ethical fashion might have self-defeating effects as collaboration might allow enterprises to sidestep some demands for sustainable production. While many activists aiming for eco-social transformation have used civil disobedience as a reasonable strategy due to the state of urgency and failure of the institutionalised actions (Hayes and Ollitrault, 2019), other actors, mainly the public and media, are debating the possible adverse effects of such actions. Still, the majority of mobilisation for sustainable environmental development is non-violent and peaceful (Sovacool and Dunlap, 2022), and it has been suggested that confrontational strategies of the recent climate movement have not affected the general public opinion with respect to climate change (Fisher et al, 2023).

The outcomes: achieving the eco-social vision of the future

Although the mobilisation for social-ecological transformation has been going on since the 1970s, the political and social consequences of these movements have not been widely studied. The wave of activism faded a bit in the 1990s and has found its second wind with the current wave of climate activism. Considering that it takes time to achieve social movements' goals of political and social change (Bosi et al, 2016), it is not surprising that we cannot yet talk about significant political changes as a result of mobilisation for eco-social transformation. Although Petridis et al (2015) suggest that the mobilisation for degrowth has made the public more aware of its social consequences and proposed alternative ways to build socially sustainable societies, there is still no clear majority support for such solutions among the public in Europe or elsewhere (Fritz and Koch, 2019). In Sweden, scholars have asked to what degree the general public supports specific visions of the future for reducing carbon emissions, and the one related to degrowth: 'People work less, can afford fewer things and have more time for communal activities and personal development' was considered desirable by 61 per cent of the respondents (Wahlström et al, 2024). Still, while some of the political solutions promoted by the degrowth movements have found their way to the policy agenda of several countries (for example, basic income or the reduction of working hours), it is not clear if these also have the desired effect on the environment (Kallis et al, 2013).

On the other hand, the above-mentioned direct-action type of mobilisation (eco-villages, repair shops and local agricultural communities) has clear economic and social consequences and could aid in the further mobilisation of concerned citizens. There are also several clear examples of how protest mobilisation of movements against the extraction of raw

materials have managed to stop or postpone the process in Latin America (Arce, 2016), Europe (Fjellborg et al, 2022) and the US (Vasi et al, 2015). Still, anti-extraction movements and Indigenous environmental activists also face physical repression all around the world (Menton and Le Billon, 2021). Repression is used even against other types of mobilisation for eco-social transformation (Temper et al, 2020). In Australia, scholars have shown the existence of widespread rhetoric supporting the criminalisation of climate protest, portraying protesters as threats to economic and political interests and national security (Gulliver et al, 2023). Similar tendencies are noticed in the US, where protests close to critical infrastructure (for example, petroleum refineries and pipelines) are increasingly banned (Gordon, 2024).

Conclusion

Combining effectively the goals of environmental conservation and social justice is not an easy task, and we have shown that this has created tensions within environmental and climate movements. It is undoubtedly usual that social movements face dilemmas and tensions in relation to their goals and strategies (Jasper, 2004), and movements for eco-social transformation are no exception. While the disagreements between the strands of 'climate justice', 'ecological modernisation' and 'green technology' have probably been more noteworthy among the social movements active in northern developed countries (the US and Western Europe), these are also present elsewhere. Many young climate activists have adopted the calls for 'climate justice' and institutionalised environmental social movement organisations such as Greenpeace criticise market solutions to the current environmental and climate crisis. This has led to some, but by no uniform, public support for the ideas of sustainable welfare (Otto and Gugushvili, 2020).

Furthermore, few political developments address eco-social transformation, especially on a global scale. Even though countries participating in the UN's global climate summit in 2023 called for a transition away from fossil fuels to prevent the harmful effects of climate change, the agreement was far from the demands of climate justice advocates. Thus, we can be sure that the mobilisation for sustainable welfare continues, and activists will combine innovative direct-action strategies with more traditional collective action repertoires of social movements. Future studies could pay even more attention to how eco-social movements all around the world develop visions of what a fossil-free and just society could look like and how to mobilise individuals, communities and political or economic institutions to work for such a future.

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