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Introduction. Putting the Political in Its Place: Towards a Political Sociology of Sustainability

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Since its inception in the early 1990s, the international framework on sustainability has developed into a rich and ambitious set of policy goals on such diverse topics as climate change, biodiversity loss, extreme poverty, public health, green growth, innovation, etc. Although it is often portrayed as a vague concept, sustainability has helped frame the multidimensional and highly interdependent issues that represent the crucial challenges of our time, framing them in a more or less coherent policy discourse. We are now used to grouping these issues according to the “three pillars” of sustainability, i.e., its environmental, social, and economic dimensions.

Notably absent from this conception of sustainability is the discussion of its political components, if by “political” we understand something more than the mere procedural concerns (such as transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, etc.) that are associated with its social dimension and the instrumental frameworks (such as policy coherence, global partnership, etc.) shoring up policymaking and governance for sustainable development. First, the “political” relates to situated conflicts over collective decisions – entailing winners and losers – between actors endowed with unequal power. At a more fundamental level, it refers to the possibility of altering the social structuration, which determines the existing unequal power distribution. In the light of this extended definition of the “political”, sustainability has been claimed to be a post-political frame, involving «the technical, managerial and consensual administration (policing) of environmental, social, economic [...] domains» (Swyngedouw 2011: 266). Even when the problem of governing socio-natural relationships is directly addressed (see *inter alia* Biermann *et al.* 2017), the current debate on the governance of sustainability seems to be mired in a post-politics, understanding social change as a techno-managerial issue, ignoring power unbalance in favor of a non-conflictual representation of social relations, and reducing political issues to pure cognitive problems (Blühdorn 2022a).

We think political sociology can contribute to reasserting the role of “the political” in the conceptual constellation of sustainability. Political sociology is, for example, well-suited to investigate the long-term institutional configurations and party politics that may enable a society-wide transition to sustainability, and the mechanisms of political participation best suited to solve

the tough trade-offs it entails. It may help to satisfactorily explore the links between social classes, groups, and identities and the support for radical or moderate sustainable measures, as well as the circumstances under which this support varies in the different national and local contexts. Sociopolitical studies can shed light on the role of industrial interest groups as sponsors of right-wing parties and think tanks that endorse a weak environmental agenda and are skeptical of climate change.

This special issue aims to demonstrate the importance of sustainability as a research topic for contemporary political sociology and, vice versa, the meaningfulness of socio-political research in improving our understanding of sustainability issues. This does not mean, though, that we are advocating for a partial, purely specialistic, point of view. We think that dialogues and hybridity between different disciplines are essential to define the place political sociology may have in this debate.

1. DEPOLITICIZATION AND THE POLITICAL

This special issue wants to interrogate the political dimension(s) of sustainability moving from the assumption that the policy discourses surrounding sustainability tend to obscure the relationship between politics and decisions of collective relevance. However, the breadth of this critical claim risks significantly diminishing its heuristic utility. When we assert that sustainability obscures the political nature of collective decisions, we might mean that sustainability, along with the issues it describes, transcends the division among diverse political cultures by presenting itself as a set of objectively collective problems requiring effective and efficient solutions. Alternatively, we might be suggesting that sustainability policies (from a normative standpoint) are best developed by autonomous authorities – detached from political contestation and independent of the need to seek public consensus.

A further interpretation could be descriptive: some actors and decision-making arenas critical to sustainability policies operate “at one remove” from mechanisms of democratic control and legitimation. This is the case, for instance, with international organizations that finance and implement sustainable development policies, like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, or transnational organizations like the OECD that produce policy recommendations and facilitate the transfer of experimental sustainability policies across geo-institutional contexts.

Another perspective might emphasize how policy discourses on sustainability pay minimal attention to the

conflict in defining goals and distributing the benefits and costs associated with sustainable transitions. Additionally, it might point to the regulatory frameworks for sustainability, which have consistently placed disproportionate emphasis on the voluntary actions of economic actors, market mechanisms, and individual consumer choices. In this framing, private behaviors – removed from the collective dimension of politics – are granted a level of importance comparable to, if not greater than, public regulation and policy initiatives.

Finally, discussing the absence of political dimensions in sustainability could pertain to the capacity of sustainability discourses to frame certain social phenomena as being beyond collective decision-making. For example, the naturalization of certain issues – the representation of phenomena as external, preexisting, and beyond collective agency – has been a prominent feature of how economic growth has been reintroduced into the sustainable development debate despite its critique by ecological approaches in the 1970s.

The variety of meanings connected to the claim that sustainability is a depoliticized concept requires a brief clarification of what we mean when we talk about depoliticization. Following the literature (Jessop 2014, Buller *et al.* 2019, Moini 2019), we can distinguish between two macro-domains in which depoliticization processes operate. The first pertains to politics, understood here as the exercise of legitimate decisional authority. In this case, depoliticization is «a governing strategy [...] *the process of placing at one remove the political character of decisionmaking*» (Burnham 2001: 128, emphasis in original). It operates on institutional architecture, attributing decision-making authority to “non-political” actors (i.e., not democratically legitimized). It also works through policy statements and public discourses, transforming a previously collective issue into a private affair and placing it outside the scope of collective decision-making (Hay 2007). The first-generation (Flinders and Buller 2006) and second-generation (Wood and Flinders 2014) studies on depoliticization understand it

as a ‘principle’ of policymakers involving the implementation of particular ‘tactics and tools’ [such as] the creation of delegated agencies to advise on and make policy decisions, [...] setting binding rules on policymakers, and [...] discursive ‘acts’ aimed at making policy issues appear non-political (Fawcett *et al.* 2017: 10).

The second macro-domain concerns the “political” itself. In this case, depoliticization refers to acts and discourses that can construct «a division between the political and non-political spheres and locating social relations and/or sets of social issues on one or another

side of this divide» (Jessop 2014: 210). This type of depoliticization seeks to neutralize the political nature of social orders, effectively denying that decisions with significant consequences for how a community is organized arise from conflict and exclusion and are contingent and reversible.

This form of depoliticization aims to neutralize the transformative potential of conflict by concealing the contingent nature of the decisions that established a particular articulation of social identities, i.e., a particular social order. This neutralization tends to abstract its object from the power relations within which it is embedded: consider, for example, the current naturalization of inequalities, which are framed as the result of different natural abilities within a context of free private enterprise and well-functioning markets. The “neutralization of the political” grants the existing social order an unquestionable and immutable character by obscuring the role of conflict in its formation. Following C. Mouffe (2000, 2005, 2013), we can define “post-politics” as that hegemonic relation which, in articulating various social identities and configuring their reciprocal relations, denies the legitimacy and even the existence of conflict within the social order it seeks to establish.

2. POST-POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT, ONTOLOGICAL POLITICS AND POST- ECOLOGICAL POLICY PARADIGMS

Political ecology has long integrated the concept of the post-political environment into its analytical framework for understanding socio-natural relations. E. Swyngedouw’s contributions to the debate have particularly addressed the issue of the post-political environment. Drawing on a conceptual apparatus that integrates the theoretical outcomes of French post-structuralism, Swyngedouw has interrogated the paradoxical nature of contemporary sustainability policies. These policies aim to guide changes in the relationships between human societies and their environments without engaging in political conflict over choices regarding the reordering of social relations. «Although disagreement and debate are of course still possible, they operate within an overall model of elite consensus and agreement, subordinated to a managerial-technocratic regime» (Swyngedouw 2011: 267). This discursive regime tends to dissociate the social causes – a historically specific organization of relations of production and reproduction – from their environmental effects, so that the latter can be presented as imbalances in physical, chemical, and biological systems. Problems within social relations are externalized

as issues among natural entities requiring technical solutions, without the necessity to change the structuring of society or the unequal distribution of social power it entails (Swyngedouw 2013, 2015).

Swyngedouw’s radical critique of the Anthropocene follows a similar line of thought. His starting point is the observation that the so-called “end of nature” (McKibben 1990, Vogel 2015) – the crisis of modern ontologies that posited a clear separation between society and nature – has led to a proliferation of discourses about new ways to construct socio-natural relations. This heterogeneous set of approaches is united by the deployment of ontologies that are symmetrical (it considers human and non-human entities as equally endowed with agency) and relational (where entities are identified through differentiation rather than an assumed individual substance). These new ontologies have prompted critical thought to develop hypotheses for «post-capitalist politics that operate through horizontal, heterogeneous, and multi-species entanglements» (Swyngedouw and Ernstson 2018: 11). However, the discursive space opened by the disappearance of nature as the opposite, limit, and measure of the social seems to have been predominantly filled by constructions that bring the alterity of the non-human world under human manipulative capacity, now reframed as «loving supervision, intelligent crafting, reflexive techno-natural nurturing and ethical manicuring» (Swyngedouw 2019: 254). Concepts like the “good Anthropocene” or “planetary stewardship” exemplify this synthesis of the “end of nature” and technical optimism about capitalism’s ability to create a healthy and hospitable environment (see *inter alia* Arias-Maldonado 2016, 2019, Hamilton 2016).

Inspired by R. Esposito’s immunological-biopolitical perspective, Swyngedouw argues that this discursive ensemble tends to isolate and expel from the social body those socio-natural phenomena that appear to jeopardize its orderly functioning. Social groups, territorial communities, species, or ecosystems deemed beyond salvation may thus be sacrificed, while safe social groups «become mere spectators of the suffering of others from the cocoon of their sanctuary spaces» (Swyngedouw and Ernstson 2018: 16).

The “ontological turn” (for an introduction see Flemmer *et al.* 2024) away from the rigid dichotomy between society and nature constitutes a crucial element of contemporary thought on socio-natural relations. However, it has not ensured the predominance of new emancipatory ontologies. The renewed focus on ontologies highlights their significance for politics, as the foundations of the (European/Western) social and natural world are increasingly revealed as contextual, open to

multiple interpretations, and thus contestable. Yet, as L. Pellizzoni (2015) convincingly argues, this “ontological politics” risks «neglecting the extent to which the emergence of the material world is [...] also the (intended or unintended) effect of deliberate moves in the context of sticky power asymmetries [...] which crucially affect the conditions of possibility of the real» (*Ibidem*: 78).

It is therefore both useful and necessary to think about the “politics of ontology”, that is, the relationship between the multiple possible ways of reconstructing socio-natural entities and relations – with their links to epistemological and methodological questions – and the acts that transform or preserve the social order through domination and consent, connecting the ruling class and the ruled, and holding together systematic worldviews and common sense.

Pellizzoni notes how the neoliberal hegemonic project has made indeterminacy, risk, and radical contingency (elements intrinsic to many new ontologies as opposed to modern deterministic reductionism) one of the main tools for managing socio-natural relations (Pellizzoni 2023). «The more unstable the world, the more manageable» (Pellizzoni 2011: 797) is the motto of neoliberal governance of the real, which overturns received ontological perspectives without modifying in an egalitarian or emancipatory sense the unequal structuring of social power in which they were embedded.

The “end of nature” is only one component characterizing the current governance of socio-natural relations. I. Blühdorn (2007, 2013) has shown how this can be better understood by overturning certain sociological assumptions about the developmental trajectories of contemporary society. Firstly, the tendency of post-industrial societies to place greater emphasis on post-materialist values (such as self-realization or the enjoyment of an unspoiled environment), as proposed by R. Inglehart. Blühdorn argues that never before have consumption choices so thoroughly replaced other measures of autonomy, social responsibility, identity, and even emancipation. Support for environmental causes, for example, is immediately equated with acquiring goods consciously marketed as green or ethical. Secondly, the presumed reflexive posture of late modernity concerning risks generated by its developmental processes is called into question. U. Beck’s “risk society” did not establish institutions capable of democratizing and globalizing the understanding and accountability for risks arising from modernization. Instead, it has prevalently framed risk as an unrealized opportunity, a privileged object of private economic initiative. As A. Wildavsky (1982) posited, «[i]n a culture of competitive individualism, risk is opportunity. Without scarcity there is no competition;

without uncertainty, there is no reward» (*Ibidem*: 320). Finally, Blühdorn observes how the deliberative and participatory promises of “democratizing democracy” have given way to a variety of pessimistic diagnoses about the state of liberal democracies: the primacy of post-democracy (Crouch 2004), the crisis of representation (Viviani 2018), and the rise of illiberal democracies (Wagrandl 2021).

The “silent counter-revolution”, the “opportunity society”, and the “post-democratic turn”, along with the “end of nature”, are the main dimensions of the post-ecological paradigm in contemporary sustainability policies. This paradigm, and its associated modes of governance, do not deny the severe consequences of our development model for socio-natural relations but fail to acknowledge the different responsibilities for their emergence, or the benefit certain social actors derive from their unresolved status. A paradox marks the post-ecological paradigm: «the coincidence of an essentially uncontested consensus that the established values, lifestyles, and social structures are (by any understanding of the term) unsustainable and the adamant resolve to defend and secure the structures and principles underlying this unsustainability» (Blühdorn 2011: 42).

3. POST-POLITICAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE SHADOW OF THE ANTI-ECOLOGICAL BACKLASH

The characterization of sustainability as a post-political and post-ecological paradigm has been particularly apt in describing the governance of socio-natural relations over the past decades (Esposto 2024). However, the effects of current global challenges – such as the deterioration of geopolitical relations, the consolidation of openly authoritarian regimes, and the strengthening of radical right-wing movements – on this policy discourse remain uncertain.

Critical contributions have frequently highlighted the need to re-politicize the governance of environmental issues (see *inter alia* Ernstson and Swyngedouw 2018), emphasizing a move beyond the “depoliticizing deadlock” of contemporary governance. Blühdorn (2022b, 2022c) seems to have reached a pessimistic conclusion about the feasibility of such re-politicization. He argues that right-wing populisms have demonstrated a capacity to politicize sustainability and green transitions in anti-ecological terms. This has been achieved by deploying the same discursive repertoire – centered on autonomy, self-realization, and opposition to oppression – that historically underpinned Western emancipatory projects. Blühdorn examines the declining efficacy of the

“dialectic of emancipation”, i.e., the relationship between “rule-transgressing” and “rule-setting” that underlain and energized the emancipatory project, forming the basis of our ideas of progress. Today, we find ourselves in a paradoxical condition: as the unsustainability of modernization intensifies, «the emancipatory project [...] fully loses the ability to counterbalance its logic of expansion and transgression with a logic of limitation and restraint» (Blühdorn 2022b: 39).

Swyngedouw (2022) highlights an additional explanation of the current contingency: the vacuum left by the long post-political era has created conditions conducive to the right-wing re-politicization of sustainability. The mechanisms of this politicization vary. Some political forces appeal to the fears of those most exposed to the costs of ecological transitions, particularly within the Global North. Some actors – in particular, think tanks and corporate lobbyists – have fostered skepticism toward scientific knowledge on socio-ecological crises, such as climate change. Another common strategy contrasts the supposedly “ideological” ecological thinking with pragmatic, “common sense” – and invariably pro-business – decisions. Despite these variations, these forces share a common goal: delaying the regulation of economic sectors that contribute most to the unsustainability of the current development model (Brulle 2014).

In response to this context, it becomes essential to explore alternative perspectives on the politicization of sustainability and ecological transitions. These alternatives must be grounded in a robust conception of politics, recognizing it as a tool for mediating diverse interests through conflict and antagonism. This approach must also acknowledge the legitimacy of theoretical frameworks that attribute the contemporary socio-ecological crises to the capitalist system and critique the prevailing notions of sustainability and transition for failing to challenge the fundamental unequal structuration of society (Asara *et al.* 2015). Such perspectives must affirm the possibility of aligning labor struggles with environmental advocacy, demonstrating their potential for mutual reinforcement in challenging the exploitation of humans and non-humans (Imperatore and Leonardi 2023, Barca 2024).

4. INTRODUCING THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The multidimensionality of sustainability refers to complex relationships between different and seemingly distant events. The study of interdependencies between social and political change is the hallmark of political sociology. This tension towards connections and inter-

dependencies represents a founding feature of the epistemology of political sociology. Segatori (2012: 13) identifies the specialization of sociological reflection on politics precisely in its ability to address the «interdependencies between conflicts, powers, systemic relations, and political forms». Moving from such considerations, the contributions to this special issue present a wide array of topics and interrogate them from the perspective of their political relevance.

Galmarini and Chiesi address the topic of the post-political environment in the urban context. The argument developed by the authors helps us appreciate the depoliticizing power of discourses on sustainable urban development and greening, which reduces the scope for alternative urban imaginaries that are more aware of socio-spatial justice issues. Secondly, and even more importantly, the contribution highlights what we might call the “dual movement” between the depoliticization of public policy and the politicization of private initiatives. This refers to the ability of market actors and entrepreneurial third-sector entities to exploit the “decoupling of social and environmental claims”, extending the privatization and commodification of urban spaces.

D’Agata revisits the theme of sustainability in urban policies, starting from a dialogue with neo-Gramscian approaches to the environment and urban regimes. This allows the author to present a theoretical framework useful for moving beyond the discursive critique of sustainability. One outcome of this theoretical reconstruction that we wish to emphasize is placing labor not as one of the many possible social identities articulated through political-discursive acts, but as “structurally constitutive of socio-ecological relations”. This is because labor is inextricably involved in the material appropriation of the non-human world, which is simultaneously the appropriation of surplus labor by capitalists or, that is the same, the unequal distribution of the products of this appropriation, and the consequent unequal structuring of social power.

Ferraro’s contribution, which introduces us to more markedly empirical research, delves into another crucial aspect of the relationship between labor and socio-natural relations, the combined negative impacts of production on the health of workers, territorial communities, and the ecosystems they inhabit. The case of asbestos pollution by Isochimica, in a territory already marginalized within Southern Italy’s Campania, reminds us of the core assumption of environmental justice: marginalized social groups and territorial communities are those that suffer the greatest effects of human-driven environmental degradation. The scenario described by the author is bleak: justice expectations have been systematically

unmet, despite sustainability rhetoric and simulated initiatives for health protection. Even when fully achieved, restorative justice intervenes – as Ferraro emphasizes – only in response to an event whose effects have already fully unfolded. Re-politicizing the issue of health within and beyond production could be crucial for forging alliances among workers, citizens, and activists capable of preventing socio-environmental devastation.

The role of “hegemonic ideas” deployed by economic actors to generate consensus for their accumulation strategies is the focus of Nupieri’s contribution. The author examines the networks of actors forming the discursive coalition supporting the expansion of so-called “sustainable finance” in Italy. Through the careful use of key concepts of interpretative policy analysis, such as *référentiel*, the author describes in detail the representations this coalition has mobilized to establish finance as an indispensable tool for achieving sustainability goals. The financial sector has thus been able, on the one hand, to regain the legitimacy that seemed lost forever after 2008, and on the other, to find new domains of socio-natural relations in which to expand its operations.

D’Albergo and Giovanelli focus on the highly topical issue of data-driven policymaking. The case detailed by the authors lies at the intersection of the two transitions that the EU has decided to invest in: the digital and the ecological. The use of augmented analytics, through the contribution of AI systems, on the vast amount of data generated by social interactions in urban environments represents a new frontier at the science-policy interface. These technical tools seem to enable the almost automatic management of urban socio-natural relations. The authors convincingly show that these techno-managerial governance tools are far from being neutral to values and interests. They are, instead, situated at the intersection of the “values and beliefs” characterizing the “mainstream policy paradigms” of our time and the goals and interests of hegemonic actors in various local political-economic regimes.

Gozzo and D’Agata undertake the challenging task of analyzing the social dimension of sustainability, whose analytical definition remains an open issue in the literature. The authors demonstrate how social sustainability is a potentially contradictory conceptual construct. For instance, social cohesion can be both strengthened and diminished by other concepts associated with social sustainability, such as tolerance towards migrants or a sense of belonging to a defined community. Armed with the rich data from *the European Social Survey*, the authors reveal the existence of multiple models of social sustainability within the EU – largely determined by the variety of social models and politico-cultural regimes – and their evolution following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The theme of eco-activism among new generations is central to the contribution of Asara and Alietti. Through the analysis of a survey administered to the students from the University of Ferrara, the authors provide a detailed account of young generations’ attitudes toward socio-ecological crises and their possible solutions. The results highlight a persistent interest in environmental issues among the majority of respondents, even five years after the mass mobilization of *Fridays for Future*. The evolving international landscape, with environmental issues increasingly marginalized in policy agendas and public discourse, is reflected in a growing sense of “agencylessness” among young people, accompanied by a pessimistic outlook on the possibility of mitigating climate change. However, the majority of respondents – across the ideological divide – consider it a priority to change modes of production and consumption, moving beyond technical fixes. This serves as a stark reminder that socio-ecological crises remain a reason to imagine different political arrangements of socio-natural relations.

Montanari and Panarari tackle the problem of conscious consumption and its political dimension, that is, the necessary forms of organization and collective action that have enabled the emergence of various forms of ethical and eco-compatible production and consumption. The creation of what have become genuine giants in the sector, such as Slow Food and Whole Foods Market, reflects the intent to re-politicize tastes and sensory pleasures. However, the possibility that this subversive charge may be reabsorbed by market dynamics remains a constant risk in the operations of these major brands, thus making it increasingly difficult for “consumer-citizens” to balance the pursuit of self-interest with adherence to the common good.

Campbell provides an in-depth analysis of a case study on collaborative governance of a natural resource. The collaborative forest management detailed by the author highlights the potential of participatory science-based initiatives to reduce conflicts over managing socio-natural relations and to open techno-managerial mechanisms to scrutiny and collective deliberation.

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