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Workshop:

Beyond the environmental state?

Exploring the political prospects of a sustainability transformation

Workshop directors

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Outline

Amidst the intensifying environmental crises of climate change, resource depletion, and rapid biodiversity loss, it is becoming apparent that modern societies will need to re-orientate themselves towards new forms of sustainable prosperity. Despite considerable progress with reformist approaches to sustainability governance, such as schemes for greening industrial processes, there is a real risk that reforms alone will not be sufficient for long-term sustainability; that a more radical, structural societal transformation will eventually be required. Yet, while the need for another 'Great Transformation' is increasingly acknowledged in both academia (Scoones et al. 2015; Westley et al. 2011; Haberl et al. 2011; Brand et al. 2013; Jackson 2009) and public authorities (WBGU 2011; UNEP 2011), what has remained questionable is the potential for societies to achieve any such fundamental transformations on the ground. Both the global efforts in sustainability governance (Parks et al. 2008; Biermann et al. 2012) and the efforts of nation states to curb environmental impacts of economic activity have remained limited so far (Duit 2014). Most industrialised countries have nowadays incorporated an environmental management agenda as a core function of their state apparatus, which gave rise to the notion of the 'environmental state' as the latest incarnation of the modern capitalist state (Duit et al. 2016; Meadowcroft 2012). However, it seems that the transformative capacities of the environmental state are limited and that it is locked into a productivist, growth-based trajectory that remains unsustainable in the long run. Whereas the environmental state has succeeded in managing many local environmental problems and health and safety issues, so far it remains incapable of achieving a profound societal transformation towards sustainability.

This workshop thus poses the question whether there may be a 'glass ceiling' in the sense of an invisible, yet structural limit to environmental reform that is constitutive of the contemporary environmental state. The first aim of the workshop is to conceptually define and explain that glass ceiling and to empirically locate it in instances of environmental policy and politics. The second aim of the workshop is to take the diagnosis of a glass ceiling as a starting point for broader conceptual and empirical explorations of the possibility of breaking it and of establishing a more transformative, permeable and open model of democracy, which would allow for more comprehensive societal transformations. With this focus, the workshop deliberately builds on the 2013 ECPR workshop on

‘Revisiting the Ecological State in the Anthropocene’, yet takes the debate a decisive step further by exploring the limitations of the existing environmental states as well as investigating the general preconditions and prospects of overcoming such structural ‘glass ceilings’ in modern democracies.

Thus, the workshop will provide a focussed platform for addressing the following inter-related sets of questions:

1. What are the structural limits of environmental reform in contemporary capitalist democracies? What are their institutional, socio-economic, and/or cultural dimensions? How can the resulting ‘glass ceiling’ of the environmental state be conceptualised and explained?
2. What are empirical instances of the glass ceiling? To what extent do the empirical cases point toward a structural nature of the barriers to change?
3. What are the chances of lifting, cracking or breaking the glass ceiling, both conceptually and empirically? Are there strategic entry points into the structure where institutional innovations may result in the dissolution of the glass ceiling? Or is an entirely new model of democracy required to allow for a comprehensive sustainability transition?
4. What are the conceptual links between the institutional structures of the democratic (environmental) state and processes of societal change? How can radical change be institutionally enabled? How can social theory, democratic theory and green political theory contribute to conceptualising a transformative model of a democratic society geared toward sustainability? What empirical instances of radical change are there that could guide and inform a conceptual debate about transformative democratic institutions?

Relation to existing research

The purpose of the workshop is to explore both the limits to transformative change in contemporary capitalist democracies and the prospects of overcoming them. This complex agenda relates to, and invites the perspectives of, a broad range of different literatures that deal with state theory, green political theory, democratic theory, social theories of change and empirical research in environmental policy and politics.

In the first instance, the workshop relates to the conceptual and empirical analysis of the contemporary environmental (welfare) state and its limitations. In recent years, an impressive body of work has emerged around the concept of the ‘environmental state’, which describes ‘the empirical development of systems of authoritative national environmental governance that occurred first in the developed industrialised countries during the final third of the twentieth century’ (Duit et al. 2016, p. 2). The environmental state has integrated the management of environmental problems as an ‘irreducible element of what governments actually do’ (ibid.) and has been related to, and compared with, the historical emergence of the welfare state (Gough 2016, Meadowcroft 2005). As such, it was found to have spread well beyond the industrialised core of Western democracies (Sommerer and Lim 2016). However, despite its merits in managing pollution, health and safety issues and local environmental problems, there are serious doubts about its capacity to engage in a comprehensive socioecological transition that would lead to sustainability (Bäckstrand and Kronsell 2015). We are interested in precisely this gap between environmental governance and management, on the one hand, and the transformative type of politics necessary for a full sustainability transition (Haberl et al. 2011; Jackson 2009), on the other. The exploration of this gap and thus of the glass ceiling can be approached from various perspectives: For example, it might be argued in terms of inescapable ‘state imperatives’ of the modern state, as John Dryzek (1996; Dryzek et al. 2002) suggests, building on the

historical-institutional perspective of Theda Skocpol (1979). From a related perspective, scholarship on institutional path-dependencies and self-reinforcing 'lock-in' mechanisms may be fruitfully explored (Pierson 2004; Levin et al. 2012). Another explanatory angle might be the perspective of regulation theory, which exposed certain structural features of the Fordist and post-Fordist model of capitalist states and their hegemonic gravity (Brand and Wissen 2012; Brand et al. 2011). Furthermore, the topic can be approached from within the body of literature dealing with the limited effectiveness of environmental governance-beyond-the-state to accomplish sustainability (Swyngedouw 2005, Blühdorn 2013, Hausknot 2014; Newig and Fritsch 2009, Parks et al. 2008). There may be several more theoretical angles to explore the empirical phenomenon of the 'glass ceiling' of environmental reform.

In a next step, the workshop aims to explore the prospects of overcoming the glass ceiling, and the theoretical and practical conditions of doing so. For this, it deliberately seeks to bring the state-theoretical and institutional literatures together with a broader set of perspectives on societal transformation, including the fields of democratic theory and theories of social change.

To start with, critiques of liberalism from within the diverse Critical Theory tradition suggest that it is structures of domination that determine the 'politically thinkable and doable'. Thus, revealing how hegemonic discourses and ideologies 'rigidify' how the world is perceived (Kompridis 2006: 35), and analysing the 'governmentalities' that define the logics and techniques with which political actors drive behaviour (Foucault 1979), can offer key starting points to uncovering the structures of a socio-cultural glass ceiling. From this perspective, what is needed to overcome these are democratic spaces for social critique as well as imagination that can open up alternative visions and pathways. For Kompridis (2006), critique is key to the profound self-reflective learning process on our forms of life and cultural traditions that can enable us to 'think from a new stance' and transform our social practices. Similarly, Norval's work on 'political grammar' (2006; 2008) suggests that it is particular familiar ways of thinking whose 'grip' closes off specific paths and practices; thus, a 'dislocation' through a re-arrangement of familiar elements is needed to help see the reality in a different light, enabling 'political change that steers a path between radical rupture and continuity' (Norval 2006: 238). Adding to Norval's (2006: 242) stressing that it is a 'multiplicity of practices' that can play this role, utopian theorists hold that 'social dreaming' (cf. Moylan and Baccolini 2009) and utopian visioning (Böker forthcoming) can serve to 'defamiliarize the familiar' (Levitas 2009: 56) as a way of problematising the taken-for-granted.

For this second step of the analysis – exploring ways of overcoming the 'glass ceiling' of the environmental state –, the workshop thus draws on the diverse sociological, philosophical and political literature conceptualising different ways in which such 'dislocations' can occur, and what institutional structures and spaces might facilitate them. For example, Arendt's social ontology (1998) sees the creation of fundamentally 'new beginnings' as the result of what she calls 'action' – the essence of human freedom, which can only manifest itself in a genuinely free, equal, and political public sphere (Walsh 2011; Gordon 2001). Similarly, agonistic theories of democracy (Mouffe 2013; Norval 2008; Tully 2009; Honig 1993; Connolly 1993) place disagreement and contestation at the centre of democratic politics, conceptualising democracy as such as representing first and foremost a 'disruptive and dislocatory potential' as the 'constitutive characteristic' of the society (Norval 2008, p. 39). Though often criticised as insufficiently contestatory by this strand of radical democratic theory, deliberative democrats, lastly, have put forward a wide array of concrete institutional innovations (Smith 2009; Fung 2003; Goodin 2008; Dryzek 2010) based on their own theory of how deliberative encounters provide the kinds of emancipation, contestation, and new horizons that can engender social transformation from the bottom up (e.g. Rostbøll 2009; Dryzek 2002).

Likely participants

Given the range of literatures the workshop taps into, it is likely to appeal across a broad range of specialisms. The aim is to bring together researchers from the fields of political as well as sociological theory with those from state- and institutional theory as well as governance and policy, so as to combine expertise in conceptual and empirical analyses of the state and actually existing institutions with abstract normative models of, and new theoretical perspectives on, societal governance. The workshop would benefit from the involvement of some of the participants in the 2013 workshop on 'Revisiting the Ecological State in the Anthropocene', whilst decidedly seeking to connect these with new participants with specific expertise in any area related to the focal question of social transformation and/or any particularly innovative, unique or ambitious new contributions to the overall thematic. The aim is to bring together researchers at various career stages, including PhD students.

Type of papers

The workshop will bring together normative, conceptual, and empirical papers. Specifically, it invites both conceptual and empirical papers on the 'glass ceiling' of the environmental state, such as both abstract and specific analyses in state, institutional, and governance theory; broader conceptual and theoretical work in social and political theory on possibilities of overcoming such 'glass ceilings', as well as governance case studies of relevant instances thereof; and both abstract-normative and practice-oriented contributions based on a combination of the former perspectives with the democratic innovation literature.

Thus, the workshop will include papers that move beyond the 'environmental state' in one or more of the following ways:

- By analysing – conceptually or empirically – the nature of the 'glass ceiling of radical change' inscribed into the environmental state and the wider sustainability challenge;
- By contributing to the theoretical or empirical analysis of ways (conditions, strategies, ...) of overcoming that glass ceiling;
- By offering/discussing concrete democratic/institutional innovations that might unlock the potential of breaking such kind of glass ceiling;
- By combining the above aspects in innovative ways.

Funding

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Biographical notes

Marit Böker is Lecturer in Politics at Keele University. Her research interest lies at the intersection of sustainability governance, environmental theory, and normative democratic theory, especially deliberative democracy and critical theory traditions. Her recent work has appeared, or is

forthcoming, in *Contemporary Political Theory, Constellations, Representation, Democratization, and Policy Sciences*.

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Endorsement

This proposal has been assessed and endorsed by the ECPR Standing Group on Environmental Politics and Policy.

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