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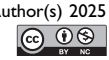

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Ecological Ungovernability and the Transition to Postliberal Modernity: On the Dialectic of the Eco-Emancipatory Project

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Abstract

Late-modern societies are experiencing a transformation that is very different from the one environmental movements and many scientists have long been campaigning for. While ecological issues are slipping down the political priority list, the autocratic-authoritarian turn and the collapse of the liberal world order are gaining momentum. Ecopolitically, this transformation may be interpreted as the exhaustion of the *eco-emancipatory project* (EEP). From the perspective of social theory, it may be understood as the exhaustion of the present phase of modernity. This article argues that these two aspects are closely related to each other. Drawing on Ulrich Beck's theory of *reflexive modernization* and his distinction between a *first*, industrial, and a *second*, reflexive, modernity, it conceptualizes this dual exhaustion as the transition to a *third*, postliberal modernity. The logic of the EEP itself, the article suggests, is one driver of this transformation: In the wake of a triple dialectic—of sustainability, emancipation, and democracy—it has rendered the EEP outdated, given rise to a condition of *ecological ungovernability* and helped to pave the way for new modernity beyond the values that once underpinned this project and Western liberal modernity at large.

Keywords

Great transformation, eco-emancipatory project, ecological ungovernability, dialectic, postliberal modernity, postapocalypse

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A Great Transformation

In the academic literature and by activist movements, climate change and the ecological crisis are still widely presented as the most important threats and urgent challenges for modern societies. In political practice, however, these issues have plummeted on the priority list. While liberal democratic consumer societies are, no doubt, experiencing a profound transformation—for example, in terms of the demise of liberal democracy (e.g., Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Selk, 2023 and in this SI)—that is radically different from the one which environmental movements and ecologically committed scientists have long been campaigning for. The Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, increased inflation rates, the end of a decade of zero- or even negative interest rates, China's rise as a new global superpower, and, most recently, the autocratic regime change in the United States, further reinforced efforts to secure economic growth and defend established lifestyles, freedoms, and wealth. Lowering energy prices for industry, easing ecopolitical regulation, cutting taxes, and reducing bureaucracy are top priorities (e.g., European Commission, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c)—and so is the massive expansion of military defense budgets. Climate activists, in turn, are portrayed as ecoterrorists and the new enemies of the state. Narratives of postgrowth, degrowth and sufficiency, which for a time seemed to be gaining prominence (e.g., D'Alisa et al., 2015; Kallis, 2018), have receded into marginality. Ideas of "collectively defined self-limitation" (Brand et al., 2021; Blühdorn, 2022a) seem strangely out of synch with the late-modern *Zeitgeist*. While ecoactivist movements and Green Parties are on the defensive, facing dramatic loss in societal resonance and electoral support, illiberal, anti-egalitarian, and xenophobic parties are on the rise, often—witness the American MAGA movement, the Reform party in the United Kingdom or the German AfD—on the ticket of explicit mobilization against policies aiming for any kind of socio-ecological transformation (SET) and anything associated with the eco-emancipatory project (EEP). If seen against the backdrop of the latter half of 2019, in particular, when the Fridays for Future movement peaked, when the European Parliament declared a "climate emergency" (European Parliament, 2019) and the European Commission celebrated its Green Deal as "Europe's man on the moon moment" (Von der Leyen, 2019), all this seems to signal significant change. How may this demise of the EEP be explained? How may the great transformation that is evolving instead be conceptualized?

From the perspective of eco-activists and transformative environmental sociology, the primary concern is why the SET, which in view of ever more worrying data by the IPCC and other scientific bodies is said to be more urgent than ever, remains so difficult to achieve and how it may finally be initiated. Common explanations include that citizens still do not have sufficient information, that there is still too little environmental awareness and too few opportunities for meaningful political participation; but there is a firm belief that, eventually, the accelerating spiral of crises and ever worsening catastrophes will render this transformation inescapable. Another argument is that, as yet, the inherent logic of capitalism has blocked a SET, but that capitalism—and fossil fuel–based economic growth, in particular—are reaching their "limits" (Brand & Wissen, 2024), thus opening new opportunities for the transformative visions progressive, eco-emancipatory avantgardes have long been campaigning for. In line with the tradition of systems theory,

it has also been argued that the lack of ecopolitical progress is due to the structure of modern societies and the fact that their functional differentiation leaves them without a strategic center that could co-ordinate and execute a SET (Luhmann, 1989; Nassehi, 2024). Others, again, have referred to the sustained attempt by political elites to "*solve* difficult social problems" by displacing them "onto other societies, onto nature and the planet, and into the future" (Wagner, 2023, p. 24; Lessenich, 2019)—a practice which, ecopolitically, has led to "a failure of world-historical dimensions" (Wagner, 2024, p. 253). And, then, there is the well-established debate about the "climate denial industry" and the populist right's politics of obstruction and blockade (e.g., Dunlap & Brulle, 2020; Lamb et al., 2020; Ekberg et al., 2023; Kinol et al., 2025).

These explanations all help to understand why liberal-capitalist democracies seem locked ever more tightly into their "politics of unsustainability" (Blühdorn, 2011, 2013a). Yet, the SET is not only blocked by the logic of capitalism, the challenges of functional differentiation, elite strategies of problem displacement, and the populist backlash against the green transition. A significant factor that has received little attention so far is that in late modernity the EEP itself has become exhausted and unsustainable. Rather than achieving the desired transformation, the inherent contradictions of this project and its self-undermining logic, unexpectedly, brought about a condition of *ecological ungovernability* (Blühdorn, 2024, pp. 122–136, 322–330). Also, the activist question for the obstacles to a SET is overly narrow: Given its commitment to ecoprogressive values, its capture in the dualist logic of *turnaround* versus *apocalypse* and the belief that late-modern societies in the Global North are about to reach a point where "no further displacement is possible" (Wagner, 2023, p. 24; Brand & Wissen, 2024), much of the ecopolitical literature remains fixated on the desired transformation and devotes far too little attention to the one that is factually occurring as, at least for the time being, neither the desired turnaround nor the predicted apocalypse materialize.

This factual transformation—recently catapulted into the center of attention by Donald Trump's politics of radical disruption—may best be grasped from the perspective of social theory. It may be understood, I will argue, as the metamorphosis of late modernity into a new phase of modernity which, in ideational terms, in particular, is radically different from Western modernity so far. This social theory perspective also sheds light on the crisis and exhaustion of the EEP itself. It reveals that the EEP's own logic and dynamic have consistently chipped away at this project's normative foundations, thus rendering a SET increasingly unlikely, reconfiguring the norms on the basis of which contemporary societies frame and negotiate their ecological problems—and paving the way for a societal transformation of a very different kind. Thus, the exhaustion of the EEP and the crisis of Western modernity are, in fact, closely related to each other: The EEP has been a powerful motor, I will argue, propelling the transformation of late-modern societies into a new phase of modernity beyond the values which once constituted the EEP and Western modernity, more generally. So, this article interlinks an ecopolitical diagnosis with the analysis of the late-modern condition. It suggests that the EEP is key to grasping the distinctive quality of late modernity and that, conversely, the late-modern condition is key to understanding the current malaise of ecopolitics. To explore this interrelationship, I will draw on Ulrich Beck's theory of *reflexive modernization* and a *second modernity* (Beck, 1992, 1997, 2009, 2016), which was originally devised for an

entirely different era and purpose but proves strikingly applicable to today's late-modern condition.

In the next section, I provide a sketch of what I call the EEP. In reconstructing this project, I will refer, firstly, to the societal values and political visions that gained prominence in the wake of the value change and ecoparticipatory revolution of the 1970s (e.g., Inglehart, 1977, 1997) and, secondly, to Ulrich Beck's modernization-theoretical attempt to conceptualize this revolution as the "reinvention of politics" for a "better modernity" (Beck, 1997, p. 5). The third section contrasts this projected and asserted transformation with an assessment of contemporary Western societies. From an ecopolitical perspective, I diagnose a condition of "ecological ungovernability," a concept that consciously draws on the ungovernability-debate of the 1970s (e.g., Crozier et al., 1975; King, 1975). From the perspective of social theory, I conceptualize the present situation as the "late-modern condition"—a concept that I am suggesting to use, very specifically, for the transition phase between Beck's second modernity that aimed to realize eco-emancipatory objectives and an entirely different "third modernity." Section four then focuses on the drivers of exactly this transformation. Drawing on Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of dialectics (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2002), it further investigates the causes of ecological ungovernability and develops the hypothesis that the EEP, by pursuing its own logic and dynamics, has rendered itself anachronistic and paved the way for a modernity that leaves the established values, notions and narratives of progressive politics behind. As the notion of autonomy played a pivotal role in the EEP and the emancipatory logic itself is a major driver for the exhaustion of second modernity, the concluding section conceptualizes this new phase of modernity as a postliberal modernity. It connects the diagnosis of "post-ecologism" (Blühdorn, 2000a) to the recent debate on postliberalism (e.g., Deneen, 2018, 2023; Pabst, 2018, 2021). Postliberal modernity, it argues, is not necessarily perceived as regressive or dystopian but actually suspends these categories. Overall, this article seeks to contribute—from an ecopolitical perspective—to the theory of late modernity, which has often not given due attention to the overwhelming optimism of the "participatory revolution" (Kaase, 1984) of the 1970s, and—from the perspective of social theory—to research on the (un-)sustainability of contemporary societies which, conversely, has often not given due attention to social theory.[1]

The EEP—or: *Second Modernity*

What, then, is the EEP? Has such a project ever existed? These questions are important. For, if it hasn't, it is difficult to defend the claim that at the current conjuncture, this project has become exhausted and that this exhaustion is key in diagnosing the condition of contemporary ecopolitics and the "crisis of late modernity" (Reckwitz & Rosa, 2023). Of course, there has never been a singular, homogeneous, clearly defined and stable ecological project, and no singular EEP either. Ecopolitical discourses and agendas have always been multiple, multidimensional, and conflictual. They have always been subject to ongoing contestation and reformulation. Their normative foundations, problem perceptions, and preferred solutions have always been diverse. Since their inception, environmental movements have comprised antimodernist, conservative, nationalist, anticapitalist, liberal, anarchist, and other currents, also including ones understanding

themselves as explicitly a-political (e.g., Radkau, 2014; Guha, 2000). Crisis and instability are, therefore, neither new nor unusual, but built into the DNA of environmental movements and ecopolitical debates. Yet, in the 1970s, a new set of values and patterns of thinking gained prominence in Western, increasingly postindustrial societies (e.g., Inglehart, 1977; Müller-Rommel & Poguntke, 1990; Rootes, 2003), which meant that the younger generation, in particular, framed ecopolitical issues and the relation of society to its natural environment from the perspective of emancipatory ideals such as autonomy, equality, self-determination, inclusion, social justice, the inviolable dignity of human beings, and universal human rights. At the time, environmental concerns and activism were not new, although the rapid economic development of the previous decades—the "great acceleration" (e.g., McNeill & Engelke, 2016)—had rendered ecological impacts much more visible than before. But the close association between ecological issues and emancipatory values was new, indeed, and so was the societal mainstreaming of both, the new values of self-determination, self-expression, and self-governance and of environmental concerns by the new social movements.

Thus, for present purposes, the term "eco-emancipatory project" refers to the new ways in which ecopolitical issues were framed and politicized in the wake of the so-called "silent revolution" of the 1970s (Inglehart, 1977) and the new social movements' "reinvention of politics" (Beck, 1997), which was the expression of exactly these new values. Rather than focusing on the biophysical dimension and the supposed objectivity of environmental problems, the concept highlights the societal perception and interpretation of environmental changes and their social framing as environmental problems—which are subject to change in line with the ongoing development of society. Inspired by critical theorists (e.g., Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944; Marcuse, 1964, 1972), eco-emancipatory thinking made a direct connection between the instrumentalization, exploitation, and destruction of nature and the oppression, domination, and enslavement of human beings (cf. Blühdorn, 2000a). Accordingly, the struggle against domination and for autonomy and democratic self-determination figured prominently in this new brand of ecopolitical thinking and action—which some observers even referred to as a new "political ideology in its own right": "ecologism" (Dobson, 1990). This also entailed a critique of the Cartesian nature/culture dualism and the hubris of Promethean thinking favoring, instead, a holistic perspective (e.g., Scerri, 2012). And even though, ultimately, the liberation, integrity, dignity, and intrinsic value of nature tended to remain secondary to anthropocentric, instrumental interests and human liberation, ecopolitical issues were still now commonly framed from the perspective of emancipatory values, the empowerment of citizens and civil society, the development of democratic institutions, and the idea of a cosmopolitan society (cf. Die Grünen, 1980).

For, the "silent revolution" mainstreamed progressive, emancipatory values well beyond the new social movements. At the time, the "participatory explosion," the beginnings of which Almond and Verba had diagnosed already in the early 1960s (Almond & Verba, 1963)—and which raised conservative concerns about the "democratic distemper" (Huntington, 1975), "state overload," and "ungovernability" (King, 1975)—fully unfolded and initiated a profound transformation of Western societies at large. This "participatory revolution" (Kaase, 1984) and its "new politics" (Müller-Rommel & Poguntke, 1990) were an ecological update and extension of the older emancipatory project that may

be traced back to Enlightenment (but also Romantic) thinking and whose core values, up to the present, are the normative foundation of Western liberal modernity; and it reflected the modernization-induced new understandings of individuality, identity, and subjectivity (e.g., Giddens, 1991; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1994). This revolution mainstreamed the belief in the right and ability of the citizenry to self-organize their societal affairs. It articulated a new political self-confidence that citizens had gained—supported also by the rapid expansion at the time of education systems. Exactly this was the emancipatory dimension of the EEP, which is, therefore, neither just an ecological nor a conservationist, conservative or antimodernist project, but a progressive one that sought to move beyond the focus of established progressive politics on technological development and issues of material production and distribution toward qualitative rather than just quantitative growth—as captured in the phrase *Neither right nor left, but ahead* (e.g., Mende, 2011; Beck, 1997, p. 148ff).

In social movement research, this EEP was conceptualized as the triad of the ecologization of industrial society, the democratization of democracy, and the anticipation of a truly liberated, self-determined society (e.g., Touraine, 1981; Melucci, 1989; Dobson, 1990; Dalton, 1994). Taking a sociological and, more specifically, a modernization-theoretical perspective, Ulrich Beck described this project as the "reflexive modernization" of industrial society which, in a "second modernity," would address the social and ecological problems of the "risk society" and fulfill the promises of modernity which had so far remained unfulfilled (Beck, 1992, 1995, 1997). In this second modernity, Beck believed, the threats of the risk society would reenergize materially oversaturated, culturally exhausted, and politically paralyzed postmodern societies and provide them with a new collective project (Beck, 1992, p. 47; 1997, p. 159f). An empirically grounded ecological reason—the collective interest in human survival and a healthy environment to live in—would become the functional equivalent of Kant's transcendental reason and generate categorical imperatives much more practical and powerful than in Kant's ethics of transcendental reason (Beck, 1993, p. 47f). They would provide the nonnegotiable criteria by which every feature of modern society and human life in it can be critically assessed and politicized (Beck, 1992, p. 176, 1995, p. 55). "Industrial modernity is disintegrating," Beck noted, "but something else is coming into existence." And while he was well aware of the tension between the ongoing processes of individualization and the belief in ecology as a collectively integrating project, he was firmly convinced that the "reinvention of politics" had the potential to bring about "a better modernity of [collective] self-limitation" (Beck, 1997, p. 5).

Despite the massive impact of the "silent revolution," this EEP always remained exactly that: a project and, indeed, a niche and minority project. Ecologism itself, this "ideology in its own right" (Dobson, 1990), was, first and foremost, a political endeavor carried by critical, progressive intellectuals (e.g., Goldsmith, 1972; Schumacher, 1973; Gorz, 1983; Porritt, 1984; Jungk, 1984). But around the turn to the 1980s, this particular perspective, this normative frame, some core ingredients of which are summarized in Table 1, inspired the formation of social movement organizations such as Greenpeace and of Green Parties in many Western countries, which aimed to achieve a radical transformation of capitalist consumer democracies and their socioecological relations worldwide (Spretnak & Capra, 1984). At this stage, conservative, Malthusian, and authoritarian

Table 1. Key Features of the Eco-Emancipatory Project.

Historical conjuncture (emergence)
- transition from industrial to postindustrial society;
- *great acceleration*: ecological and social impact of industrial modernity and the rise of mass-consumerism;
- *silent revolution*: values of self-determination and self-expression as mainstreamed in postindustrial societies in 1970s and early 1980s

Geographical location/sociostructural base
- postindustrial societies in the liberal-democratic, capitalist Global North
- primarily younger generation born in the 1960s; educated middle class

Core values
- autonomy of the subject (human and ecological);
- inalienable dignity and universal rights;
- moral freedom and responsibility;
- moral-cum-rational duty/categorial imperatives of reason;
- rational argument and collective reason;
- cosmopolitan orientation and horizon

Political agenda

Ecologization of industrial society	*Authentic self-determination*	*Democratization of democracy*
• integrity, dignity, autonomy of nature; • critique of domination and exploitation of nature; • belief in non-negotiable ecological imperatives, reason and responsibility; • concern about the compatibility of ecology and capitalist economy; • critique of the logic of growth and material accumulation; • critique of large-scale technology; • needs- rather than profit-oriented economy	• liberation from the rule of tradition, religion and secular authorities; • autonomous self-development and self-realization; • critique of social inequality and injustice; • protection of minority rights; • understanding of the citizen as *citoyen*; • information, education and the development of critical abilities for the development of civic maturity and responsibility	• critique of liberal representative democracy; • belief in authentic empowerment of the citizenry; • radical expansion and deepening of democratic participation; • claim to political maturity and ability to take collective responsibility for the common good; • confidence in self-organization of civil society and democratic self-governance

Self-perception of activists
- avantgarde of an ecologically, economically, politically and culturally transformed world society allowing for a good life for all within ecological limits

strands of ecopolitical thinking (e.g., Ehrlich, 1971; Hardin, 1973; Heilbroner, 1974; Ophuls, 1977), which had also been present in the 1970s, receded into the background. Many of these new politics organizations pursued reformist rather than radical strategies,

but they were still inspired by the belief and vision that "another world is possible" (e.g., McNally, 2001; George, 2004). In societal institutions and public discourse their emancipatory new politics thinking, incrementally, became deeply engrained until, since the 1990s, new "culture wars" (e.g., Gitlin, 1995) began to challenge what conservatives and the populist right today widely refer to as the "green hegemony" and the "ideology of left-green wokeness."

Thus, what I am calling the EEP has a clear geographical location and is firmly rooted in a particular historical context and in specific socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions. Its ecological and emancipatory dimensions are equally constitutive of this project and inseparably connected to each other. The distinctive feature of the EEP is the interplay of the ecological and social side-effects of industrial Fordist modernity, on the one hand, and the specific norms and values, mainstreamed through the "silent revolution," shaping their social perceptions and evaluation, on the other hand. In order to boost the legitimacy of their demands and their mobilizing force, environmental activists have often been at pains to portray the issues they sought to put on the political agenda as objective, incontestable problems "out there" in the environment—which sooner or later inescapably have to be addressed. They sought to play down the significance of subjective perception and the social evaluation of empirical facts—let alone their denial and the belief in *alternative facts*. Yet, politically, this subjective dimension, that is, the dimension of social values, always remains dominant. For, the extent to which empirical facts are perceived as problematic and gain political salience strongly depends on the extent to which they are felt to violate prevailing social norms beyond established thresholds of social acceptability (Luhmann, 1989; Beck, 1995, p. 45). And while in the decades that followed, the exploitation of natural resources, the destruction of habitats, and the anthropogenic transformation of biophysical conditions proceeded in an essentially unabated manner, the patterns of their societal perception and evaluation profoundly changed.

Unfulfilled Promises—or: the Crisis of Late Modernity

From the mid-1980s, the technomanagerial and market-oriented paradigm of *ecological modernization* (EM) (e.g., Huber, 2004; Jänicke & Jacob, 2006) side-lined the EEP's critique of capitalism and the logic of growth. In fact, the agenda of depoliticizing ecological issues and focusing on the technical, biophysical, and resource dimension marginalized the entire normative and emancipatory dimension of ecopolitics, thus essentially suspending the EEP (e.g., Blühdorn, 2000b; York & Rosa, 2003). *Ecological modernization* promised that the principle of growth could be retained, if only technological innovation and better management strategies would radically increase the efficiency of resource use. It was presented as a win–win strategy opening up new opportunities for both the capitalist economy and environmental protection (cf. Arias-Maldonado in this Special Issue). New, market-based environmental policy instruments and new forms of participatory stakeholder governance would render capitalism compatible with ecological integrity. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the science-oriented, technomanagerial, and market-driven approaches of EM became hegemonic in environmental policy-making worldwide (e.g., Mol & Sonnenfeld, 2000).

Yet, these strategies did not deliver. Or more precisely: They did deliver in as much as they facilitated the cleaning up of local environments in Western postindustrial societies (Hausknost, 2020), and in that they bought time for consumer capitalism (Blühdorn, 2022b). But they did so by displacing rather than resolving the issues environmental movements had raised (Wagner, 2023, 2024). They addressed them by externalizing them (Lessenich, 2019)—a strategy that allowed postindustrial societies to further sustain their established socioeconomic arrangements but gave rise to an ever more visibly "imperial mode of living" (Brand & Wissen, 2018). As these strategies blocked rather than facilitated a structural transformation of capitalist consumer societies, social and ecological problems continued to aggravate; and following the international banking and financial crisis from 2008/9, neo-ecologist movements emerged. In line with the ecologist assumption that, eventually, the steadily aggravating problems, inescapably, have to be addressed, neo-Polanyian demands for a "great transformation" (e.g., WBGU, 2011; Brand et al., 2020) became popular again—facilitated also by diagnoses that the sustainability paradigm had become exhausted (e.g., Benson & Craig, 2014, 2017; Foster, 2015), by the new debate on "planetary boundaries" (Rockström et al., 2009a, 2009b), a transgression of which would trigger potentially catastrophic events, and by the increase of social inequality in the wake of policies designed to combat the financial crisis (e.g., Borriello & Jäger, 2023).

These neo-ecologist movements gave new emphasis to the emancipatory dimension which the paradigm of EM had marginalized. Commoning, solidarity, conviviality, and the vision of a postcapitalist degrowth society facilitating a good life for all gained new currency (e.g., D'Alisa et al., 2015; Kallis, 2018; Brand et al., 2021; Brand & Wissen, 2024). Yet, as outlined above, the EEP was firmly rooted in a particular historical context and societal condition. It could not easily be resuscitated—and resonate—in an entirely different era. For, by the time of the banking crisis, the socioeconomic structures and societal value preferences, once again, had fundamentally changed. Although the scientific data on global warming, species loss, land use, or ocean littering were much richer and clearer at the time than ever before, any kind of structural SET seemed most unlikely. The neo-ecologist narratives of postcapitalism, a good life for all, and "more genuine" societal prosperity beyond economic growth and mass-consumption (e.g., Jackson, 2009; Mason, 2015) had become even more unrealistic than before. For, the fixation of contemporary societies on defending established lifestyles and levels of wealth is overtly a project of exclusion: In capitalist consumer democracies, the fortification of borders, the rejection of refugees, and the deportation of unwanted immigrants are key political concerns. Overly ecological and social justice–oriented ideals, in contrast, are framed as threatening societal prosperity and economic competitiveness—and perceived as unaffordable by significant parts of society. The win–win promises of EM and green growth have given way to the recognition that renewable energy, e-mobility, or a turn to organic agriculture require massive public investment and individual expenditure. While policies of social welfare, equality, and redistribution had already been targeted in the decades of ideological market liberalism, contemporary attempts to defend established lifestyles and privileges—or to secure at least some level of security and social inclusion—now increasingly challenge the institutions of liberal democracy, the rule of law and the commitment to human rights.

Ecological Ungovernability

Ecopolitically, this shift may be described as the further consolidation of the neo-liberal "politics of unsustainability" or, referring back to the ungovernability-debate of the 1970s (e.g., Crozier et al., 1975; King, 1975; Habermas, 1975), as a condition of "ecological ungovernability" (Blühdorn, 2024, pp. 122–136, 322–330). This concept denotes the simultaneous exhaustion of the two strategies that had promised to address and resolve the social and ecological problems the new social movements had raised: the emancipatory "new politics" agenda of the EEP and the technomanagerial EM approach which toward the end of the 1980s became hegemonic, instead. Both strategies had promised "ecological governability"; their proponents had firmly believed in the viability and effectiveness of their respective approaches to resolving the ecological and social crisis. Yet, in the late-modern constellation, both of them seem exhausted. Indicators of this new ecological ungovernability include, for example:

- the discrepancy between the ever more urgent ecopolitical warnings by scientists and the demotion of transformative efforts on political agendas, nationally and internationally;
- the tight fixation of politics and policy-makers on the short-term management of ever more frequent and severe crises (ecological, economic, political, military, geo-strategic) which fully absorb available capacities leaving scant resources for longer-term protection, let alone structural transformation;
- the reemergence of the social question (material provision, justice, equality), nationally and internationally which, in the wake of sluggish economic growth and neoliberal policies of welfare-retrenchment and self-responsibility has become a major obstacle again for the implementation of ecological agendas;
- the repoliticization of what environmental movements and scientists had achieved in terms of a consensus on the necessity and urgency of a SET, accompanied by the new tide of denial, skepticism vis-à-vis science and scientific experts, and belief in "alternative facts";
- the systematic discreditation and criminalization of ecoactivists, as illustrated by the case of "Last Generation" or the accusations of anti-Semitism leveled against Greta Thunberg, political intellectuals and the entire critical-emancipatory cultural sector;
- the tide of populist movements and the success—also among young voter cohorts—of far-right parties explicitly revolting against the SET; or
- most recently, the aggressive "politics of disruption"—reaching well beyond established agendas of denial, obstruction, and delay—pursued by the Trump administration in the United States and its unambiguous embrace of the "rule of the strongest" as the lead principle in domestic and international politics.

In fact, against this backdrop, issues of climate protection and sustainability may, for the foreseeable future, largely disappear from governments' political agendas. And while so far, the critique of the sustainability paradigm and the diagnoses of its exhaustion (e.g., York & Rosa, 2003; Benson & Craig, 2014; Foster, 2015) tended to imply the demand for more radical goals and more effective strategies of transformation, the

EEP and the struggle for a SET may now have become exhausted in a much more profound sense. As the era of rule-based politics, UN institutions, international law, and human rights seem to be giving way to the primacy of national interests and the rule of autocrats and oligarchs, economic and military strength seem set to dominate political agendas.

As regard its causes, the condition of ecological ungovernability may be traced back to factors such as the ever-increasing complexity of late-modern societies and the problems they have to address, and the weakening of political institutions by hegemonic neoliberalism. Their coincidence, in particular, causes a structural mismatch between the demands on late-modern (eco-)politics and its ability to deliver and, thus, systematic government overload. Also, at the current conjuncture, determinedly anti-environmental actors clearly play an important role. But ecological ungovernability is much more than just a matter of political priority setting or the power of denialist actors. To a significant extent, this syndrome is caused by parameters related to the EEP and movements themselves. Examples include:

- the incremental depletion of the prepolitical fundamentalisms of the EEP which were assumed to provide the normative yardstick and signpost the roadway for the transformative politicization of every aspect of society;
- the cultural pluralization and diversification—also including the diversification of rationality/ies and reason/s propelled by the cultural revolution since the late 1960s;
- the mainstreaming of understandings of freedom, patterns of self-realization, and notions of a good life which are known to be ecologically destructive and socially exclusive but are, nevertheless, regarded as emancipatory achievements and essentially non-negotiable;
- the inherent contradictions of the EEP, such as the tension between its ideals of limitation and those of liberation, or between the belief in rational-cum-moral categorical eco-imperatives and the persistent questioning of established authorities and all supposedly categorical imperatives;
- the diffusion of power, propelled, *inter alia*, by the social movements' participatory revolution; or
- the transformation of the public sphere and its fragmentation into ever smaller discourse communities, implying, conversely, the decline of all-integrating spaces for public deliberation.

In fact, the concept of ecological ungovernability is inspired by this latter set of parameters, in particular, which locate—as the proponents of the ungovernability hypothesis in the 1970s did—the causes of the malaise in the eco-emancipatory movements themselves. In the 1970s, conservative observers of the participatory revolution had been concerned that the new social movements would trigger a "crisis of democracy" because democratic institutions would not be able to cope with the wealth of new issues these movements were seeking to put on the political agenda, with their new participatory expectations, with the new complexity of the issues to be managed, and with the citizenry's rising demands on political institutions (e.g., Crozier et al., 1975; King, 1975) —in particular at a time when the *trente glorieuses* had come to a close. They warned

that Western liberal democracies might have to face a "crisis of the regime" (King, 1975, p. 295). The specter of "mass dissatisfaction with the consequences of our present political arrangements," King noted, "could grow to the point where the arrangements themselves were seriously called into question," with citizens looking "for new places to lodge their trust" (p. 294). Progressive observers, in turn, read these warnings as a conservative attempt to clamp down on emancipatory agendas and legitimate progressive demands and to defend established political elites, privileges, and authority. They regarded the new social movements not as a cause of a potential crisis of democracy and government overload but, conversely, as the articulation of an already existing crisis and as its solution, that is, as evidence that the established institutions of liberal, representative democracy, and their personnel were already unable to deal with the legitimate concerns and expectations of increasingly mature and articulate citizens. They diagnosed a "legitimation crisis" (Habermas, 1975) of capitalism and liberal democracy and, accordingly, regarded the social movements' "new politics" challenge to established political institutions and elites as fully justified.

At the time, the critique of conservative agendas of expectation- or demand-management, confidence in the citizens' capability of responsible collective self-governance, and the belief in the EM promise of dual gain (win–win perspective) side-lined the concerns about overload and ungovernability. Yet, in late modernity, this confidence in collective self-governance and the belief that technomanagerial innovation have themselves reached their limits. As the narratives of the EEP and of EM have both become unappealing and unconvincing (see Table 2), the specter of ungovernability is back—and so is the concern that "mass dissatisfaction with […] our present political arrangements" makes citizens look beyond democratic actors and institutions "for new places to lodge their trust." And as, to a significant extent, ecological ungovernability is caused by the eco-emancipatory logic itself, this condition cannot easily be remedied. It does not imply that ecological politics becomes impossible *tout court*, but it renders ecopolitics ever more difficult. Especially for the ways in which the EEP had framed and aimed to address its concerns, the prospects are less hopeful than at any earlier point in time. To the extent that the postecologist politics of unsustainability is still perceived as an unacceptable violation of prevailing norms and expectations, it may still trigger major eruptions of fear and bursts of mobilization. Yet, it becomes increasingly difficult to stabilize this mobilization, and its impact—witness Occupy Wallstreet, Fridays for Future, or Extinction Rebellion—remains limited. Increasingly, such movements are performative, expressive, and "simulative," rather than transformative (Blühdorn, 2006, 2007). They may be seen as the ecopolitical phenotype of late-modern "hyper-politics" (Jäger, 2023, 2024; also see Kalke in this Special Issue): highly politicized, but "without clear political consequences"; highly mobilizing because it is "low-cost, low-entry, low-duration," but "with only weak policy influence or institutional ties" (Jäger, 2024, p. 13). This hyperpolitical activism itself reinforces the syndrome of ecological ungovernability. It signals the emancipatory self-blockade of the EEP.

Toward a Third Modernity

From the perspective of social theory and, more specifically, from the perspective of modernization theory, this shift that has so far been framed in ecopolitical terms, may,

Table 2. Failed Promises of Ecological Governability.

	New politics	Ecological modernization
Focus/Emphasis	Emancipatory dimension: Autonomy/subject-status of human beings (individually and collectively) and nature	Biophysical dimension: Scientific measurement, resource efficiency, political pragmatism
(False) Assumptions	Social question is largely resolved and no longer a priority; ecological citizenship, reason, maturity, responsibility	Ecological problems are technical issues; addressing them brings dual gain (win–win scenarios)
Neglected dimension	Social question: Material provision/equality/ redistribution	Emancipatory agendas; significance of social values and norms
	ecological ungovernability	

further building on the work of Ulrich Beck, be conceptualized and explained in a much more encompassing manner: If, as outlined above, the EEP can be paralleled with Beck's reflexive modernization and the transition from industrial, Fordist modernity to post-industrial and post-Fordist second modernity, then the current societal transformation may be understood as the crisis of this second modernity and its metamorphosis into a "third modernity" beyond the values and assumptions that underpinned its predecessor.

Beck assumed that his second modernity would evolve automatically, unnoticed and unpreventably, driven by the logic of modernization itself, from the crises of first modernity. And just this seems to apply—despite the current focus on particular actors and capitalism—to the transition from second to third modernity, as well. Just as first modernity once questioned and undermined the certainties of the feudal order, Beck suggested, second modernity would question and undermine the certainties of industrial modernity. And it would not arise from the failure of first modernity, he insisted, but rather from its success (Beck, 1992, 1997). For, it was only in the course of first modernity that the conditions emerged for the rise of those norms from the perspective of which the social and ecological consequences of capitalist industrial and consumer society were then politicized and perceived as so problematic that a "reinvention of politics" and the EEP appeared necessary. It was only with the postindustrial expansion of education systems that citizens developed full confidence in their individual and collective ability to take politics into their own hands. Put differently, only in the course of modernization itself did a new political subject and consciousness emerge, which was to become the driver of a societal transformation in a reflexive modernity. At the same time, the ecological and social side-effects of earlier modernization, Beck believed, meant that the centrifugal force of the "participatory explosion" (Almond & Verba, 1963) was supplemented by a new integrating theme that represented a common interest, around which a new social consensus and social contract would develop. He was confident

Table 3. Three Phases of Modernity.

First modernity		Second modernity		Third modernity
Classical industrial society	Silent revolution	Post-industrial society, risk society	Late modernity	Post-ecologist society / society of sustained unsustainability
Politicisation of pre-modern certainties		Politicisation of the certainties of first / industrial modernity		Politicisation of the certainties of second modernity / the EEP

Also see Blühdorn (2013b).
EEP, eco-emancipatory project.

that the ecological theme, ecological rationality, and the "principle of responsibility" (Jonas, 1979) would give rise to a new "morality beyond morality" (Beck, 1995, p. 55) and deliver exactly what Almond and Verba had called "civic virtue" but left rather vague.

Yet, just as reflexive modernization in Beck's second modernity (or rather in the "silent revolution" that initiated it) radically politicized the assumptions and certainties of first modernity, today, the beliefs and assumptions of second modernity and its EEP are themselves becoming the target of radical repoliticization. And just as the transition from Beck's first to his second modernity was not an "option" that could have been "chosen or rejected in the course of political disputes," the metamorphosis of second into third modernity, too, is the result of "modernization processes that are blind to consequences and deaf to danger" (Beck, 1993, p. 36). Thus, the crisis of the EEP and of late-modern societies more generally may be conceptualized and explained—as visualized in Table 3—as the transition from the phase of second modernity into third modernity that leaves the EEP's beliefs and certainties behind.

Given their normative commitment to (eco-)progressive values, transformative sustainability research, and critical sociology are still finding it difficult to engage with this metamorphosis of modernity. In social theory, the terms "late-modern" and "late modernity" have been well established for a long time (e.g., Giddens, 1991; Reckwitz & Rosa, 2023), yet, they tend to be used in a rather unspecific way for the phase of modernity that follows the era of Fordist industrial modernity. Andreas Reckwitz, for example, distinguishes between "bourgeois," "industrial," and "late" modernity. Hartmut Rosa, using the dynamic of societal change as his key criterion, distinguishes between "early," "high," and "late" modernity (Reckwitz & Rosa, 2023). Reckwitz even refers to late modernity as the "end of illusions" (Reckwitz, 2021). But in line with major parts of sustainability research and critical sociology, both Reckwitz and Rosa remain caught up in the critical-progressive normativity—one might say the "illusions"—which render their thinking unable to capture the specifically late-modern features of contemporary Western societies or the crisis of the EEP. Reckwitz, in particular, has made a significant contribution to understanding the late-modern transformation of subjectivity (Reckwitz, 2006, 2020), but neither ecological issues nor the

1970s new social movements' big emancipatory departure toward a radically democratized, ecologized, and emancipated society figure very prominently in these writings. For defining the specifically late-modern constellation, however, and for understanding the metamorphosis and trauma of late modernity, exactly these two parameters—and the unsustainability of the EEP—are, arguably, essential.

Hence, it is useful to conceptualize the phase of modernity following on from classical industrial or Fordist modernity, as Beck did, as reflexive or second modernity, and reserve the terms "late-modern," "late modernity," and "late-modern society" specifically for that phase of modernity in which the eco-emancipatory optimism, the belief in a "new politics" (Müller-Rommel & Poguntke, 1990), in a civil-society driven SET and in a good life for all in perpetual peace with nature or the biophysical environment, is fading and regarded not just as an illusion but—as regards the good life *for all*, in particular—increasingly, as undesirable. Late modernity, in other words, is specifically the era in which the (essentially prepolitical or successfully depoliticized) narratives, hopes, beliefs, and optimism of the eco-emancipatory era and project are being (re)politicized and becoming untenable. It is the interregnum between Ulrich Beck's reflexive or second modernity and new third modernity—as depicted in Table 3—that moves beyond those values and ideals which underpinned not only the EEP but essentially European and Western modernity at large. In line with Beck's notion of the "victory crisis" (e.g., Beck, 1997, p. 6, 12), late modernity is the era in which the logic and dynamic of the EEP itself have rendered the values, assumptions, beliefs, and certainties that once supported this project increasingly outdated and anachronistic, in which the logic and dynamic of the EEP have undermined, eroded, hollowed out, this project's own normative foundations—thus setting the stage for new modernity and shaping the normative framework for an (eco-)politics beyond the EEP.

Reflexive Modernization—or: the Triple Dialectic

What is becoming unsustainable and being repoliticized in late modernity is, more specifically, the relationship, as sketched above, between the emancipatory values mainstreamed in the "silent revolution" and the changes in the social and biophysical world which, from the perspective of these new values, appeared increasingly problematic, indeed entirely unacceptable. This unsustainability is not caused by any radical improvement in the social and biophysical conditions or deceleration in social and environmental change, but by the fact that in comparison to the EEP, prevailing patterns of social perception and problem framing have fundamentally changed. This change, which one might describe as a second silent revolution, was propelled by the interplay of the ideology of neoliberalism, on the one hand, and the emancipatory movements' drive for liberation and self-determination, and their "artistic critique" of capitalist modernity (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2017), on the other. This second silent revolution mainstreamed new notions of autonomy, subjectivity, identity, and self-realization (Bröckling, 2015; Reckwitz, 2020; Fraser, 2017). Incrementally, it unhinged the fragile connection between the two logics that the EEP had sought to reconcile, that is, the logic of emancipation (liberation) and the logic of ecology (limitation) or, put differently, between the autonomy of the human subject and the autonomy of nature. In late modernity, exactly

this inherent tension of eco-emancipatory thinking powers the process that hollows out the normative foundations of the EEP, renders this project unsustainable, and propels the metamorphosis of late modernity into a new phase of modernity beyond the beliefs, commitments, and responsibilities constitutive of the EEP.

Focusing on this project's three main pillars—the ecologization of industrial society, the realization of the modernist promise of self-determination, and the democratization of liberal representative democracy (see Table 1)—this process in which the logic and dynamic of the EEP itself, unintendedly, obstructed rather than promoted the envisaged SET and facilitated the transition to an entirely different modernity, may be conceptualized as a triple dialectic comprising the dialectic of ecologization, the dialectic of emancipation and the dialectic of democracy. This triple dialectic—its three dimensions being closely interconnected—not only further develops the above explanation of how and why in late modernity, the EEP became anachronistic and ecopolitics ended up in the condition of ecological ungovernability, but it also sheds light on how—beyond the EEP—capitalist consumer societies frame and address their sustainability problems.

In line with Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), the term dialectic may be understood as a progressive effort and struggle inadvertently bringing about a regressive outcome. In order to capture that processes of modernization are not linear and one-directional but always produce both positive and negative effects, others have preferred to speak of the "aporias" of modernization or used the seemingly paradoxical term "regressive modernization" (e.g., Nachtwey, 2016; Geiselberger, 2017). In the present context, however, the focus is on the emancipatory revision of the very norms on the basis of which the outcomes of modernization have so far been categorized as progressive or regressive. In the wake of this emancipatory reconfiguration, talk of regression itself actually becomes regressive or reactionary—and adherence to the beliefs and political agendas of the EEP becomes normatively questionable. It is precisely this emancipatory departure from the EEP that I call dialectics. It is the distinctive feature of late modernity and an important driver of its metamorphosis into a new third modernity—which can only be understood from the perspective of this dialectic.

In ecopolitical terms, the dialectic is that the struggle for the ecological transformation of capitalist consumer societies involuntarily led into the late-modern society and politics of unsustainability. More specifically, for the ecological transformation of industrial modernity, modern societies relied, with good reasons and the best of intentions, on the paradigm and strategies of EM. In the 1980s, this new paradigm and these strategies were hoped to finally provide a solid basis and a powerful engine for ecological politics beyond its earlier foundations—aesthetic, religious, ethical, and anticapitalist—which had all proven notoriously weak. But rather than boosting the EEP, this new paradigm and these strategies actually destroyed its normative foundations and promoted a completely different transformation. They sought to generate ecopolitical support and consensus by means of depoliticization through science, markets, and technology and deliberately side-lined normative questions. They neglected that ecopolitics is, ultimately, not concerned with facts, but that—as outlined above—norms always remain the linchpin (see Table 2). Thus, the belief in EM created a protected space in which these all-important norms could evolve, in line with neoliberal thinking, in favor of the emancipatory objective of liberation rather than the ecological objective of limitation

(Blühdorn, 2022c). The promise of a dual gain—economic and ecological—in particular, provided reassurance for the further expansion of aspirations, expectations, and demands, and delegitimated calls for restriction and limitation. It gave free rein to the value change referred to above as the second silent revolution and thus became the stepping stone to the society of unsustainability, which today unconditionally defends its freedom, prosperity, and emancipatory achievements regardless of their well-known socio-ecological implications. At the same time, this marginalization of the normative dimension and the fixation on technomanagerial approaches also helped to mainstream objectives such as decarbonization and solutions such as e-mobility, nuclear power, and green growth, all of which reinforce rather than transform the established structures of unsustainability. They promoted strategies of international relocation and problem displacement (Wagner, 2023, 2024), and empowered technoscientific elites rather than the citizenry, thus preparing the political space for the populist revolt against the SET (cf. Zierott et al. in this Special Issue).

As regards the second dimension of the EEP, the dialectic is that the struggle for freedom, equality, and self-determination unintentionally led to the proliferation of inequality, exclusiveness, and authoritarian tendencies. More specifically, in search of genuine emancipation and true self-determination, progressive movements critically questioned all notions of the general and supposedly categorically obligatory. Yet, as outlined above, the EEP itself firmly relied on the prepolitical, non-negotiable assumptions of collective reason, civic maturity, moral duty, categorical ecological imperatives, and so forth. It was strongly based on a Kantian understanding of autonomy and emancipation in which freedom and the submission to categorical imperatives are inseparably connected to each other. But the emancipatory logic consistently chipped away at these Kantian essentials. Incrementally, emancipatory struggles aimed beyond the disciplined, self-controlled rational, and morally responsible subject—also by contesting the demands and requirements inherent in the concepts of ecological reason, responsibility, and maturity. Thus, the ideal of the ecological *citoyen* lost traction and left the political space to the purely self-interested *bourgeois*. "Liberal currents of emancipatory social movements," in particular, Nancy Fraser notes, "adopted thin, meritocratic, market-friendly understandings of equality and freedom" (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 192). And this incremental updating of prevailing understandings of autonomy and emancipation—which elsewhere I have conceptualized as "second-order emancipation" (e.g., Blühdorn, 2013b, 2022c)—fundamentally changed the prospects for a societal transformation in the sense of the EEP. For, in late modernity, freedom and self-determination have a completely different meaning than the EEP once assumed. While these earlier understandings now appear fundamentalist, unreasonable, and reactionary—often portrayed and rejected as the basis for a politics of prohibition and eco-dictatorship—late-modern understandings of "our freedom," "our values," and "our way of life" are ecologically ruinous, socially exclusive and distinctive of a neo-colonialist order of sustained unsustainability.

The dialectic of democracy means that the struggle for authentic democracy, that is, the "new politics" attempt to further democratize the existing institutions of liberal, representative democracy which emancipatory movements had always regarded as insufficient and, in fact, ecologically counterproductive (e.g., Eckersley, 2020), unexpectedly fostered a "multiple dysfunctionality" and "legitimation crisis" of democracy and its

incremental replacement by authoritarian, technocratic, expertocratic, and artificial intelligence–based forms of government (Blühdorn, 2020, 2022c; Selk in this Special Issue; Sorg & Staab in this Special Issue). This dialectic is a major cause of what is widely discussed as the autocratic-authoritarian turn (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), which is, however, commonly attributed to the logic of capitalism, right-wing populism, or globalization. The notion of the dialectic of democracy, in contrast, emphasizes that democracy is not only threatened from the outside, by its enemies, but, at least as much, by its own logic and internal dynamics (e.g., Manow, 2020). For example, as discussed above in the context of ungovernability, the expansion of participatory opportunities puts significant strain on the efficiency of democratic procedures. Agendas of pluralization and diversity promote the proliferation of veto-players and democratic sclerosis. Also, the "participatory revolution" has disproportionately favored parts of society that had already been privileged and thus further distorted political equality to the detriment of less privileged groups (e.g., Schäfer & Zürn, 2021). Furthermore, eco-emancipatory movements did not take into account that the emancipatory logic would steadily unhinge their assumptions regarding the civic maturity of citizens (consistency, long-term stability, public-mindedness, openness to rational argument, ability to compromise etc.). And the less late-modern citizens complied with the ideal of the ecological *citoyen*, the more the agenda of democratizing democracy became ecologically problematic. Unsurprisingly, therefore, de-democratized forms of governance—evidence- and science-based—are increasingly accepted and even demanded in late-modern societies—not least by eco-activists. Thus, efforts to democratize democracy have themselves become a cause of widespread democratic ambivalence and increasing dissatisfaction (Manow, 2020). In fact, the deproblematization of the loss of democracy and the autocratic-authoritarian turn is well advanced, today; and democracy, now mainly understood as the populist rule of the majority, is metamorphosing from the primary tool for a SET into an important tool for the politics of unsustainability.[2] It is no longer a tool for progressive ecopolitical decision making, but rather for the obstruction of such policies and the legitimation of autocratic, capitalist government.

Thus, in the wake of this triple dialectic—with its three dimensions being tightly connected to each other—the EEP, which wanted to be the midwife of a truly ecologized, emancipated, and democratic society and modernity, unintendedly became the gravedigger of exactly this vision—and the midwife of an entirely different modernity. And in light of this triple dialectic—tentatively captured in Table 4—the supposedly progressive determination of critical sociologists and transformative sustainability researchers to hold on to their established ideals of sustainability, emancipation, and democracy has become normatively questionable—and so has their much too narrow focus on capitalism as the primary cause of the late-modern malaise.

Beck's narrative of a second modernity—quite consciously, in fact (cf. Blühdorn, 2024, p. 210ff)—disregarded this dialectic. He was well aware that his term "reflexive modernization" has more than just one meaning, but he decided to understand the term, primarily, as the critique and refashioning of the institutions of modern societies in accordance with unchanging "sacred (unwritten) norms of human existence and civilization" (Beck, 2016, p. 117f), so that, in a second modernity, these "sacred norms" would be more fully realized. Yet, his vision of a second modernity neglected that

Table 4. The Triple Dialectic of the EEP.

	Projected transformation (SET)	Reflexive modernization	Unforeseen outcome
Ecologization	Healthy environment; ecological integrity; autonomy and dignity of nature (intrinsic value); good life for all	Objectivation of problems; neglect of normative dimension; reliance on depoliticized strategies	Society/politics of unsustainability; ecological ungovernability
Self-determination	Enlightenment promise of the autonomous subject; authentic self-determination; realization of the authentic self	Questioning of authority and categorical imperatives; liberation from Kantian reason, maturity and duty	Notions of freedom and self-realization which are based on radical inequality, social exclusion and ecological destruction
Democratization	Authentic democracy; collective self-determination of citizenry; political autonomy of the democratic sovereign	Critique of liberal representative democracy; expansion of participation; pluralization, diversity and inclusion	Democratic dysfunctionality and legitimation crisis; autocratic-authoritarian turn; expert-/algorithmic government

EEP, eco-emancipatory project.

these reference norms are stable, at best, only as conceptual shells, while in terms of their content, they are subject to continuous reinterpretation. In a similar manner, the EEP, too, was based on fundamentalisms which were assumed to be exempt from critical questioning, from modernist and modernizing doubt. But as outlined above, the EEP's "sacred norms" were closely tied to the historical conditions of the turn from industrial to post-industrial society. They were neither eternal nor universal. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the EEPs understandings of ecologization, emancipation, and democracy seem outdated, today, and are (re)politicized. And their reflexive modernization gives rise to something categorically new: a fundamentally different modernity that no longer seeks to more fully realize the EEP's ecologically updated and extended ideals of Enlightenment philosophy, but, in an emancipatory manner, leaves these ideals behind—or at least their established interpretations—and regards them as anachronistic (cf. Kalke in this Special Issue).

Conceptualizing this process in terms of dialectic is helpful, firstly, to emphasize that the transition from Beck's second to the new third modernity is not a planned, voluntary, controlled, and coordinated transformation as eco-emancipatory movements had always envisaged it, but an unforeseen and uncontrolled metamorphosis—that does, however, not fit the activist dichotomy of transformation "by design" or "by disaster." Secondly,

if understood in the Hegelian sense, the term dialectic signals that the late-modern metamorphosis of society cannot suitably be portrayed as regressive. It is neither a relapse into an earlier stage of modernity or civilization, nor a repetition of history, but the evolution, driven by the emancipatory logic itself, of something entirely new (synthesis) that emerges from the specifically late-modern untenability of (a) the established societal order of unsustainability (thesis) and (b) the EEP's envisaged SET (antithesis). From the perspective of critical sociology and eco-activism, this dialectic process is a traumatic experience, of course. If the emergence of the EEP in the 1970s marked "a moment of rethinking" when "all elements seemed to be in place for a turning point in world history," the late-modern unsustainability of this project and the emerging third modernity may easily be perceived as "a failure of world-historical dimensions" (Wagner, 2024, pp. 252–253). After all, seen from this perspective, social and ecological problems are much more severe and urgent now, but the triple dialectic has rendered the prospects for a SET less favorable than ever. Yet, this assessment neglects, firstly, that the transformation that occurred instead, was facilitated by the success rather than the failure of the EEP's logic—as signaled by Beck's concept of the "victory crisis." Secondly, in comparison to the perspective of the EEP, societal problem perceptions, value preferences, and priorities have radically changed in late modernity, implying that the supposedly objective problems that proponents of the EEP seek to put on the agenda seem much less urgent and paramount today—as richly evidenced by the tide of populist movements and parties. Indeed, these ecologist problem perceptions may no longer need to be resolved, at all, but may, instead, in a sense, dissolve. Referring to the displacement strategies modern societies developed in order to "*solve* difficult social problems," Wagner reminds us not to neglect or […] underestimate the human capacity to reinterpret their situation in the light of problems' (Wagner, 2023, p. 24, 42). But it is equally important, conversely, not to neglect or underestimate the human capacity to reinterpret their problems in the light of their situation and their updated understandings of freedom, rationality, subjectivity, and a good life. Irritating as it may be, this implies that some problem perceptions may simply *dissolve*—and just this is, arguably, distinctive of the late-modern condition and the emerging new modernity. For, the triple dialectic takes late-modern societies beyond the normative horizon of second modernity. And if it wants to grasp this distinctive moment, social theory needs to move beyond its established critical horizon, too.

Postliberal Modernity—or: Beyond Dystopia?

Extending Beck's distinction between a first and a second modernity, I have so far referred to the newly emerging phase of modernity as "third modernity." This suggested a neat three-stage model (see Table 3) which helps to appreciate the significance of the EEP for the definition, crisis, and metamorphosis of late modernity. From today's perspective, however, Beck's second or reflexive modernity appears as a rather short phase, barely on a par with its predecessor. Undoubtedly, the silent revolution and reflexive modernization have had a major transformative impact on modern societies, yet, ultimately, Beck's second modernity—and the EEP, too—always remained a project that was unhinged and superseded rather soon. Also, reflexive modernization and

second modernity were not really guided by "sacred norms" distinct from those guiding first modernity, but in seeking to address the unforeseen side-effects of first modernity and fulfill the promises which it had left unfulfilled, they held on to the same regulative ideals. Furthermore, Beck himself actually referred to his first modernity as a "truncated modernity" (Beck, 1992, p. 153) and to its successor as a "radicalized" and "*hyper*-modernity" (Beck, 2009, p. 55), again suggesting that his second modernity is not something categorically different and new, but the corrective continuation of first modernity. And as regards the third modernity, the contours of which the new Trump administration in the United States has rendered blatantly visible, the suggested model leaves this concept rather vague.

It may, therefore, be appropriate to move away now from the three-stage model and zoom in on the key feature distinguishing this new modernity from both its predecessors: Given that the Kantian idea of the autonomous subject is, undoubtedly, the most sacred basic norm of Western modernity; given, furthermore, the centrality of this norm in all three dimensions of the EEP (see Table 1), and given that in late modernity exactly this norm—or at least the Kantian understanding of it (see Kalke in this Special Issue)—has become questionable and is being renegotiated, this new modernity may suitably be referred to as postliberal modernity as opposed to liberal modernity which preceded it, comprising both Beck's first and his second modernity (see Table 5).

The term postliberal modernity takes up a concept, postliberalism, that has recently been much debated (e.g., Deneen, 2018, 2023; Pabst, 2018, 2021). It captures the distinctive feature of the new era, but it has its own weaknesses. *Inter alia*, the term seems primarily backward-oriented. Relying on the prefix "post," it still fails to define this new modernity in positive terms, that is, it does not make explicit that it is an exclusive, autocratic, and authoritarian modernity that—in the interest of further self-aggrandizement—overtly departs from the values of equality, human rights, the rule of law, or a good life for all, and instead, ever more openly relies on the right of the strongest—physically, technologically, and financially. Yet, in defense of this term: The recent debate on postliberalism explicitly focuses on the factual transformation of late-modern societies that has been a central interest throughout this article. Its contributors share the above diagnosis that "the modern liberal ordering of the world is exhausted" (Borg, 2024, p. 8). And while the EEP does not figure prominently in this debate, their explanation for this exhaustion very strongly resembles the argument that has been made above. In line with Beck's notion of the "victory crisis," the proponents of postliberalism believe that liberal modernity "has failed because liberalism has succeeded" (Deneen, 2018, p. 3, 179). Mirroring what has been said above about the EEP, they have argued that liberal modernity has run into problems not just because liberal ideals have "been realized incompletely or captured by special interests of big business, but rather because its inner logic tends to undermine its core aims" (Borg, 2024, p. 10). And corresponding to the above analysis of the EEP's triple dialectic, they have argued that liberalism "tends to lead to its own undoing" because it "erodes the values" it "purportedly defends" (ibid., pp. 4, 3). In fact, theorists of postliberalism have explicitly conceptualized the rise of the new era as the "dialectical response to a liberalism that is increasingly exposing its own contradictions" (ibid., p. 12). "A political philosophy that was launched to foster greater equity, defend a pluralist tapestry of different cultures and beliefs, protect

Table 5. Modernity and Autonomy.

Liberal modernity				**Post-liberal modernity**
First modernity		Second modernity		Third modernity
Autonomy of the human subject as a Kantian regulative ideal and legitimate claim, yet, with limited relevance in political practice	Silent revolution	Autonomy of the subject (human and natural) as the central claim of a politically mature citizenry and their 'new politics'	Triple dialectic of the EEP	Beyond the Kantian ideal of the autonomous subject

EEP, eco-emancipatory project.

human dignity, and, of course, expand liberty," Deneen has argued, "in practice generates titanic inequality, enforces uniformity and homogeneity, fosters material and spiritual degradation, and undermines freedom" (Deneen, 2018, p. 3). And this is not, Borg suggests, "because of some nefarious design," of liberal thinking, but "due to the steady erosion of all sources of authority deemed as external to the individual will" (Borg, 2024, p. 10). Just as I have noted with regard to the eco-emancipatory thinking, postliberal thinkers have argued that "liberalism has abandoned any substantive vision of the good," and "what has happened then, is, at least in part due to the failure of liberalism to accept any boundaries to itself" (ibid., pp. 9, 13).

So, the parallels of postliberal thinking to the argument developed throughout this article are striking. Yet, rather than moving beyond liberalism, much of the literature on postliberalism, ultimately, remains focused on defending the values underpinning the EEP and liberal modernity. It undertakes "a critique of liberalism" hoping to find "remedies for its perceived deficiencies," most notably its unrestricted individualism (Borg, 2024, p. 13). Failing to recognizes that this is exactly what the EEP and reflexive modernization had already attempted, it restarts the "search of the common good" (ibid.) and continues to hope for a "coming era of renewal" (Pabst, 2021). Yet, the factual transformation that empirically occurs provides scant evidence of such renewal; and the theorists of postliberal politics offer little in terms of sociological analysis that might support their hopes. Instead, the new modernity emerging from the triple dialectic seems to move beyond such hopes and the values underpinning them. Hence, the term postliberal modernity is used here—if only in an exploratory manner—in a more radical sense. For, if social theory wants to understand the crisis and metamorphosis of late modernity, it needs to overcome the backward-oriented perspective and its attempts to secure or retrieve what has been lost.

Understandably, a modernity beyond liberal values and beyond the autonomous subject in the Kantian sense is widely perceived as utterly dystopian. Yet, postliberal modernity—autocratic and technocratic, increasingly delegating autonomy to artificial intelligence and conceivably under the global leadership of China—is not in itself pessimistic, defeatist, or dystopian, but the beginning of an entirely different society and

era. It is neither progressive and emancipatory in the established sense, nor, as outlined above, would it be appropriate to describe it as regressive, for it dialectically overcomes and suspends the normative yardstick required for such an assessment—the autonomous subject. It emerges from the ruins of liberal thought, life, and institutions. The triple dialectic takes late-modern societies beyond the condition of sustained unsustainability and the "practices of simulation" (Blühdorn, 2007, 2013b) which accompany and ease the emancipatory departure from the values, self-descriptions, and institutions of liberal modernity. Its unexpected outcome is, contrary to what Beck and the new social movements had assumed, that, rather than capitalism and the order of unsustainability reaching their limits, the EEP and the narratives, self-descriptions, and certainties of liberal modernity do so. And contrary to the EEP's dualistic imaginary of SET versus apocalypse, this does not mean the end of humanity and the uninhabitability of the planet. This would be a very European, Western, and second modernity perspective. For the time being, at least, it means, first and foremost, that—even in Europe and the West—the EEP's utopia is no longer attractive and its dystopias are no longer dystopian.

Inspired by the optimism of the new social movements and their EEP, Beck had urged sociologists to focus on "what arose at the time before the unseeing eyes of the time" (Beck, 2009, p. 219). He theorized a crisis and transformation of modernity but insisted that this crisis implied "the end not of the world, but of the world certainties" of what he then called "the first modernity" (Beck, 2009, p. 218). Critical theorists and critical environmental sociology, he argued, if they wanted to avoid becoming "blind and naïve concerning political realities" (Beck, 2009, p. 219), needed "to move the future which is just beginning to take shape into view against the still predominant past" (Beck, 1992, p. 9). Rather than talking about the end of the world, they needed "to recognize the signs of new world beginnings" (Beck, 2009, p. 219). "We are currently witnessing," he optimistically noted, "not a *decline* but a *shift* in values in accordance with the demands of the second modernity" (Beck, 2009, p. 221; emphasis added). And he conceptualized this shift as "a kind of involuntary release from the forms of self-incurred tutelage [immaturity] characteristic of industrial society" (Beck, 2009, p. 218).

Traumatic as it may be, all this seems strikingly applicable to the late-modern constellation, when critical sociology and sustainability researchers seem largely stuck in their established normativity and unable to capture the novelty of the emerging postliberal modernity. Today, "the still predominant past" is what Beck still saw as "the future which is just beginning to take shape" and which he wanted "to move into view." If viewed from the perspective of eco-emancipatory thinking, what is emerging today may well appear as rather dystopian. Yet, Beck was right in insisting that the end of the established certainties and self-descriptions which are still very present in late-modern societies must not be confused with the end of the world, and that what "we are currently witnessing" and perceive as a *violation* and *decline* of values may also be conceptualized as a "*shift* in values in accordance with the demands" of a new modernity (Beck, 2009, p. 221; emphasis added). Irritatingly, this shift may even be understood as "a kind of involuntary release" from the "forms of self-incurred immaturity" characteristic of the outgoing phase of modernity. In fact, it is much more than just an "*involuntary* release": "Second-order emancipation" (Blühdorn, 2013b; 2020, 2022c) takes late

modern societies into new forms of "postapocalyptic" environmentalism and social theory (e.g., Cassegard & Thörn, 2018; De Moor, 2022).

As yet, however, significant parts of the sustainability literature keep mobilizing for sufficiency, degrowth, collective self-limitation and for corridors of sustainable consumption and production (e.g., Brand et al., 2021; Bärnthaler & Gough, 2023). Critical sociologists keep cultivating their critical orthodoxies, ranging from their critique of varieties of regressiveness to the big narratives of "experimental politics" pioneering the SET and being the most promising strategy for achieving it (Haderer et al., 2023; Dannemann et al., 2024), and on to hopes for the formation of a "counter-hegemonic bloc" which eventually, when the contradictions and "deep-seated crisis tendencies" of capitalism become "painfully obvious" (Fraser & Monticelli, 2021, p. 8) might break the current hegemony of neoliberal capitalism (Crouch, 2004; Fraser, 2019; Mouffe, 2023). But environmental sociology and critical social theory are not just about mobilizing for values which they themselves categorize as progressive or emancipatory and campaigning for a SET guided by these ideals. They are equally committed to offering an analysis of the condition of contemporary societies that reaches beyond their own normative preoccupations. Indeed, even for *critical* social theory this dual commitment has been presented as "the hallmark" (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 122). And this commitment also entails being ready to consider that the logic of emancipation might itself render the EEP anachronistic. This does not mean to say that eco-activists and critical theorists should renounce their values and agenda just because in postliberal modernity these values lose societal resonance and political purchase. But if they want to honor their diagnostic commitment, social theory, and environmental sociology must not confine their analyses to their own established normative horizon. Furthermore, they also need to account for the unexpected side-effects of their agenda so far—which render the self-assured continuation of this agenda normatively questionable: The ongoing destruction of the planet, the syndrome of ecological ungovernability, and the populist revolt against the EEP unmistakably signal that for critical sociology and eco-activism, too—not just for the actors and institutions their critique commonly targets—business as usual is not an option.

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Notes

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2. Note that democracy—as the struggle for material security, well-being, and participation—has always been a strong driver for economic growth and for different varieties of displacement of both social and ecological issues (e.g. Mitchell, 2011; Wagner, 2023).

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