Environmental crises and the ambiguous postneoliberalising of nature

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During the last few decades of the neoliberal-imperial globalisation process, social relations have been fundamentally transformed. Neoliberalism was never a purely market-driven process but also a shaping of other social relations and institutions, especially of the state. The state, private corporations, public discourses but also many aspects of everyday life were reoriented towards economic efficiency and international competitiveness. Aspects such as (re-) distribution or social and/or international solidarity played scarcely any role. As these societal changes have occurred, the appropriation of nature has also been transformed. Dimensions of nature that were previously of little interest were now becoming (potentially) valuable resources to be assessed for their value and incorporated into the capitalist accumulation process. Neoliberalism was and is also an ecological project – that is, a project to transform societal appropriation of nature or societal relationships with nature.

The argument in this article is set against the following background. There was a first phase of neoliberalism – starting in Chile 1973 and gaining power in the 1980s – which consisted mainly of the destruction of the post-war (Fordist and peripheral-Fordist) institutional settings and (asymmetric) social compromises, and a second phase in the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin wall, when neoliberal politics was largely uncontested, institutionalised in many spheres of the social and constitutionalised (in national legal systems as well as internationally, for example, in the WTO). For some years a third phase has been underway, consisting of attempts to deal with the contradictions and crises of neoliberalism itself. Neoliberal politics has produced highly unstable relations which can no longer be controlled: the most obvious examples are the financial crisis and the social crisis of integration, but there is also a deepening of the environmental crisis. These strategies

1 I would like to thank Achim Brunnengräber, Dieter Klein, Bettina Köhler, Nicola Sekler and Markus Wissen for their comments.

can be called post neoliberal and they aim to deal with the several crises of functioning and to avoid a crisis of legitimation of neoliberal and especially of capitalist societal relations – or to deal with such a crisis if it occurs.

I give a very short sketch of the development of the environmental crisis since the 1970s and present some reflections on the relationship between capitalism, its neoliberal and neoimperial phase and the societal appropriation of nature. The current environmental debate and the crisis of societal relationships with nature underlying it are put into the context of post neoliberal developments and strategies.

My argument is enshrined in a real – that is, historical – contradiction: there is a widely generalised consciousness that capitalist societal relationships with nature require radical transformation because of the destructive consequences of capitalist-neoliberal and imperial forms of the appropriation of nature. In principle this opens up space for a critique of and a practical change in the dominant forms of societal relationships with nature. However, there are few really alternative practices beyond the important local experiences of subsistence. Therefore, and despite all minor changes, I would call the current constellation a widely recognised crisis of the dominant socio-economic, political and cultural forms of the appropriation of nature with, at the same time, strong passive consent – as there are no visible and accepted alternatives on a large scale – for these crisis-driven forms. Environmental politics aims to deal with this contradiction and this is the terrain where post neoliberal strategies and politics emerge.3

Environmental crisis and neoliberal nature

The destructive tendency of the appropriation of nature is inherent in capitalist development, its forms of production, distribution and consumption – all shaped by domination – its instrumental rationality and its raison d’être in the valorisation of capital.4 Capitalist development is necessarily irrational – that is, in principle, there is no conscious and democratic shaping of societal relations – and this becomes especially clear with respect to societal relationships with nature. Moreover, the use of the resources and sinks of the particular countries and social groups correlates – according to form – with the level of material development (cf. Altvater, this volume).

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3 Of course, this rather general argument has to be adapted to particular societies and historical conjunctures.

4 With respect to the appropriation of nature, countries practising socialism as well as countries practising peripheral Fordism pursued the same patterns.
In order to understand the link between neoliberalism and societal relationships with nature, it makes sense to see capitalist development and the use of its energy basis as happening in (uneven) historical phases. To give an example: liberal capitalism in the 19th century had a particular energy basis (coal), and particular technological, production and consumption norms. After the beginning of the 20th century, we saw a new energy basis (oil and gas), new technologies – as the assembly line, (mass) production and (mass) consumption patterns emerged in the US and were more or less generalised after World War II (of course, in very different ways) – and a new international division of labour and resource flows.

In the 1970s, an accumulation crisis and a related crisis of the development state and of the Western welfare state undermined the (peripheral) Fordist mode of development. Through a conflictive search process, neoliberal politics was strengthened in many countries, and trade unions and the labour movement, in particular, were weakened (cf. Albo, this volume, on trade unions). The state should create the conditions for a new phase of capital accumulation with legal, discursive and coercive means. This is the underlying grammar of the dominant way of dealing with the environmental crisis. It was not by chance that the socio-economic and political crisis of the post-war mode of development went hand in hand with the politicisation of the environmental crisis (cf. Brand and Görg 2008). The crisis became obvious in the 1970s when public debate and social movements put the problems of societal appropriation of nature on the political agenda.

At the beginning, the environmental crisis was dealt with symbolically and by more or less technocratic state policies. After the mid-1980s some ‘solutions’ became more and more obvious. After the Rio Conference on sustainable development in 1992, the road towards institutional innovations seemed to be opened and ways of dealing with the most fundamental environmental problems established: new international institutions like the Framework Convention on Climate Change, private companies which understood the profound and innovative changes that were necessary – certain sectors such as the automobile and chemical industries promoted their strategies under the label of sustainability – and an increasing public awareness. A new social group of technocrats emerged, the so called ‘earth brokers’ (Chatterjee and Finger 1994). However, the aforementioned grammar of societal dynamics was not evident for many years: in fact, in the course of the 1990s, the Rio Conventions on Climate Change and Biodiversity were themselves articulated through neoliberal politics – that is, they became one institutional dimension of the neoliberalising of nature (Brunnen-
gräber 2007, Brand and Görg 2008). Not by chance, we can observe a strong institutional selectivity towards market-based instruments in the very constitution of international climate and biodiversity politics. But more generally, a neoliberalising of nature took place: its privatisation, marketisation, de-regulation but also re-regulation (that is, state policies in order to facilitate privatisation and marketisation), market prox- ies in the residual public sector and respective flanking mechanisms in civil society (Castree 2008).

Since the end of the 1990s and especially around the ‘Rio +10’ conference in Johannesburg in 2002 it became clear that the strategies of the corporations consisted much more of a ‘greenwashing’ than real changes and that the public awareness reached among the global elites and middle classes was only translated into institutional changes as long as their own production and consumption norms were not questioned.

To sum up this first argument: environmental policies were and still are formulated in line with dominant politics and related interests. From the 1980s on, the dominant politics were neoliberal and neoimperial, orientated towards competitiveness and maintaining and enhancing the power of Northern governments, corporations and societies. The iconographic sites of the 1990s were, not Rio de Janeiro, but Baghdad – because of the second Gulf War in 1991 – and Marakesh – with the end of the so-called Uruguay round where the foundation of the World Trade Organization was agreed upon. Neoliberal and neoimperial politics were much more dynamic than politics of sustainable development and were able to determine the dominant development path (cf. Park et al. 2008, Leff 2008). Policies were and are in the interest of the owners of assets and of the global middle classes – including the middle classes in economically emerging countries such as China, India or Brazil. The Western way of life still promotes its attractiveness worldwide. Human wellbeing and social security are still equated with economic growth and this means the resource-intensive growth of car production, of airports, of industrialised farming, projects of ocean fertilisation, and so on. It is therefore possible to speak of an imperial way of living in Northern/Western countries and also in the nations of the Global South with their growing middle

\[\text{These developments show that we need to distinguish between explicit and implicit forms of environmental politics. The former are intended forms in a specific ‘policy field’ with specified apparatuses and policies. Implicit environmental politics refers to those}
\text{manifold societal structures and processes that lead to dominant and dominated forms of the societal appropriation of nature – that is, land use, infrastructure (e.g. the expansion of airports), science, technologies, norms of production and consumption, state policies including financial, trade and economic policies. From a critical and emancipatory}
\text{perspective it is not enough to focus on explicit politics but to see the broader picture.}\]
class. That means that quite a large portion of the world’s population lives by exploiting nature and exploiting other people(s); this is also one crucial element that despite the obvious crisis in the dominant relationships with nature remains largely uncontested.

**Recent re-politicisations**

Surprisingly, since the end of the year 2006 a re-politicisation of the environmental crisis has taken place on a global scale and, from an emancipatory perspective, it is of utmost importance to understand this. Obviously, it was a ‘catalytic mixture’ which caused the recent re-politicisation: the assumed peak oil – that is, the definitive exhaustion of the global oil and gas reserves within the next few decades, the growing political power of Russia on grounds of its energy resources, the ongoing war in Iraq, the energy demands of the emerging economies of countries like China and India, the strategies to produce agrofuels for the world market in countries like Brazil or Indonesia, the Stern Report (2006) to the British government and the 4th Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2007; for a critical overview see Brunnengräber 2007).

These recent developments articulate themselves with a certain societal sensitivity for environmental issues in some countries – Germany, for example. This was created in recent decades by social movements and NGOs as well as some scientists and intellectuals, media and state officials. In other countries, like Bolivia or Brazil, conflicts over resources intensified due to degradation and scarcity, price increases and problems of access to the means of subsistence for millions of people as well as the lack of distributional policies.

But there is an additional aspect. The dominant forms of global environmental governance – for example, at the international level, the Kyoto Protocol of the Framework Convention on Climate Change or the Convention on Biological Diversity, environmental political institutions and processes at the regional, national and local levels – are more and more considered inadequate by scientists as well as the wider public (cf. MASR 2005, Park et al. 2008, Brand et al. 2008).

And finally, environmental politics seem to be an integral part of the attempts to re-legitimise neoliberal politics which came under pressure due to manifold protests and problems of social polarisation, impoverishment, environmental problems themselves, and so on. Governments and business intend to create in this situation a win-win-win-win situation through dominant political and economic institu-
tions: the proposed sustainable strategies are considered to be good for business, good for consumers, good for society as a whole and good for nature – and, therefore, justify state and intergovernmental policies. Because of the politicisation of the environmental crisis, on the one hand, and the implicit consensus that the dominant ways of production, consumption and relationships with nature should not be changed fundamentally, on the other hand, symbolic politics can predominate, flanked by some political and economic institutional innovations.

Postneoliberal societal relationships with nature

Alongside neoliberal-imperial political, economic and cultural dynamics, the many ruptures, crises and criticisms must also be given greater attention. Because the fact is that some dimensions of post-Fordist and mainly neoliberal relationships with nature are coming in crisis. At a general level we can distinguish between crises of legitimation – that is, through social struggles and criticism which delegitimise the existing forms of the appropriation of nature – and crises of functioning – that is, problems for the dominant forces themselves and of societal reproduction which, according to form, affect the weaker and more vulnerable social groups and regions most.

In view of the growing consciousness that the existing ways of dealing with the environmental crisis are inadequate and that the neoliberalising of nature produces severe problems, we can identify different postneoliberal strategies and politics concerning the appropriation of nature (politics in the sense of strategies that became socially important). The emerging terrain and related politics upon which emancipatory, liberal social democratic, (market) liberal, conservative, reactionary and other actors are performing with their respective strategies could well be described as postneoliberal. The mentioned ‘types’ do not exist in a pure form but we have to acknowledge the unevenness and the contradictory character of specific developments in the areas of, for example, land use, the production of food and wood, the use of water, ways of dealing with the consequences of climate change, the erosion of biodiversity, the creation of environmental refugees, institutional settings, and so on. Postneoliberal strategies do not necessarily constitute a rupture with neoliberal politics. On the contrary, the term helps us to understand the continuities and discontinuities of the societal forms used to appropriate nature (and we should not mix up

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6 At the methodological level, there is not a clear criterion to distinguish the different variants of postneoliberal strategies. The distinctions are rather heuristic and should be developed further in a coherent research programme.
strategies with outcomes – that is, the real shaping of societal relationships with nature in concrete constellations which are often products of compromises). Moreover, the different variants should not be understood in a voluntaristic way – that is, that dominant forces can choose to employ this or that strategy. Usually they are forced to use a specific strategy or several different ones, according the existing experiences, power relations and socio-ecological conditions.

A first and important strategy is one that is part of the postneoliberal struggle – in that it deals with the many contradictions, but is in itself neoliberal. I call it a business-as-usual version – that is, the way of dealing with the contradictions of neoliberalism is a more or less reflexive or even a completely ignorant deepening of those strategies. A main feature of modern societies is what Marx called the ‘silent coercion of societal relations’. The production of commodities and surplus value through wage labour and the valorisation of capital through the seemingly equal exchange on the market reproduce highly unequal societal relations in an opaque way. Neoliberal strategies were successful in the strengthening of this dynamics (whereas, before, the partial de-commodification of wage labour was important) and the related policies had strong impacts on various relations: gender relations, the racialised structure of societies, the international division of labour, relations between the younger and older generations (for example, through the capital-market orientation of pension funds) and, as we saw, societal relationships with nature. The business-as-usual version of postneoliberalism aims to maintain the same kind of development as in the recent past, with some slight changes, integrating lessons from the worst experiences of neoliberal politics and/or responding to critiques. Here, the continuities of neoliberal policies concerning societal relationships with nature prevail: privatisation, marketisation, deregulation and related issues (see above).

The specific operation of the neoliberal form to deal with neoliberal contradictions and crises is the ‘Rio type’ of politics – that is, a form of dealing with socio-ecological problems through some institutional innovations, much more efficiency in the spheres of production and consumption, the development of ‘green markets’ and ‘green investment’, and reliance on modern Western expertise. The rationale behind it is ecological modernisation and the justification as a social market economy – that is, environmental politics without questioning the basis of societal structures and power. A certain individualisation of responsibility takes place and the leitmotifs are enlightened consumers and new lifestyles.

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questioned. This strategy is quite prominent in some countries in Western Europe, of course with differences between Germany and the Scandinavian countries because the latter were and still partly are responsible for the most progressive attempts to regulate capitalism. However, the institutionalised logic of the Rio type does not question neoliberal dynamics.

A second and openly coercive variant of postneoliberal strategies comes into force when conflicts about resources or sinks intensify and/or when protest against the predominant structures might involve questioning their very existence. The appropriation of nature and the related forms of social power are not mainly exercised through the market and its political embeddedness but through the military, police and/or private armies, which might lead to open or hidden wars (Ceceña 2006). The coercive variant might also emerge as an imperial strategy when resource-rich societies and their governments are not willing to integrate into the world market or when the political-economic orientation of a country is questioned by a major power. At the international and the national level, the rationale behind it is the maintenance of existing power relations. The extreme political right resorts more and more to openly coercive means. Concerning the political shaping of societal relationships with nature, this version is oriented towards eco-authoritarian politics, which it justifies by referring to resource scarcity, overpopulation, the ‘inability of the poor’ to help themselves and the profligate lifestyles of the masses, which destroy nature.

Thirdly, a roll-back version of postneoliberalism – which is an attempt to redynamise state-led capitalist development and to strengthen regional integration – is strong in some Latin American countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. Here we experience very dynamic social changes through movements, parties, intellectuals and even state apparatuses in the light of the obvious disaster of neoliberal politics. It is a kind of neo-developmentalism (neo-desarrollismo) which aims to regulate capital movement, foster the development of infrastructure, and link growth and distribution. However, this does not mean automatically that the damaging societal relationships with nature are subject to change. It is not by chance that the distributional and anti-colonial political project, especially in Venezuela, is often called ‘oil socialism’ because it is based on the exploitation of oil and does not question the societal relationship with nature, which is mediated through domination. Another aspect of the roll-back version considers that some dimensions of the neoliberalising of nature are dysfunctional for private capital itself. Actually, this becomes clear in water privatisation where the expected profits cannot be realised.
Additionally, here we can learn that social protest – as in the Bolivian city of Cochabamba – is important to make capital privatisation processes unattractive.

**Emancipatory postneoliberal strategies**

A fourth variant – often combined with dimensions of the third one – can be called *emancipatory postneoliberal strategies*. Emancipatory postneoliberal strategies might open up a way of thinking and acting that go beyond the capitalist mode of societalisation, beyond the mediation of the appropriation of nature through patriarchal, imperial and racist social relations. This would require conscious ways of appropriating nature that go beyond valorisation or management that is mediated through domination in the interest of powerful social forces, and deeply rooted in capitalist, imperial, patriarchal and racist forms of living.

It implies a critical understanding of precisely these societal relationships with nature. One element here is a critique of the dominant framing of the environmental crisis as a crisis of ‘humankind’ or of overstretched ‘carrying capacity’ or as still too weak management of resources (which is common in the Rio type of environmental politics). In contrast, the appropriation of nature is materially – especially through technologies and labour – and symbolically – through, for example, scientific understandings of nature – mediated, and these economic, political and cultural forms of mediation have to be transformed. Another dimension of emancipatory relationships with nature is the acknowledgement that there is an irreducible plurality of them, despite the fact that some forms become dominant or even hegemonic – that is, widely accepted, and embedded in institutional and everyday practices.

Another essential for emancipatory strategies is to reject the ‘false alternative’ between the domination of nature – inherent in most of the strategies outlined – and the subordination of society to the assumed ‘laws of nature’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 1982). Both orientations strengthen a dichotomist view of nature as something outside of society. An adequate perspective lies in the conscious and democratic shaping of societal relationships with nature (Görg 2004). This also implies a critique of any unilinear understanding of progress which always implied and still implies a deepening of the domination and destruction of nature.
What, against this background, are the important aspects that might strengthen an emancipatory post neoliberal perspective? The following outline is by no means comprehensive but emphasises some important points for general discussion.

_Taking experiences seriously:_ First of all, there needs to be acknowledgement of the manifold experiences of non-capitalist relationships with nature as well as the enormous variety of types of resistance to forms of appropriation that are shaped by domination – and their productive and problematic dimensions. In many parts of the world, societal relationships with nature have never been completely modern and capitalist. However since the 1960s, neoliberal dynamics has tried to modernise those regions of the world which were forgotten by the ‘Green Revolution’. One major example is the South of Mexico and large parts of the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca. In other places, resistance emerged from the local level and moved to the international and transnational level – examples include campaigns against genetically-modified organisms or against free trade at the expense of local farming. Alternative and attractive forms of producing and living, of exchange, and of social divisions of labour and alternative identities are necessary – and they are possible: the protection of the natural commons (water, biodiversity, air, and so on) against their commodification is in many cases a very concrete struggle. Collective consumption, the accompanying infrastructures, more energy efficiency and sustainable goods are not only linked to learning processes but might also question the power of certain producers and the speed of ‘throwaway’ globalisation.

_Questioning the forms and contents of economic growth:_ Social domination is, among other things, codified in the concrete forms and characteristics of economic growth – that is, world market and political competition and the private appropriation of socially produced surplus, resource-intensive production and consumption. Under capitalist conditions, the wellbeing of societies and individuals is linked to those forms of economic growth that involve degradation of nature. Social domination also occurs through access to the means of social reproduction (including knowledge) and through distribution. The alternative is not just a shrinking of the economy but a transformation of the rationality linked to the capitalist mode of development which is inscribed into science and technology, political institutions, subjectivities (the famous figure of the homo economicus) and so on (Leff 2008). Therefore, from an emancipatory perspective, the concrete forms and characteristics of growth and its societal preconditions need to be questioned and practically changed.
Creating linkages: Of utmost importance for emancipatory strategies is the linking of different political and social issues. Their separation into different ‘policy fields’ (including the competences of specific ministries) is part of the technique of capitalist-bourgeois domination. One major example is the current separation of dominant policies of ‘energy security’ in a context of growing competition for energy resources and control of the energy infrastructure. This is largely delinked from policies to combat climate change. Dominant political actors often claim ‘policy coherence’ and ‘comprehensive approaches’ but in fact coherence mirrors – according to form – existing power relations. From an emancipatory perspective, in many cases coherence and integrated policies to deal with problems seriously are only possible if these power relations are changed.

State politics matter: Politics in times of deep socio-ecological crises must be designed differently – that is, as a democratic and informed transformative process that takes into consideration the many ambiguities that exist, but with a view to creating a more just world based on solidarity – beyond the dogma of competitiveness and profitability. Therefore, state and intergovernmental policies tend to be part of the problem rather than the solution. The state is not a neutral entity committed to the general interest of society and wellbeing but first and foremost an institutional condensation of societal relationships – that is, the main rationale of the state is to reproduce capitalist, patriarchal and racist relations as well as specific, socially constituted relationships with nature under which powerful as well as dominated social groups and individuals live. However, recent experiences in Latin America show that emancipatory strategies also require forms of universalisation, legal codification and the backing of financial, discursive and physical means. Moreover, the contribution of state policy to international environmental policy primarily lies in transforming it into more of a ‘domestic political’ matter. As important as international cooperation and so-called political regimes are, changes must nevertheless be promoted within the particular societies and above all ‘on the ground’. This is where powerful non-sustainable interests and everyday orientations hold sway. Many studies on international environmental policy have shown that while international cooperation is important, what is decisive is securing implementation at the nation-state level. ‘Globalisation’ is often nothing more than an excuse. Governments, parliamentarians, parties and individuals in the state apparatus have considerable room for manoeuvre.
Socio-ecological conflicts as starting point: We need to ask whether the highly politicised topic of the environmental crisis and especially of climate change can open up a way for more transformative thinking and action. Socio-ecological conflicts reveal that much more is at stake than symbolic policies to slow down climate change through global resource management: questions of democracy and decision-making, power over social knowledge and the means of production, the necessary reduction in working-hours, the valorising of reproductive activities concerning caring, health, food production, and so on. Environmental issues are profoundly linked to social issues. Exploitative work, especially of ‘illegal’ immigrants and many workers in the Global South, obeys the same logic of profit and accumulation which precipitates the destruction of nature. It is necessary to politicise workers about the cheap food, energy and other goods in which they have an immediate – that is, short-term – interest and which are produced under unsustainable and unsocial conditions. However, this also represents a problem that needs to be solved. Emancipatory socio-ecological orientations and practices need to be linked to a more fundamental critique of the organisation of social life and of alienation, and to a redistribution of social wealth.

Environmental justice: In many emancipatory struggles we can detect an orientation towards environmental justice. In contrast to the rather technocratic concept of sustainable development, this refers, to the contested character of societal relationships with nature. Many environmental problems are not socially neutral but affect different social groups, regions and societies differently. This was the analysis of the environmental justice movement which emerged in the US in the 1980s.7 They saw that, as usual, environmentally damaging activities like industrial production took place disproportionately in poorer, often black communities. It is important to address the issue of the distribution of environmental problems – spatially, at the local, regional, national and international level, and socially, in relation to class, gender and race. The political challenge is not just to ‘distribute’ negative environmental impacts equally but to question the dominant forms of production, distribution and consumption. The forms of access to the material means of social and individual reproduction, and the power-mediated framing of environmental problems or ‘the’ ecological crisis, are both at stake. However, the concept of environmental

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7 The famous report ‘Toxic Waste and Race’ (United Church of Christ 1987) showed that toxic waste in the US is concentrated in those urban areas where poor people and people of colour live. The authors of this report invented the concept of environmental justice, which became more and more important for groups contesting dominant destructive forms of the appropriation of nature (Bradley and Roberts 2006, Kaiser and Wullweber 2007).
Radical demands and proposals: It might be useful to develop radical demands and proposals through debates and the exchange of views and experiences. These should be articulated in relation to specific problems and alter the ways in which they are interpreted, thus offering possibilities for action. One major debate was initiated by Walden Bello’s quest for ‘deglobalisation’ of the international political economy (2002): he argues, among other things, for a need to reject Western consumerism and a focus on resources from outside via foreign direct investment and proposes the promotion of environmentally-sound and local technologies, distributional justice, self-determination and an important role for the democratic state. A major conflict field consists of the struggles against privatisation in response to the overall negative experiences of the last 20 years. These are still rarely linked to environmental issues and a debate about democratic and sustainable forms of the appropriation of nature. A similar debate is needed in the light of the current financial and banking crisis.

Learning processes and democracy: We should not overlook the fact that the current problems are also caused by the relative material well-being of many people. Especially the middle-classes in Western coun-

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tries but also the ‘new consumers’ in the Global South seemed and many still seem to profit from current developments (Myers and Kent 2004). A deeply rooted imperial subjectivity, involving a problematic relationship with nature – where a subjectively more-or-less good life in some regions of the world or among certain groups can conceal the ecological and social consequences of that lifestyle elsewhere – has to be replaced by a new attitude. Therefore, it is not enough to bargain over emissions targets; a broad and – since different interests prevail – conflictive learning process has to take place in order to promote alternative but attractive ways of living, producing and consuming, based on a relationship with ‘nature’ that goes beyond one of domination. Emancipatory politics seeks to strengthen alternative strategies and forms of living through cooperative learning processes and where necessary through conflict. Next, questions of democracy arise. Who decides about production and investment? Who controls access to knowledge? To give one illustration: technological development, with its profound consequences for societal relationships with nature (as, for example, in the case of genetic and nano technologies), and driven by intercapitalist competition, needs to be subject to democratic discussion and decision-making. The existing forms of representative democracy are not adequate. Here again it is clear that the solution to the problem should not be seen as residing in Western scientific knowledge, intergovernmental processes and ecological modernisation for the Western middle classes at the expense of many others, especially the poor and the earth’s resources.

A brief outlook. The postneoliberal terrain is not completely open but relatively structured due to historical developments and current power relations. As we have seen, environmental issues are questions of power and domination – though this is not to simplify them as above equals bad and below equals good. Unless linked to a practical critique of societal and socio-ecological domination, environmental politics runs the risk of remaining a nice wellbeing programme for the enlightened middle-classes. But in contrast to the 1970s, in most countries there seem to be no relevant social forces that might be capable of changing the overall dynamics and orientation towards the exploitation of nature. However, the terrain is full of contingencies and this might give critical thinking and emancipatory action a chance. Therefore, we need a reflection of different strategies to maintain and shape societal relationships with nature.
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