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Abstract
Emancipatory politics and the very idea of *emancipation* have come under pressure. Feminist and post-colonial critiques, the appropriation of emancipatory ideals by right-wing populists and the crises triggered by the transgression of planetary boundaries all expose *emancipatory paradoxes* and raise questions about the further suitability of emancipation as a regulative ideal guiding any socio-ecological transformation of contemporary consumer societies. With this article, which introduces a Special Issue entitled *The Dialectic of Emancipation - Transgressing Boundaries and Boundaries of Transgression*, we are working toward a research agenda that acknowledges the current impasse of emancipatory politics and explores its ambivalences and further potentials. Following an outline of the *emancipatory paradox* and a review of how emancipatory movements have continuously contested – and redrawn – restrictive boundaries, we scan sedimented understandings of the two key terms, *emancipation* and *dialectic*, feeding into the concept that we are suggesting as an analytical lens for investigating the current impasse and future prospects of emancipatory politics: the *dialectic of emancipation*. We preview how the contributors to this Special Issue make use of these terms as they are

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engaging with this research agenda and conclude by reflecting on the dangers and pitfalls associated with the concept *dialectic of emancipation*.

Keywords

Anthropocene, dialectic of emancipation, ecological crisis, emancipatory paradox, planetary boundaries, right-wing populism

Emancipatory politics and the very idea of emancipation have come under pressure. After decades of emancipatory movements which have substantially expanded individual rights, achieved unprecedented freedoms and citizen empowerment and placed environmental and climate issues firmly on the political agenda, supposedly *advanced modern* societies in the Global North find themselves confronted with a condition where the experience of disorientation, powerlessness and vulnerability in the face of aggravating social tensions, political crises and ecological risks is rife. The rise of social inequality and exclusion (Piketty, 2014), obvious deficits in terms of (eco-)political steering capacity (Hausknost & Hammond, 2020), declining confidence in democratic processes and institutions (Blühdorn, 2020a, 2020b; Diamond, 2015, 2021; Mair, 2013) and the *autocratic-authoritarian turn* (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Maerz et al., 2020) all point towards an *emancipatory paradox*:

Social justice and equality and political, economic and cultural self-determination had been centrally important goals of emancipatory politics – which some movements also extended to the natural environment and the protection of the bio-physical foundations of human life. Democratic institutions and processes had been expected to secure the achievement of these goals, and the empowerment of citizens and their democratic organisation were believed to consign autocratic and authoritarian rule to pre-democratic history. But despite the substantial expansion of possibilities for political articulation and participation; despite the wealth of new opportunities for political networking and organisation, there is a perceived 'breakdown in the capacity for collective action in contemporary society' (Øversveen, 2021, p. 16). While the unprecedented availability of communication technologies and the easy accessibility of information might suggest a steady improvement of societal deliberation, contemporary societies seem to fragment into diverse, mutually insulated discourse communities, with democratic negotiation or even consensus becoming ever more difficult. At the same time, both the multi-dimensional sustainability crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic have triggered new calls for a strong (environmental) state and given new credence to the belief that centralised, autocratic systems might, after all, be better positioned to manage the risks and catastrophes contemporary societies have to address than democratically governed systems (Wainwright & Mann, 2018).

Thus, paradoxically, the emancipatory agenda of equality, empowerment and democratisation seems to be accompanied by the proliferation of material and political inequality, feelings of disempowerment and anti-democratic sentiments (Rancière, 2007). In fact, there even seems to be a direct relationship between the two: Since the 1970s, in particular, that is, since the emergence of the new social movements,

emancipatory agendas often have been driven by social groups which, for example, in terms of their education and social capital, were more privileged than others, to begin with. And in various respects, emancipatory politics seems to have benefitted these social groups more than others. Despite their commitment to overcoming social inequalities and securing universal rights, emancipatory politics, thus, also has nurtured, unintendedly, new feelings of marginalisation and disempowerment – which neoliberal policies of welfare retrenchment then further aggravated. Today, right-wing populist movements are capitalising on just these sentiments. They are promising to *take back control* and empower those who the privileged have left behind, that is, they are appropriating and reframing the emancipatory agenda.

In the realm of eco-politics, too, emancipatory politics seems to trigger unexpected side effects. Gains in (individual) autonomy and self-determination have often correlated with the expansion of growth-based, resource-intensive forms of production and consumption, especially in liberal democracies (Hausknost, 2020; Malm, 2016; Mitchell, 2011). But as *planetary boundaries* (Rockström et al., 2009) are becoming increasingly visible, lifestyles commonly associated with autonomy and self-determination are criticised as *imperial mode of living* (Brand & Wissen, 2018). For many observers (Brand & Wissen, 2018), capitalist power relations are the root cause of contemporary societies' *sustained unsustainability* (Blühdorn, 2013). Yet, others have argued that the very understandings of freedom and notions of a good and self-determined life entertained by the most *progressive* societies and the most *emancipated* social groups are no less significant a parameter. Indeed, the defence of these understandings of freedom, autonomy and emancipatory achievements (Blühdorn, 2020b) and the maintenance of the *imperial mode of living* inherently depend on the denial of exactly those rights, freedoms and values which major parts of *progressive* societies regard as non-negotiable to those providing these societies with the goods and services they desire (Lessenich, 2019).

Thirdly, at a level somewhat removed from everyday politics and popular discourse, debates on the *Anthropocene*, too, illustrate the emancipatory paradox. In this new geological epoch, geophysicists and earth system science say, the human species has become a major force determining the further development of the planet Earth (Steffen et al., 2015). Yet, this contrasts sharply with the proliferation of feelings of disempowerment and vulnerability both at the individual and the collective level. And the Anthropocene illustrates the limits of emancipatory politics not only in that the emergence of the human species as a planetary force coincides with the exposure of (wo)mankind to unprecedented self-generated risks, but this new epoch also represents a new challenge to the specifically modernist mode of thinking in terms of dualisms such as body versus mind, instinct versus rationality, society versus nature, subject versus object or autonomy versus heteronomy. Post-modernist thinkers have challenged these binary distinctions for a long time, and so have various emancipatory and ecological movements. Yet, in some respects – most notably with regard to its core ideas of *subjectivity* and *autonomy*, neither of which can be conceived of without implying its respective counterpart – the prevailing logic and understandings of emancipation themselves have remained indebted to dualist thinking. And if the Anthropocene fully suspends this mode of thinking, this might then also unhinge this very logic.

Thus, at the current conjuncture, the tide of right-wing populism, the ecological crisis and the new notion of the Anthropocene all illustrate the emancipatory paradox. They expose the complicities, ambiguities and reconfigurations of emancipatory politics and, for this reason, are prominent themes throughout this Special Issue. Indeed, in the wake of right-wing populism, the ecological crisis and the Anthropocene, the category of *emancipation*, which had been the beacon for a long history of diverse social movements has, yet again, become highly contested. It's re-politicisation and the revolt against what some perceive as the *moral paternalism* inherent to *emancipatory orthodoxies* are propelled by diverse social groups – not only on the ideological right but, increasingly, also on the left (Davis, 2011; Wagenknecht, 2021). They challenge established certainties about emancipatory agendas and their core values and, reversely, trigger attempts to defend *authentic* and *legitimate* emancipation against *perverted* understandings and *illegitimate* appropriations. The paradox that they illustrate poses the questions: Is emancipatory politics hitting new limits? To what extent and under what conditions can the ideal of emancipation still signpost and energise a societal transformation towards a socially and ecologically just and inclusive global society? What other kinds of societal transformation may emancipatory struggles power? How are established understandings of emancipation themselves being redefined? On what normative grounds is it possible – and legitimate – to distinguish between *authentic* or *perverted* and *legitimate* or *illegitimate* notions of emancipation? Can we envisage forms of emancipation that, in light of the unexpected side effects, focus not only on the transgression of boundaries but put much more emphasis on setting boundaries to transgression?

As an analytical lens for exploring these questions, we are suggesting the concept of the *dialectic of emancipation* (Blühdorn, 2020a, 2020b). This concept is a useful tool, we believe, for analysing the emancipatory paradox and understanding the new constellation *advanced modern* societies in the Global North find themselves confronted with. We will explore diverse readings of this concept in more detail below. Prior to that, however, we want to further unpack how emancipatory movements, past and present, have framed – and struggled with – the relationship between the transgression of boundaries and the boundaries of transgression. Sections three and four then sketch different understandings of the two key terms, *emancipation* and *dialectic*, which feed into the concept of the *dialectic of emancipation* and which we are seeking to make productive for the analysis of the phenomena highlighted above. In the concluding section, we further elaborate the emancipation-related research agenda triggered – not least – by the trias of the right-wing populism, the ecological crisis and the Anthropocene; we preview how the authors contributing to this Special Issue use the terms *emancipation* and *dialectic* as they are engaging with this research agenda and we reflect on the dangers and pitfalls associated with exploring the *dialectic of emancipation*.

Contesting boundaries

Since the 19th century, the transgression of and emancipation from existing restrictions and oppressions has stood at the core of most social movements and many political parties. The imagined liberation from economic, social, political or biophysical limitations has inspired a huge variety of visions of future societies and has fuelled a diversity

of political struggles. But movements understanding themselves as emancipatory have had very diverse goals in mind, and they have not only sought to overcome given restrictions, they have always also demanded new boundaries which, in turn, then triggered new forms of political contestation. This was the case in the past and is so in the present: The restrictions that some sought to transgress were those that others would sternly defend, and the new boundaries that some regard as constitutive to freedom and self-determination mean oppression and heteronomy to others. To illustrate the *emancipatory paradox* from a social movement perspective, to show how emancipatory agendas may themselves grow into new orthodoxies, which some then experience as unacceptable, and to further specify our research agenda, four trends in contemporary protest movement landscapes seem particularly relevant: the growth of progressive movements as traditionally understood, the simultaneous appropriation of the term *emancipation* by right-wing populist movements, the new problematisation of emancipatory values in the wake of the ecological crisis and recent debates on the Anthropocene and the tendency towards DIO-emancipation (do it ourselves, Pickard, 2019) against the backdrop of a lingering *crisis of representation* (Dalton, 2004).

Adopting a global perspective, scholars have highlighted the growing number of emancipatory movements in the first two decades of the new millennium and the increasing contestation of social, economic and political boundaries and orthodoxies in many countries (Ortiz et al., 2013). From the Arab spring movements and the various revolutionary democratic uprisings in Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Hongkong or Myanmar to the Square Movements after the international financial crisis; from anti-austerity movements to the recent Black Lives Matter protests; from the #metoo debates to the LGBTQ+ movements – the number of protests and struggles claiming cultural, political, economic and social change in ways traditionally understood as progressive has spiked since the 2000s (Della Porta, 2017). These movements differ greatly in terms of their particular targets: from corrupt elites and autocratic state bureaucracies in the case of the Arab Spring and other democratic revolutionary movements, to the neoliberal system and the self-serving class of the ultra-rich in the case of the Square Movements, and on to the systemic racism, sexism, homophobia and gender normativity in the case of anti-racist, feminist and sexual self-determination movements. Yet, despite all their differences, these movements are united in understanding emancipation as the struggle for inclusion, greater equality and more democracy – demands which are often addressed to the state and established political institutions which are perceived as securing the established structures of oppression. This is the take on emancipation that has been prominent (although never exclusively) since the Enlightenment (Rebughini, 2015) and is commonly subsumed under the notion of *progressive* movement politics. The contemporary strength of these movements provides evidence that the *emancipatory paradox* and what we are referring to as the *dialectic of emancipation* have by no means suspended the long-standing struggle for autonomy, equality and universal rights which some social theorists (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Inglehart & Welzel, 2010) have even regarded as the natural trajectory of socio-political development towards ever more democratic and self-confident civil societies (Welzel, 2021).

Yet, while emancipatory movements in this traditional sense continue or even gain additional momentum, other movements are evolving which appropriate the legitimatory

leitmotiv of emancipation, but regard the traditional understandings of emancipation as the true obstacle to freedom. Right-wing populist movements, for example, argue that the prominence of *progressive* agendas in Western societies since the *new social movements*, in particular, have facilitated the rise of social elites, which have developed new forms of cultural and political domination that threaten reassuring traditions and established ways of life. From their perspective, the *emancipation* from these earlier agendas and from the *moral paternalism* and *prescribed political correctness* they associate with their proponents is overdue (Blühdorn & Butzlaff, 2019). Many conservative political parties and civil society organisations, too, have picked up on this critique and promote a reading of emancipation that demands liberation from the perceived *new orthodoxies* – ranging from liberal individualism, sexual self-determination, multiculturalism, environmental protection and socio-ecological justice to the cosmopolitan questioning of the nation state. The common denominator underpinning this rendering of emancipation is a push – to various degrees – towards a more exclusive, (culturally) anti-libertarian and politically authoritarian understanding of the *autonomy of the national people*. The objective is to remedy forms of alienation supposedly induced, more than anything, by the earlier social movements' transgression of boundaries. What these new *emancipatory* movements are rebelling against is, not least, the inclusive universalism and the cosmopolitan perspective which have always been central to progressive-emancipatory movements in the more traditional sense.

Further adding to the doubts and uncertainties about the achievements and future prospects of emancipatory politics, environmental activists, too, are challenging established notions and implications of emancipation. Movements such as Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion and the Climate Justice Movement are questioning, once again, (still) entrenched beliefs in the emancipation of humans *from nature* and in understandings of emancipation which are linked to the exploitation and destruction of bio-physical systems. Similarly, recent debates on the Anthropocene (Steffen et al., 2015) have been accompanied by a critical scrutiny of the biophysical implications of emancipatory quests, especially their accommodation in liberal capitalist societies, be they the quests of the so-called *post-materialist* movements since the early 1970s or that of the older labour movements (Bailey, 2014). Indeed, in the Global North, in particular, greater socio-economic equality and individual freedom have gone hand in hand with the proliferation of ways of life which are deeply unsustainable in a number of regards. Mass consumerism and the expansion of the growth-based welfare state brought empowerment, freedom and social security to many, and they have remoulded prevailing notions of autonomy, freedom and self-determination. Yet, substantial parts of Western societies, let alone in the Global South, have remained excluded from the promises of individual emancipation and social modernisation. In fact, the gains of consumerism and individuality for some, the benefits of emancipation-cum-neoliberalism in Western societies, could materialise *only because* of the exclusion and exploitation of others (Brand & Wissen, 2018). As planetary boundaries are becoming increasingly visible, environmental movements call for norms and ideals of autonomy, freedom and self-realisation that no longer imply living *at the expense of others* (Lessenich, 2019), including future generations and non-human species. Yet what environmentalists present as necessary limits appears to many as undue restrictions and a threat to emancipatory achievements

or aspirations. For the latter, both in the wealthy countries and the Global South, current calls for redrawing boundaries in favour of long-term sustainability are equal to the spectre of authoritarianism dressed in green.

Finally, in addition to the spike of movements that further pursue emancipatory agendas in the traditional progressive sense, to the rise of movements that explicitly challenge and reframe the latter's take on emancipation and to the (re-)politicisation of emancipatory ideals in the wake of new debates on planetary boundaries and the Anthropocene, participation- and movement-scholars have noted an increase in public scepticism about political representation and delegation nurturing a desire *to do things by oneself* (Butzlaff & Deflorian, 2021). This tendency, too, can be understood as a remoulding of emancipatory politics – as *emancipation from the agents of emancipation* (the state, the party, movement leaders, etc.). It reconditions the action repertoire of many emancipatory movements and struggles (Pickard, 2019). Conceptualisations of social movements as *DIO-movements* (Pickard, 2019), *direct social action* (Bosi & Zamponi, 2020), *community movement organisations* (Forno & Graziano, 2014), *alternative action organisations* (Giugni & Grasso, 2018) or as *new materialist practices* (Deflorian, 2021) are expressive, it has been argued, of increased demands for more direct, unmediated and unfiltered experiences of self-determination *without* being overly bound by collective commitments. The boundaries which these forms of activism seek to transgress are restrictions imposed by structures and processes of representation, by bureaucratic structures and hierarchies and by feelings of social and political alienation triggered by the complexity of late modern consumer societies. And the new boundaries they draw secure the centrality of the emancipatory self-experience and guard the individual against the mediation, compromise, reliance and dependence that necessarily come with collective action. This DIO-development renders the imagination and organisation of *collective* and *group-based* emancipatory processes more difficult, as such collective practices would necessarily reintroduce elements of delegation and representation. Yet, if the social collective is conceived of as an obstacle to self-determination and a source of domination and oppression, struggles for emancipation and/or political change run the risk of becoming more and more individualised, eclectic and highly particular – which, in turn, may even further aggravate the feelings of political disempowerment emancipation had once set out to alleviate.

These recent shifts and developments in social movement activism are conditioned by emancipatory paradoxes and ambivalences, and they themselves produce new ones. As some observers had suggested already in the mid- and late 20th century (Foucault, 1995; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002), the belief that emancipation is unambiguously positive, normatively desirable, progressive and universal is itself unsustainable. Even if emancipatory movements in the traditional sense, too, are thriving, in the wake of right-wing populist movements, the ecological crisis and the Anthropocene, *progressive* expectations and certainties about emancipation can, also today, by no means be taken for granted. Of course, the developments outlined here must not be read as unidirectional, irreversible and universal. The interpretation and realisation of emancipation has always been contested, and today's struggles, too, are marked by contradictions and the simultaneity of considerable difference.

Sedimented understandings of emancipation

Notwithstanding continuous social, political and conceptual 'battles for ideas' (Salzborn, 2015, p. 15) of emancipation, from a historical and conceptual perspective, sedimented meanings of emancipation and prominent re-makings can be identified. This is, with a view to the exploration of paradoxes and ambivalences of emancipation useful to reflect on. *Inter alia*, these sedimented meanings contain fundamental assumptions and debates about human nature, history and the role of progress in it, the promises and pitfalls of an ideal society or utopia, the relation between human and non-human nature and the legitimatory role of emancipation primarily, but never solely for purposes of inclusion.

As a concept, emancipation is most commonly associated with modernity and the legacy of the Enlightenment. The concept's provenance, however, dates back to antiquity, more specifically, to Roman Law. In this context, emancipation designated a single legal act by which a person (one's son, daughter or wife) or a property (in antiquity, a slave) was set free by the *pater familias* or the slave holder (Coole, 2015; Grass & Koselleck, 1994). Thus, in this context, emancipation was delivered by a legally superior, active agent to a subordinate, passive subject. In modernity, by contrast, the meaning of emancipation changed fundamentally. For one, it was conceived of as a moral right and even duty of human beings to use their own reason. Human beings were regarded as having been born free, that is, as autonomous subjects capable, at least *de jure*, of living their lives according to reasons and motives that are taken as their own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces (Christman, 2020). In addition, modern renderings of emancipation typically designate emancipation as process instead of a single (legal) act, a process of (often arduous) maturing (Kant, 2006 [1784]).

Although Kant himself did not use the term emancipation, Kant's definition of the Enlightenment as 'the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority' by putting his own reason to use – by daring 'to be wise' (*sapere aude*) (Kant, 2006 [1784], p. 11) – has turned into a paradigmatic example of a modern rendering of emancipation (Coole, 2015; Foucault, 1984; Grass & Koselleck, 1994). According to Kant, the key challenge of emancipation is not domination, but a lack of courage. Although, as he argues, humans are released into autonomy by nature, they continue to follow prejudice, custom, norm, tradition and desire – the sensual – all of which embody heteronomy. They do so because following commands and desires is easier than asserting one's autonomy from pre-givens and routines to put one's own reason to use (Kant, 2006 [1784]). The latter is, however, crucial to the realisation of universal reason, to which, according to Kant, every human has access *qua* being rational (Kant, 2006a). Kant was convinced that nature intends human capacities to be developed to their fullest sense and that 'unsocial sociability' (Kant, 2010, p. 19) plays a major role in this development. The latter means that humans, in Kant's view, have a propensity to enter into society. At the same time, they have thoroughgoing resistance to this tendency and are always liable to tearing society apart by asserting their particular will, interests and preferences. For Kant, it is precisely this social antagonism, which brings about human progress understood as the gradual realisation of universal reason (Kant, 2010).

   What Kant and other (high) moderns, such as Hegel, Fichte, Schelling and Marx, shared was a teleological view of history. This implied linking the concept of emancipation to visions of an ideal society – utopias – such as 'perpetual peace' (Kant, 2006b), a fully 'rational state' (Hegel, 2011), a 'communist society' (Marx, 1978a [1844]). There are, of course, key differences between idealist takes of human autonomy (according to which, reason is the main source and delimiter of freedom) and materialist takes (according to which social relations are the main source and delimiter of freedom), but teleological and utopian thinking underpins Marxian thinking no less then Idealist thinking. Although progressivist and utopian readings of emancipation are still operative and defended today (e.g. when right wing-populist claims are depicted as regressive and liberal claims as progressive), today such a defence is, at least philosophically, no longer readily conceived of as being able to resort to transcendental grounds, ontological certainties, laws of history or nature or truth. Ultimate grounds (Laclau, 2007), such as reason in Kant and Hegel or man's species being in Marx, have undergone fundamental questioning, including their functions and implications for processes of emancipation. Doubting and dismantling ultimate foundations does, however, not forcibly mean that there are no normative reference points at all. What the loss of ultimate grounds does commonly imply is that any normative horizon of a given quest for emancipation is (also) regarded as a historically contingent or embedded horizon (Allen, 2017; Azmanova et al., 2018).

   Progressive readings of history and visions of an ideal society – two common characteristics of emancipation – have undergone substantive criticism already in the 19th century (Nietzsche, 2004). Such criticisms have, however, become particularly prominent in the 20th century (see Foucault, 1995). In light of Fascism (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002), colonialism (Fanon, 2011) and the systematic exclusion of some subjects in modernity along the lines of gender, race, religion, ethnicity and class (Balibar & Wallerstein, 2005; Pateman & Mills, 2013), promises of progress and visions of ideal societies were no longer conceived of as definitive antipodes of barbarism and domination, but also as likely acolytes. Against this backdrop, efforts were made to sever the close ties emancipation had to a progressivist reading of history and visions of an ideal society.

   Adorno, Foucault and Butler are prominent thinkers of post-progressivist and post-utopian, that is, 'negativistic conceptions of emancipation' (Allen, 2015, p. 513). They have (largely) given up on the idea that domination (be it in the form of instrumental reason, capitalist property relations, the patriarchy, heteronormativity, racism, antisemitism, etc.) could be fully overcome. From their perspective, chances are high that – as signalled in the previous section – what presents itself as emancipation today is likely to usher in new forms of social control and domination tomorrow. Against this backdrop, they conceive of the assertion of autonomy and claims to emancipation in more micro-political and rather non-utopian terms. Foucault, for instance, understands emancipation as the transformation of a given state of domination into a malleable field of power relations (Foucault, 1998). Adorno's take on emancipation implies breaking up closures by laying bare the contradictions between what thought claims and what it actually delivers (Adorno, 2014). And Butler underscores the importance of not only dismantling patriarchal domination and heterosexist oppression, but – more generally – challenging

structures of intelligibility that prevent some gender non-conforming bodies from being read as human at all (Butler, 2015). Some of these negativistic takes on emancipation, especially Foucault's and Butler's resignification of emancipation as post-progressivist and non-utopian practice of freedom (Brown & Held, 2010), have been themselves subject to various criticism: first and foremost, the criticism that emancipation understood as practice of freedom blends all too easily with neoliberal logics of self-transformation (Brown, 2009, p. 101).

Another common implication of high modern renderings of emancipation – apart from progressivism and utopianism – was the separation of the human from the non-human realm, including (non-human) nature. Because, in modernity, humans were considered as the seat of all knowledge qua their (*de jure*) rationality, they were also regarded as the sole and highest arbiter of reason. This established not only a dualism between human (rational) nature and (irrational) non-human nature but also a hierarchy between the two. This dualism had characterised Descartean thought (Descartes, 2010); it also found entry into the thinking of Locke (Locke, 2010) and Kant. As Kant argues, nature 'without man', non-human nature, that is, 'creation', would be 'a mere wilderness, a thing in vain, and have no final end' without men (Kant, 2007, p. 271). Emancipation from (non-human) nature – for Kant, one source of heteronomy – by subordinating it to human interest has exceeded early modern and Enlightenment thinking and became a dominant topos in and common feature of (capitalist) modernity. One central pitfall of modernity, as Walter Benjamin has put it, is to conceive of human progress as 'progress in the mastery of nature' (Benjamin, 2007, p. 259). It is not nature we need to master, Benjamin claims, but rather our societal relationships with nature (Benjamin, 2007, p. 259). Although, as political ecology has emphasised, human's relationship with non-human nature may be severed in the mind or through processes of abstraction in capitalist societies, metabolically, the two remain closely intertwined (Foster, 1999)

Historically and until today, emancipation has undoubtedly been closely associated with Enlightenment agendas and the critical theory tradition building on Kant, Hegel and Marx. The mission of this tradition, as Max Horkheimer's classic statement suggests, is not merely the theoretical aim of understanding what constitutes emancipation or the conditions under which it is possible, but also the ambitious practical aim of mankind's 'emancipation from slavery' (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 246). In the context of Horkheimer and, more generally, in the 20th century, the term slavery has come to refer to a broad constituency. Emancipation from it means liberating *any* person (or class of people) 'from a condition of dependence, such as a lack of rights or from a status in which those who have been classified as legal minors or nonentities lack [. . .] recognition as persons' (Coole, 2015, p. 532). While the inclusion and the empowerment of the so far marginalised, excluded and disenfranchised remains a central connotation of emancipation, emancipation also been brought into position for explicitly exclusionary agendas, as the emancipation from 'inferior human kind' (Hentges, 1999, p. 49), a designation commonly applied to non-Whites and non-Christians. As one may argue with Adorno and Horkheimer, that foregrounding principles of equality and freedom has always also gone hand in hand with new forms of legitimising inequality, is not only a prime example of the dialectic of the Enlightenment, but also – more narrowly – a prime example of a

paradox of emancipation. This paradox, as this article suggests throughout, was not only virulent in the history of ideas – which is always also a social history. It is also virulent in the present. To grasp this paradox analytically, approaching it and its manifestations in the present through the analytical lens of dialectics is, we believe, a promising endeavour.

Thinking dialectically

Approaching the current social constellation dialectically – a constellation shaped by, as mapped in the second section, progressive political agendas and exclusionary ones, by socio-economic legacies and achievements of emancipatory struggles and current ecological problematisations of them, by calls for radical societal changes in light of environmental crises and the simultaneous emancipation from collective forms of organisation – means, first and foremost, being sensitive towards 'contradictory process[es] between opposing sides' (Maybee, 2020). Such an approach implies resisting conceiving of a given social constellation in terms of dualisms between authentic and inauthentic, legitimate and illegitimate, progressive and regressive or emancipatory and reactionary agendas. Instead, adopting a dialectical point of view implies accepting at least the possibility that emancipation may serve as both, as a 'midwife' of (more) inclusive, egalitarian, universalist social constellations and, at the same time, as a 'gravedigger' of these very same norms (Blühdorn, 2020b, p. 48). One specificity of a dialectical point of view on, or approach to, phenomena is that it is informed by a *both and*- as opposed to an *either or*-perspective. This means it understands social relations as relations between component parts that are not only contradictory or antagonistic but also mutually constitutive (Grant, 2014; Maybee, 2020). Another key feature of a dialectical point of view is its concern with the field of tension that emerges between opposing, yet interdependent components, since within this field, potential catalysts of change emerge. Thus, dialectical relations cannot be reduced to a 'war of position' shaped by the defence of given strongholds. Instead, they always also imply and trigger 'wars of manoeuvre' (Gramsci, 1985, p. 238): the negation and reconstruction of social and political terrains through tensions, antagonisms, paradoxes and conflict. This is to say that dialectical relations are not static, but productive insofar as the tensions that shape them are likely to usher in social change. The current social constellation is but one example of tension- and conflict-driven reconstructions of given social and political terrains.

Taking a brief glimpse at the history of dialectical thought in social and political theory, Hegel is commonly regarded as the 'ground zero' (Grant, 2011, p. 12). For modern social and political theory, this is undoubtedly true. But also Hegel's dialectic has prominent precursors, among them, ancient ones. Socrates, as we learn from Plato's work (1991), had practiced dialectic in a specific way: as an art of dialogue that continuously challenges declarative propositions that are separated from their larger argumentative and historical context. 'Such propositions', or, as one may argue, opinions, beliefs and normative claims nourished by orthodoxies, hopes, dreams or desires, 'remain as ripe for questioning today as they were for ancient practitioners of dialectics' (Grant, 2014, p. 1). One of the key differences between ancient and modern dialectic is, however, that for the ancients, dialectical thinking and conversing is driven by the belief that it is a promising means to the end of identifying eternal truths. For moderns, by

contrast, the focus is no longer on *uncovering* eternal truths (being) but on *becoming*, that is, 'the self-creation of man as a process' (Marx & Engels, 1975, p. 332). Among moderns, dialectic is widely regarded as key to this process, especially one of dialectic's key component parts: 'determinate negation' (Hegel, 2010, p. 21.38; see also Maybee, 2020).

Determinate negation denotes the limits of any certainty provided by the senses, a concept or a form of life (e.g. family life or life in civil society) (Hegel, 2010, 2011). It makes visible that human beings, for whatever reason, may fail in living up to a given image of the world our reason (e.g. rational self-determination) or our senses (e.g. love) may provide us with. In a dialectical process, this failure of not being able to live up to a given image of the world ushers in a cancellation of this very image, that is, the negation of a given concept, sense-certainty or social constellation. Yet, for Hegel (and all those who write themselves into the tradition of dialectical thinking after Hegel, among them Marx, Gramsci, Adorno and Horkheimer, Marcuse, Adorno, Fanon, Jameson or Žižek), the negation of a given fixity is clearly different from mere nothingness (Hegel, 2010, p. 21.38). It neither leads to a *contradictio ad absurdum* (as is the case with opposites in logic) nor to mere reversal (Hirschman, 2004). Instead, negation gives rise to a new concept, sense-certainty or social constellation that entails elements of both poles of the previous contradiction, but also embodies something profoundly new. Although Hegel himself hardly used the terms thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis to describe dialectical modes of becoming, that is, social change, these terms have come to serve as the most prominent shorthand for denoting the *dialectical process*. The thesis demarcates a fixity (e.g. the idea that emancipation is the motor of human progress towards a more just, democratic, free society); the antithesis makes visible the limits of a given fixity and negates it by presenting itself as an opposite to the thesis (e.g. that some humans are held in bondage and colonised in the name of emancipation). And the synthesis preserves elements of both, while at the same time embodying a new concept, social norm or social constellation, which may itself turn into a new fixity (e.g., that the idea of emancipation may mean freedom and domination at the same time) (see also Maybee, 2020).

Marx, as is well known, was profoundly fond of Hegel's dialectical thinking and his uncovering of negation as the motor of history. Yet he considered Hegel to be an idealist. According to Marx, Hegel committed the mistake of treating consciousness – the mind – as the determinant of life. For Marx, the opposite is true: the material reality of our existence is what determines consciousness (Marx, 1978b [1844], p. 145). Yet, as Grant argues in light of the idealism versus materialism-debate, '[b]oth options seem overly mechanical and miss the dialectical relation between thought and material conditions' (Grant, 2014, p. 3). Marx may have done interpretative injustice to Hegel, yet, it was Marx who most famously turned his attention to actual, material conditions: the functioning of capitalism; the formation of dialectically related (collective) subjectivities within it, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; and capitalism's (self-)negation and overcoming through class struggles. In contrast to a considerable part of the Left, in Marx's time no less then now, who derive their views of the ideal society from some combination of their hopes, needs and dreams, Marx arrives at his views on communism from his analysis of capitalism: capitalism's bits and pieces and the manifold contradictory

relations between them; no less than capitalism working's as a totality, whose perceptibility hinges on abstraction – a precondition for *Gesellschaftskritik* (critique of society).

Adorno and Horkheimer, among many others, followed in the footsteps of Hegel and Marx. In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002), they offer a scathing critique of modern societies. Against then common wisdom, they argue that Enlightenment, the seeming victory of reason did, in light of Fascism, clearly not set an end to myth – the perceived antipode of reason. Instead, the victory of reason over myth implied the enthroning of the myth of reason, more precisely, the myth of instrumental reason. The latter implies the mastery over nature through science, technology and capitalist social relations shaped by domination and exploitation. Yet this mastery, Adorno and Horkheimer claim further, does not stop at the subjection of nature to instrumental, rational(istic) imperatives. It also implies the expansion of instrumental rationality to all other domains of modern societies, including our conduct with others as well as ourselves. The 'curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression' (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 28), they suggest, and the Enlightenment is a key exemplification of this paradox.

Current debates on the Anthropocene seem to echo this paradox. They take account of techno-scientific progress, which propelled the Great Acceleration after 1945, while also pointing to the unprecedented and irreversible scope of environmental destruction. By making sense of social change as dialectical change, Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* obviously enlivens the tradition of dialectical social and political thought. Yet, at the same time, they break with a fundamental tenet of this tradition, namely the assumption that the productive qualities of dialectical relations are bound to lead, as mentioned above, to human progress. While this *break* does not forcibly imply the verdict that there is no progress at all (Allen, 2017), it certainly calls into question teleological views of history. In Adorno and Horkheimer, dialectic relations, social antagonisms, co-constitutive oppositions continue to be viewed as movers of history. What's new, as has been indicated in the previous section, is that they show that these movers may not only lead to improved human and non-human conditions but also to new forms of barbarism. Colonialism, for instance, is but another example of this dialectic of Enlightenment. Dialectical thinking helps to unearth, among others, how given seemingly inclusive values, such as the Enlightenment values of freedom and equality, may also come to mask the exclusion, poor treatment, domination and exploitation of those who are deemed unsuitable holders of these same values. This masking, as is well known, has most typically operated along the lines of race, gender, ethnicity, religion and sex. According to Žižek, who thinks that thinking dialectically remains *the* crucial key to making sense of reality in a critical sense, thinking dialectically in late modernity, means bringing into light the 'repressed real' of antagonism (1994, p. 25). According to him, what we perceive as real and normal *always* hinges on fading out potential disturbances to such perceptions. From his perspective, the extra-ideological point of reference that authorises us to criticise the content of our immediate experiences as ideological is neither the real, nor the ideal, but the repressed real of antagonism.

Thus, dialectical thinking remains present in contemporary social theory. But this said, many have also come to dismiss this tradition. Some argue that its heavy reliance on the logics of co-constitution and contradiction stands in the way of seeing contingencies

and of making sense of more subtle operations of power (Foucault, 1980, pp. 184–186). Others have come to dismiss dialectical thinking because it runs the risk of functioning in a way in which nothing seems to be able to count against it (Derrida, 1978) as everything seems to be relational and a component part of a totality. Others again reject dialectical thinking because they regard it, as Nietzsche already did, as a reactive and an uncreative mode of thinking that is, predominantly, employed by those who are incapable of affirming what is good or valuable without first objecting to the existence of people with greater power than they have (Deleuze, 1983; see also Grant, 2014).

Yet, in spite of these (and other) objections against dialectical thinking, there are, we believe, good reasons to stay with the dialectic approach – especially in light of current contestations and reconfigurations of emancipation. For one, the analytic lens of dialectic equips the social critic, at least in a first instance, with the freedom from being for or against certain claims to and struggles for emancipation – a type of freedom unavailable to social critics who operate in a (more) normative register. Second, without denying that social change may (also) be indebted to mere contingencies, the analytic lens of dialectic sensitises for the possibility that (seemingly stark) opposites, such as nationalist, nativist, masculinist populism on the one hand and neoliberal, cultural liberalism on the other may be related. The point is certainly not to read relations into given phenomena – this would make for a poor analysis – but to be open to the possibility that opposing sides may not only function as opposites, but also as co-constituents. Third, if, in the present social constellation, there is a *dialectic of emancipation* that operates akin to the dialectic of Enlightenment, that is, as a dialectic that ushers in empowerment *and* (planetary) destruction, universalist inclusion *and* particularist exclusion, the floor is wide open for the debate on the future of the norm, ideal and political rallying cry that has, at least historically and politically, always hinged on the promise that things turn to the better.

Into the research agenda

Thus, a research agenda titled a *dialectic of emancipation* engages with the question if and to what extent emancipatory agendas and politics may serve as both a driver of (more) inclusive, egalitarian, universalist social constellations and, at the same time, a trigger for these norms' subversion and radical reconfiguration. More precisely, it conceives of antagonistic understandings and pursuits of emancipation not as independent, opposing sides, but as – potentially – interrelated and co-productive. It investigates norms, idea(l)s and political rallying cries for emancipation and what has become of them in actual social practices. It examines the nature of a given form of social change and the new social constellations it brings about, and it looks back, from this perspective, on once envisaged and aimed for norms and ideals. Last but not least, it explores to what extent, if at all, the ideal of emancipation, which has been critical to and in modernity may have seized to serve as relevant concept – in which case it may need to be radically rethought and re-loaded for it to remain meaningful and relevant in light of current challenges and crises.

Such a research agenda – and the contributions collated in this Special Issue – do not need to be underpinned by one single, integrating understanding of the *dialectic of emancipation* and the latter's core components: dialectic and emancipation. In fact, such

uniformity would be counter-productive. Instead, such a research programme is deli-neated, as signalled above, by the questions to what extent emancipatory politics is hitting new limits; whether and how emancipation can still signpost and energise a societal transformation towards a socially and ecologically just and inclusive global society; what other kinds of societal transformation emancipatory struggles may power; how established understandings of emancipation are themselves being redefined; on what normative grounds it is possible – and legitimate – to distinguish between *authentic* or *perverted* and *legitimate* or *illegitimate* notions of emancipation; whether we can envisage forms of emancipation that, in light of the unexpected side effects, focus not only on the transgression of boundaries but put much more emphasis on setting bound-aries to transgression and so forth. The contributions collated in this Special Issue only begin to engage with these questions, and they are doing so from a variety of perspec-tives. Yet, the tide of right-wing populism, the ecological crisis and the new debate on the Anthropocene are ever recurring themes, and the *democratic paradox* and *dialectic of emancipation* are the conceptual lens which all contributors are experimenting with.

To begin with, Ingolfur Blühdorn further develops the understanding of the *dialectic of emancipation* which he first suggested in a different publication (Blühdorn, 2020a, 2020b). Seeking to explain why after decades of eco-emancipatory mobilisation, there still seems to be no realistic prospect for any profound socio-ecological transformation of contemporary consumer societies while, instead, an autocratic-authoritarian turn is reshaping even the most established liberal democracies, he suggests that the emanci-patory logic itself is a parameter that has not received sufficient attention so far. Blüh-dorn starts out from an understanding of emancipation as the individual and collective acquisition of the ability for self-determination on the basis of a collective reason and rationality. In this Kantian sense, Blühdorn argues, the emancipatory struggle for libera-tion and autonomy inherently implies the recognition of imperatives of (self-)limitation and (self-)restriction which are essential for the realisation of a society that guarantees universal rights and appreciates planetary boundaries. Yet, in the wake of consecutive reframings of the emancipatory project and the struggle between competing interpreta-tions of the concept, he suggests, notions of emancipation have prevailed which steadily strengthen the dimension of liberation at the expense of the dimension of limitation. The *dialectic of emancipation*, then is the unintended and unreflected metamorphosis of the emancipatory project from an agenda of equality, justice and inclusion into an agenda of inequality, exclusion and authoritarian governance.

Working with a similar understanding of *dialectic*, Erik Swyngedouw then further deepens the analysis of the current tide of populist political movements. He focuses on the impasse of democratic politics today, marked by the fading of the belief that liberal democratic institutions are conducive to emancipation and by the seemingly inexorable rise of a variety of populist political movements. He scrutinises how the lure of autocratic populism in combination with neo-liberal governance arrangements have pioneered post-truth autocratic politics and fostered illiberal agendas. In particular, Swyngedouw focuses on the institutional configurations through which the democratic has been fun-damentally transformed. The reframing of emancipation through an increasingly author-itarian neoliberalism, he believes, is reducing the individual's efforts to the liberation from boundaries limiting consumption and individual happiness. Accordingly, the

emancipatory paradox he highlights lies in the fact that this reframing of emancipation might – albeit in the name of democratisation and liberation – subordinate the individual citizen even further to the dominance of illiberal-neo-liberal governance, which may even further increase the demands for authoritarian steering.

Taking a somewhat different perspective, Torben Lütjen challenges the assumption of a causal link between a re-formulation of emancipation, on the one hand, and the rise of right-wing populism and authoritarianism, on the other. In fact, he interprets right-wing populism as an essentially anti-authoritarian movement. He emphasises that contemporary right-wing populist movements diverge from the clearly authoritarian movements of the past, such as classic conservatism and fascism. His article shows how right-wing populists forge their own project of self-empowerment and appropriate notions of emancipation and autonomy. They zoom in, Lütjen suggests, on the alienation and atomisation experienced by many under conditions of the contemporary post-industrialist societies. The de-valuations of established lifestyles of the past, he argues, have created a growing demand for a liberation from *new* norms of behaviour, consumption and lifestyles, which some perceive as intrusive and moralising. The paradox and dialectic that arise from these appropriations of emancipation lie in the fact that they entail exclusive and sometimes aggressively authoritarian or even racist understandings of self-empowerment, which contrast sharply with previously established notions of progressiveness.

Felix Butzlaff then turns to the way in which the re-scripting of emancipation that Blühdorn, Swyngedouw and Lütjen are seeking to capture affects the patterns and possibilities for the political organisation of emancipatory struggles. Based on a review of how liberal, (post)Marxist and postmodernist social theory have conceptualised the ongoing reframing of emancipation, Butzlaff investigates how political parties and social movements strategically respond to these reformulations. He traces how prevailing readings of emancipation have become increasingly individualised, contingent, flexible and process-oriented, eliminating the formulation of concrete goals and collective ideals of a good and just life. As a consequence, he argues, the organisation of effective and powerful collective emancipatory politics might become ever less likely. While occurring in the name of further liberation, the ongoing reinterpretation of emancipation and the impact on its political organisation might, in the end, hamper or even obstruct the very goals they had originally aimed to further. Thus, speaking in terms of political organisation, the dialectic of emancipation is, Butzlaff suggests, that the contemporary organisational forms of emancipatory movements, while seeking to promote self-empowerment and liberation, might in fact further disempower and atomise the individual citizen, thereby further reducing the potential to organise and orchestrate socio-ecological transformations at a larger scale.

The next set of articles then shifts the emphasis to making suggestions on how to re-think emancipation and the emancipatory project in light of planetary boundaries and, in particular, in light of the new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. Andrew Dobson aims for an understanding of emancipation that departs from traditional notions of autonomy and acknowledges that in the wake of its attempts to gain full control over nature, the human species has, in fact, become increasingly subject to forces which it cannot control. He takes issue, firstly, with the Kantian distinction between the realms of nature and necessity, on the one hand, and reason and freedom, on the other, and, secondly, with the

understanding of emancipation as gaining freedom from constraint and achieving mastery over the forces of nature. This, he suggests, was the Holocene project of emancipation, yet, in the Anthropocene, he argues, the late-Holocene notions of emancipation cannot survive, for, the transition to the Anthropocene is the moment when the Holocene process of controlling external nature reunited the human species with external nature from which it sought to gain autonomy. The simultaneity of the *humanisation of nature*, that is, its mastery, and the *naturalisation of humans*, that is, their subjection to forces they cannot control, Dobson conceptualises as a dialectical process. Yet, in the Anthropocene, he believes, it is not just more urgent than ever but also more possible for humans to embrace notions auf emancipation that recognise and accept the human condition of dependence and constraint.

Manuel Arias-Maldonado and Luigi Pellizzoni think through what such notions of emancipations might look like in concrete terms. Arias-Maldonado conceives of the Anthropocene not as a dialectical sublation, let alone as the sounding of the death knell for the concept and idea(l) of emancipation. Instead, he presents the Anthropocene as an opportunity: the opportunity to conceive of emancipation and with it of autonomy no longer in mainly moral (and rational) terms, as Kant did, or as an endpoint (such as living a *truly* autonomous live), as proponents of degrowth commonly do, but as a state of affair that is open-ended, profoundly relational and biophysically embedded. Emancipation understood as personal (as opposed to moral) autonomy hinges on other human beings as well as on non-human nature. Human subjectivities are, as Arias-Maldonado puts it, 'planetary subjectivities'. Against limits discourses and (often related) visions of the good life, he argues that deciding on the very meaning of a good life remains to be a decision that is the prerogative of the individual – a matter of 'personal autonomy'. Yet, for personal autonomy to be possible, collective decisions and efforts are necessary: decisions and efforts that take into account ecological limits *and* provide the economic conditions that allow for self-determination, if necessary by economic growth (in some regions of the word), for people to at all be in the position to determine themselves.

For Luigi Pellizzoni, the starting point is the modernist account of the human being as ontologically indeterminate which underpins understandings of emancipation that seek for endless enhancement of the Self. This ontological indeterminacy and endless quest, he believes, propel the ever more intensive exploitation of the biophysical world, explain the unsustainable ways of living reiterated worldwide and are the root cause of the multidimensional crisis of unsustainability. The search for alternative ontologies of the human – and, accordingly, alternative understandings of emancipation – lead him to a review of post-humanist ontologies, theories of degrowth and the critique of lifestyle politics. Yet, these all remain caught up, he argues, in modernist understandings of the human. Drawing on Agamben's notion of *form-of-life*, Pellizzoni then develops an understanding of emancipation that reverses the established relation between *being* and *doing*, departs from the modernist belief in ontological indeterminacy of the human and thus avoids the implications of unsustainability which are attached to the latter: If to *become* and *be* something, ontologically indeterminate humans have to *do*, this makes them vulnerable to capital's operation, Pellizzoni argues. Yet, if *being* precedes *doing* and *doing fits being like a glove*, he believes, then capture is hardly possible, the quest for emancipation is no

longer endless and the maintenance of planetary boundaries becomes thoroughly feasible.

Margaret Haderer's contribution operates at a distance from given dialectics of emancipation and argues that whatever may become of given meanings of emancipation, emancipation remains a lingering task. From her perspective, neither the loss of ultimate foundations for emancipatory claims nor the loss of certainty about history's trajectory is bound to constitute the end of emancipation as a meaningful critical or utopian concept. Emancipation, she argues, is also a question of how one positions oneself towards the Enlightenment inheritance, a question any subject, including the subject of a social theorist may ask herself. Such a questioning implies making sense of the term's meaning changes, functions, scopes and limits in light of right-wing populism, socio-ecological crises and Anthropocene debates. Yet it may also usher in an active and argued boundary drawing for or against certain meanings of emancipation in light of the term's history and legacies. This is, as Haderer argues, particularly true of a social theory that understands itself not only as observant and reconstructive, but also as critical, since limit setting is, as Kant has already argued, a key component of any form of critique.

Needless to say, the contributions collated here are but an attempt to engage with the research agenda outlined above. They are not based on a unified understanding of *emancipation*, *dialectic* and *dialectic of emancipation*, but they are based on the recognition that at the current conjuncture established certainties about emancipation and the emancipatory project have become uncertain and contested, that in this constellation simply re-iterating established modes of thinking in terms of binary distinctions between progressiveness and regressiveness and so on are no longer helpful and that dialectical ways of thinking are much better suited to capture the paradoxes, simultaneities, contradictions, complicities and ambivalences which, we believe, the tide of right-wing populist movements and the authoritarian turn, the multi-dimensional sustainability crisis and the new debates on the Anthropocene all expose in a particular way.

Between ourselves, as authors of this conceptual article and editors-cum-contributors of/to this Special Issue, we share a normative commitment to egalitarian, inclusive and universal emancipatory values – even though, in exploring the legacy of emancipatory politics and assessing its achievements and future prospects, we adopt slightly different perspectives. We also share the belief that the questions we are raising here will further gain in significance as the identification and transgression of planetary boundaries shift issues of limitation, restriction and regulation right into the centre of political debates and attention – issues which, up to the present, (eco-)emancipatory movements in the traditional sense are finding difficult to confront. No less importantly, the new societal divisions and polarisations – as illustrated also by recent protests against government policies to contain the COVID-19 pandemic or the bitter controversies around various forms of *identity politics* – seem set to further challenge established emancipatory politics, redraw political conflict lines and restructure the political space. And not least, the new competition between the US and China, that is, between liberal-democratic and communist-authoritarian countries is pouring fuel onto the debate on the scope and limits of the values of autonomy, freedom, self-determination and emancipation in these values' name and on the very meaning of progress and regress.

Against this background, the research agenda we are outlining here is important and urgent, but also discomforting. Critical sociology and the critical social sciences, more generally, are only beginning to give it the attention it deserves – not least because this research agenda invariably implies radical normative uncertainties and, potentially, disorientation. It is a radical and innovative agenda in that it problematises the, still prevailing, unambiguously positive perspective on emancipation, the emancipatory project and emancipatory politics. It requires that questions of being *for* or *against* certain takes on emancipation are, at least temporarily, bracketed out and emancipation is approached as an ambivalent concept and political rallying cry that promises greater freedom, dignity and equality, but may, at the same time, by accident and/or by intention, also undercut this very promise. And research in line with this agenda is irritating in that it must be willing to read contemporary protests and movements challenging the very orthodoxies of egalitarian, universalist, cosmopolitan and ecological emancipatory politics as being themselves, in a sense, emancipatory. As such, this research agenda also contributes to explaining the apparently irresistible appeal of right-wing populist movements and the curious resilience of the order of unsustainability. Indeed, these are core respects, in which this Special Issue ventures into new and largely unchartered territory.

With all this said, to investigate the ongoing contestation and remoulding of emancipation, obviously does not mean taking *any* claim to emancipation and liberation at face value and granting them normative validity (Celikates, 2006). Movements invoking ideals of emancipation are struggling for very diverse values, world views and political agendas, and we are far from intending to ennoble every call for liberation as emancipatory. Reversely, however, it is also necessary to resist any urge of wanting to readily draw clear boundaries between *progressive* and *regressive*, or *legitimate* and *illegitimate* takes on emancipation. Accordingly, our overall objective with this Special Issue is not – even though individual contributions are doing so – to approve or reject particular understandings of emancipation, but to explore, to make sense of and to endure the 'messiness' (Salzborn, 2015, p. 15) of ongoing battles for the idea of emancipation.

Authors' note

The authors' names appear in alphabetical order, but this does not signal differentiated weight of intellectual input. All three authors have contributed equally to writing this article and share the authorship of each of its sections equally. In line with standard practice, only one author is officially marked as 'corresponding author', but contact details of the other two authors are listed elsewhere in this Special Issue. All three authors are equally responsible for the framing, collating and guest-editing of this Special Issue.

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