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Politicisation beyond post-politics: new social activism and the reconfiguration of political discourse

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the financial crisis of 2008/9 social movements reminiscent of eco-emancipatory movements of the 1980s powerfully repoliticised the post-political order of neoliberalism. Additionally, and more recently, right-wing populist movements, Fridays for Future or political mobilisations related to the COVID-19 pandemic have substantially refashioned both the understanding of *post-politics* and the patterns of its *repoliticisation*. This article introduces a special issue on *Movements and Activism beyond Post-politics*. In light of these recent shifts we revisit the notion of *post-politics*, identify key characteristics of contemporary forms of repoliticisation, zoom in on academic debates about *prefigurative* and *transformative* politics and – following a preview of the contributions collated in the special issue – explore what the ongoing reconfiguration of public discourse may imply for further research into social movement activism beyond post-politics.

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1. Introduction

Following the era of hegemonic market-liberalism which many post- and neo-Marxist theorists had conceptualised as an era of *depoliticisation*, *post-democracy* and *post-politics* (Crouch, 2004; Rancière, 1995, 2006; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014; Žižek, 2008) a wealth of new social movements and forms of activism have been repoliticising social arrangements and beliefs which had come to be regarded as non-negotiable and immutable. These repoliticisations raise new hopes that the socio-ecological transformation of capitalist consumer societies for which emancipatory social movements and sustainability researchers have been campaigning for many decades might, after all, still be possible. Yet, they are also highly diverse and ambiguous, and political sociologists, social theorists and social movement researchers are hard pushed to understand their drivers and assess their transformative potential.

In the wake of the banking and financial crisis of 2008/9, these repoliticisations – such as Occupy Wall Street, the Five Star Movement in Italy or the Movements of the Squares in Athens, Madrid and elsewhere – first seemed to revive the egalitarian-participatory agenda of earlier waves of social movement mobilisation. They seemed to signal

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a *reinvention of politics* and a *return of the political* in the sense of Beck (1997) and Mouffe (1997). They were widely interpreted as pushing the democratisation of institutionalised democracy, as pioneers of a societal transformation to come and as prefigurative experiments for a socially and ecologically pacified society (Mason, 2015; Schlosberg, 2019; Schlosberg & Coles, 2016; WBGU, 2011) beyond the present *order of unsustainability* (Blühdorn, 2007, 2011, 2013; Blühdorn & Deflorian, 2019). Almost in parallel, quite different forms of repoliticisation were flourishing as well. They, too, are critically engaging with neoliberal globalisation but, ideologically, they are radically opposed to the progressive-emancipatory tradition and have been conceptualised as agents of a *great regression* (Geiselberger, 2017): In the wake of the refugee crisis of 2015 in Europe and the US presidential elections of 2016, right-wing populist mobilisation fundamentally reconfigured public political discourse and the political space in many polities, militating not only against the market liberal project of globalisation but also against the perceived hegemony of liberal, cosmopolitan values (Mondon & Winter, 2020) and the emerging consensus that a tightening climate and sustainability crisis render a profound socio-ecological transformation of capitalist consumer societies inevitable and urgent (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2018; Wiedenhofer et al., 2020). And most recently, new climate movements as well as protests against government policies addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, yet again, have added to the complexity of the repoliticisation of the supposedly post-political constellation (Dean, 2020; Pleyers, 2020).

In their own particular ways, these diverse forms of activism all conceive of themselves as struggling against heteronomy and oppression and as defending citizen rights, political self-determination and authentic democracy. They all aim for the empowerment of subjects whose inalienable rights, they feel, are being denied. Yet, many of them can no longer be interpreted as pursuing a *reinvention of politics* in the sense of Beck or Mouffe. They are not the ‘massive escalation of truly disruptive action’ that, as Colin Crouch (Crouch, 2004, p. 123) and many others had believed, would revive the egalitarian-democratic project and launch a ‘counter-attack on the Anglo-American model’ (ibid.: p. 107). And they shed fundamental doubt on the claim that despite all temporary ‘retrogression’ and ‘authoritarian backlashes’ liberal values will eventually prevail (Inglehart, 2018, pp. 114–119; Inglehart & Norris, 2017). Not only are these repoliticisations very diverse in terms of their political values and ideological orientations, but rather than suspending the era of post-politics many of them also seem to be perpetuating the agenda of depoliticisation and post-democracy. This applies to right-wing populist movements which have lost all confidence in the established political institutions as much as to parts of the new climate movements which portray their demands as non-negotiable, scientifically objective imperatives. And it applies to many urban niche initiatives, too, which, rather than regarding themselves as the avantgarde of a great societal transformation, seem to be signalling a kind of retreat into everyday practices and personal lifeworlds.

Thus, the repoliticisation beyond post-politics calls for new conceptual tools and theoretical approaches. A range of assumptions which still underpin much of critical social movement research are becoming increasingly questionable; and eco-political commitments often condition academic perceptions of repoliticisations. Hence, analyses following the tradition of post-Marxist critical sociology need to be supplemented by analytical and interpretative approaches better suited to understand the complex patterns and logics of

contemporary repoliticisations. Crucial in this is, not least, to bear in mind that core concepts of critical social movement research such as alienation, liberation, autonomy or democracy are not fixed and immutable norms of reference but are themselves political, that is dynamic constructs whose meaning is and remains socially contested.

The articles collated in this special issue *Prefiguration – Co-optation – Simulation: Movements and Activism beyond Post-politics* contribute to the endeavour to understand political activism in and beyond the post-political constellation. They were written before and hence do not reflect the very latest waves of political mobilisations. Focusing, first and foremost, on movements and forms of activism which emerged in the wake of the banking- and financial crisis of 2008/9, they explore to what extent these repoliticisations contribute to overcoming the post-political order. In particular, the authors ask for the prefigurative and transformative power of these movements as pioneers of a socially and ecologically pacified alternative society. In this introductory article we carefully situate the special issue by clarifying the notions of *post-politics* and *repoliticisation* (section two). Then we zoom in on academic debates about *prefigurative* and *transformative* politics (section 3), also reflecting on alternative or complementary ways of interpreting contemporary social movements and political activism. Section four provides a preview of the contributions to this special issue. In the final section we explore how the recent waves of repoliticisation have reconfigured public discourse and the political space, and we consider the implications of this for the further investigation of social movement activism beyond post-politics.

2. Post-politics and repoliticisation

What theorists such as Badiou, Rancière, Žižek or Swyngedouw are referring to as *post-politics* and the *post-political constellation* gradually evolved in the 1990s. In policy-making and policy studies it is closely related to the paradigms of *new public management* and *public administration* and to the confidence in government by experts and technocrats – which, in turn, gave rise to diagnoses of *post-democracy* (Crouch, 2004; Rancière, 1999). The notion of post-politics is based on, firstly, a distinction between *politics* as a more or less formalised, institutionalised process and the *political* as the irreducibly plural and irresolvably conflictual (Mouffe, 1997; Rancière, 1999; Schmitt, 1996). Secondly, the notion of post-politics presupposes an understanding of *politicisation* as the contestation on the ‘part of those that have no part’ (Rancière, 2010) of hegemonic beliefs, arrangements and practices combined with the demand that things could and should also be different – not only for them personally, but also for society at large. And thirdly, the post-political condition presumes the opposite process of *depoliticisation* as the discursive construction of a new consensus which annuls political conflict (Rancière, 1995). Thus, depoliticisation implies – positively and negatively – the pacification, denial and suppression of the *political*, the construction and maintenance of a new hegemonic constellation, and the closure of spaces for the articulation and celebration of dissensus.

In the post-political condition, then, politics is reduced to procedures of by and large consensual governance which engages different *stakeholders* but excludes any voices contesting the hegemonic consensus. By denying the legitimacy of any alternative ideas and approaches and implementing the required policy measures, post-political policy-making confines itself to securing – or as Rancière (2010) puts it, *policing* – the continuation of the prevailing order. On the one hand, the post-political condition is

marked by complaints about the decline of political interest and the proliferation of political apathy (Crouch, 2004; Stoker, 2006). At the same time, however, any alternative voices and newly emerging movements are swiftly denounced (policed) as irrational, immoral, irresponsible or even as terrorist because they challenge the hegemonic consensus and its supposedly objective truths.

As regards the origin and drivers of depoliticisation and thus the post-political constellation, post- and neo-Marxist theorists (e.g., Dean, 2009; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014) had identified the ideology of market liberalism as the root cause of the problem. Others are also pointing to, inter alia, pressures for the efficient management of ever rising complexity (Burnham, 2001; Zolo, 1992) or to a *dialectic of emancipation* leading to a *multiple dysfunctionality* and *legitimation crisis* of democracy (Blühdorn, 2020a, 2020b). Furthermore, it has been noted that strategies of depoliticisation are by no means exclusive to the proponents of market liberalism, but are equally essential to actors pursuing other political agendas (Offe, 1985; Rancière, 1995). Indeed, not only the dogmatic belief in supposedly non-negotiable market imperatives may be described as post-political, but this label also fits the belief in the categorical rule of science and scientists, for example, in matters of public health – smoking, obesity, immunisation, COVID-19 – or in climate and environmental policy (Swyngedouw, 2010a, 2010b). For a nuanced understanding of the post-political constellation and its ongoing repoliticisation this point is crucial. In eco-political discourse, in particular, strategies of depoliticisation have always played an important role. This is evidenced, for example, by the techno-managerial policy approaches which have become hegemonic in environmental governance since the 1980s, by the most recent climate movements' fixation on scientific data and evidence, and also by the long-standing efforts of eco-political activists to frame their respective causes as a concern of, and issue for, (the survival of) humanity at large (Blühdorn, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2010b). The former, that is, depoliticisation by scientisation, obscures the specifically *political* in eco-politics in that, focusing narrowly on bio-physical conditions and changes which scientists describe in a more or less objective manner, it eclipses the competing and conflicting *value judgments* about these conditions and changes – which are, in fact, the actual substance matter of all eco-politics (Latour, 2004). The latter, that is the rhetorical reliance on the all-inclusive *we*, obscures that environmental politics is never about the human species at large but always about conflicts of values and interests between different social groups and/or societies. Where, and to the extent that, eco-political movements – seeking to strengthen the legitimacy and authority of their demands – draw on these strategies of depoliticisation they, too, by implication deny the claims to autonomy and equal recognition of dissenting voices and subjectivities. They, too, negate the legitimacy of alternative rationalities and the right to disagree. In this sense they become part of the post-political constellation – and, predictably, trigger reflexes of repoliticisation.

Accordingly, the distinctive features of today's repoliticisation beyond post-politics include, inter alia, that in addition to the logic of capitalism and the hegemony of market-liberalism, new actors are contesting the perceived new hegemony of eco-cosmopolitan thinking, too, as well as the claims that scientific evidence renders a socio-ecological transformation of capitalist consumer societies imperative and a matter of priority. Put differently: whilst sharing the counter-hegemonic belief that *things could and should also be different*, new actors and forms of *reflexive repoliticisation* are emerging which

challenge the scientific evidence and, more importantly, the very values, logic and perceived new hegemony of those who in the name of emancipation and progressiveness once set out to challenge the logic of capitalism and industrial modernity. Obviously, these new varieties of politicisation neither suspend nor replace the more established ones; they just increase the complexity and ambiguity of the ongoing repoliticisation of the post-political constellation.

Secondly, and closely related, a distinctive feature of contemporary repoliticisations is – as illustrated, for example, by Novák’s contribution to this special issue – the extent to which they are triggered by and directed against each other, thus propelling a new fragmentation and polarisation of contemporary societies as well as the formation of new political conflict lines. In this regard the confrontation between right-wing populist climate change deniers and the new climate movements is a prominent case in point, and Donald Trump and Greta Thunberg have both become icons illustrating the new polarisation.

Thirdly, many of these diverse repoliticisations are calling for a more authentic democracy and the empowerment of the people, yet their respective norms and agendas are often radically incompatible with each other. Quite evidently, established notions of empowerment, self-determination and autonomy, once again, have become very contested and the traditional distinction between *progressive* and *regressive* movements seems simplistic and due for reconsideration.

And, fourth, as signalled above, these new politicisations themselves at times appear to perpetuate, just as much as they challenge, the post-political constellation, be it in that they withdraw into hermetically sealed echo-chambers and refuse to engage with alternative rationalities; that they contract into personal lifeworld- and lifestyle-activism more or less surrendering the ambition to collectively mobilise for large-scale societal change in the public space; that they explicitly remove their causes from the arena of political contestation by placing them, instead, into the hands of supposedly apolitical science; or that they develop a *hatred of democracy* in the sense of Rancière, who notes that the critical intelligentsia, in particular, are increasingly concerned that democracy itself, proving unable to regulate the freedom it promotes, might accelerate the ‘great catastrophe of civilization’ (Rancière, 2006, p. 27; Blühdorn, 2020a). Aspects of a withdrawal into lifeworld- and lifestyle-activism, in particular, are touched upon, for example, by De Moor and colleagues as well as by MacGregor in this special issue.

Thus, contemporary forms of political mobilisation and activism can neither easily be conceptualised as reversing processes of depoliticisation and suspending the post-political constellation, nor can they unequivocally be described as progressive and empowering in the established sense. As yet, the ways in which and the extent to which they unfold transformative potentials remain very ambivalent, and established interpretations of the disruptive role of social movements and political activism need to be carefully reviewed. By reviewing and recontextualising the notion of *prefigurative politics*, the contributions of this special issue make a first step into that direction.

3. Prefiguration, co-optation and simulation

One of the most common interpretations of new social movements and innovative forms of activism is their conceptualisation as a political avantgarde that, experimentally developing new social practices, subjectivities and socio-ecological relations, pioneers

modern societies' transformation towards the ideal of a good life for all in a socially and ecologically pacified (world) society. In line with this tradition, the notion of *prefiguration* has recently become very prominent. The term has been used to signal that utopian social relationships can be anticipated by and brought about through their collective performance in the present (Yates, 2014). In recent years, this strategic concept and analytical frame have spread into constituencies far beyond critical intellectuals and anarchist circles. Its rise is closely connected to a new tide of activism centring on the development of alternative everyday practices – which in turn was triggered not least by the widespread experience of eco-political inertia and the adamant resilience of market-liberal consumer capitalism. Two important explanations for this new tide are, firstly, that the spontaneous declarations of equality, freedom and solidarity in the wake of the financial crisis could not easily be sustained, once the activists had been evicted from the public squares and the imposition of draconian austerity threw major parts of the population into poverty and precarity. Varvarousis and colleagues (in this special issue) draw attention to how in the South of Europe, in particular, this led to a shift in activist strategies towards practically testing and spatialising new social and political lifeforms that also cater for the basic needs of individuals (also see Swyngedouw, 2018; Zamponi & Bosi, 2018). Secondly, the failure of the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009 shattered the belief of many climate activists and engaged citizens in the feasibility of any coordinated international climate politics (Blühdorn, 2011); and the suspicion that established forms of environmental governance may for ever be compromised by the interests of the fossil economy translated into demands for more practical and situated approaches to solving sustainability problems (De Moor et al., 2020; Schlosberg & Craven, 2019).

It was against this backdrop that scholars not only framed the manifold forms of collective everyday activism – from food banks and community gardens via collaborative housing and social centres to recycling networks and repair cafés – as prefigurative action, but also put considerable hopes in the transformative power of these collective performances of alternative practice. From their perspective, the latter not only demonstrates the *possibility* of bottom-up democracy and sustainable modes of producing and consuming, but also the *efficacy* of eco-egalitarian lifeforms in the struggle against the neoliberal colonisation of people and nature (Certomá, 2016; WBGU, 2011; also see the discussion by Pellizzoni in this special issue). Not only would the protected space of local experimentalism allow for the emergence of authentic forms of autonomy and collectivity, but it would also generate micro-solutions to global problems that might subsequently be replicated and diffused into the society at large, thereby subverting the hegemony of market liberalism and technocratic eco-governance. The politicising power of prefiguration, then, lies in *embodying* the dissent against the capitalist organisation of social space and technocratic forms of government, in *materialising* an equitable, ecological and solidary alternative, and in *diffusing* these alternative practices into the broader cultural and institutional landscape (Monticelli, 2018; Schlosberg & Craven, 2019). From this perspective, also highlighted by Deflorian in this special issue, what collective everyday activism is bringing to the fore is the contingent character of the established societal order and the fact that the latter is, and always will be, constructed and contestable (Kenis, 2019). In this sense, the reading of collective everyday activism as *prefigurative* action clearly reflects a scholarly commitment towards emancipatory and

progressive values, and it articulates support for social movement activists and their struggle for social change.

Yet, how much prefigurative power and transformative capacity do these movements and forms of activism really have? Do not the ongoing changes in the perception of the post-political and its origins, as signalled above, render understandings and agendas of repoliticisation much more ambivalent than the concept of prefiguration can capture? Two alternative or complementary perspectives on social movements and new forms of political activism are those of *co-optation* and *simulation*. The former zooms in on neoliberal strategies of mobilising the creative energies, organisational capacities and situated problem-solving of alternative milieus for its own purposes, that is, for its agenda of privatisation, delegation and outsourcing. With the roll-back of the welfare state and the roll-out of new management techniques (Peck & Tickell, 2002), neoliberal policymakers have increasingly sought to integrate civil society actors into social community management, neighbourhood revitalisation plans, local sustainability projects and other government programs. In a sense, the social movements' emancipatory drive for self-organisation, self-help and self-realisation lent itself to being redirected towards the goals of creating private investment opportunities and easing the pressure on public households. Yet, neoliberal governance is selective: it makes a sharp distinction between desired and undesired forms of social activism, and its strategies of co-optation go along with the determined repression of any activism challenging the logic of privatisation, growth and social inequality (e.g., Mayer, 2013; Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014). MacGregor as well as De Moor and colleagues, in their respective contributions to this special issue, show how civil society and social movement organisations often find themselves in a position where they are being activated for dealing with social and ecological problems, but do not have the capacities nor the resources required to successfully deal with them. And rather than envisaging and working towards societal alternatives, self-organised groups suddenly participate in networks of governance that orchestrate the *collaborative management of sustained unsustainability* (Blühdorn & Deflorian, 2019).

The analytical frame of *simulation*, in turn, takes account of the diversification of lifestyles in contemporary consumer societies and of the extent to which – through globalised regimes of production and consumption – most contemporary citizens are now firmly entangled in exploitative and destructive relationships with nature and the global South. This deep complicity and the inescapable pulling power of the *imperial mode of living* (Brand & Wissen, 2018) at the *expense of others* (Lessenich, 2019) raise questions about the political character of local everyday activism. Rather than working towards radical alternatives, the experimentation with sustainable everyday practices may, after all, just provide engaged individuals with opportunities for the short-term articulation of otherness (Blühdorn, 2007, 2011). As such, these forms of social activism might have to be read as the partial withdrawal into niches where practitioners can display and experience a non-imperial self and non-exploitative socio-ecological relationships, while keeping their overall lifeworlds, value-orientations and identities largely intact – lifeworlds, value-orientations and identities shaped, ever more strongly, by the offerings of the market and the pressures for adaptation to the logic of neoliberal capitalism and its crises (Bauman, 2012; Sennett, 1999). Collective everyday activism then constitutes a place for temporarily suspending everyday life and performing an eco-

democratic self that would neither be possible – nor perhaps even attractive – outside the ec(h)o chambers of alternative activism (Blühdorn, 2006). And accordingly, the prefigurative and transformative potential of these new forms of activism would be rather limited: the *simulation* cannot be maintained over longer periods of time nor can it be expanded into other domains of everyday life. In fact, such a stabilisation and diffusion would not even be desired; for, it would necessitate the renegotiation and, consequently, restriction of the consumer opportunities and flexibility which in late-modern society have become so central to individuals' subjectivity and are strictly guarded by the *politics of unsustainability* (Blühdorn, 2011, 2013). In this sense, simulative practices can then also be read as collective strategies to cope with personal identity conflicts, in particular, when a recipe for a swift, substantive and sustainable transformation of capitalist societies is far from being seen.

These different analytical frames – prefiguration, co-optation and simulation – most certainly have to be seen as supplementing rather than excluding each other. Taken on its own, each of them provides a rather restricted view on contemporary social movements and new forms of activism. But together, they facilitate a multi-layered and nuanced analysis of the complexity and ambiguity of the repoliticisation of post-politics – which is what this collection of articles aims to achieve. Investigating new forms of activism through more than just one analytical lens can help to provide critical and detailed accounts of these repoliticisations and to avoid simplistic and generalising conclusions about their transformative power.

4. The contributions to this special issue

The articles collated here provide insights on the scope of and the limits to bottom-up initiatives repoliticising the post-political order. Looking at diverse case studies and taking a range of different positions, the authors explore the prefigurative effects of social movements and activism, the extent to which these mobilisations, rather than developing truly transformative potentials, may have to be read as responsabilised service-providers to the established order, and the role that they may play as ways of coping with the contradictions and psychological pressures inherent in the order of unsustainability.

Arnošt Novák presents the case of Klinika, an autonomous social centre in Prague that grew out of the collective squatting of a former lung clinic in 2015. Until its eviction in January 2019, Klinika provided something that, Novák suggests, was almost unprecedented in a post-socialist country like the Czech Republic: a social, cultural and educational commons that subverted the dichotomous distinction between public and private space. Through a detailed account of the eventful history of Klinika and making connections to literatures on prefiguration, commoning and post-politics, Novák draws a nuanced picture of what he calls a *ping-pong play* between processes of repoliticisation and depoliticisation. Emerging from a city experiencing rapid privatisation and gentrification, Klinika's demands for de-commercialised spaces and a right to the city for all received widespread support – before the project was hard hit by violent anti-migrant mobilisations and eventually evicted. But despite its closure as a physical social centre, Novák argues, Klinika was not just a short-lived *island of freedom*. By reaching thousands of people directly, by motivating attempts of replication in other places in the Czech Republic and by developing new political imaginaries, it had a lasting effect on the

broader public. At the same time, however, Novák also demonstrates how the repoliticisation of hegemonic neoliberalism triggered right-wing populist counter-mobilisations as well as state responses of law-and-order politics.

Further exploring the longer-term impact of eruptive mobilisations, Angelos Varvarousis, Viviana Asara and Bengi Akbulut study the afterlives of the movements of the squares in Athens and Barcelona. After the occupations of Syntagma Square and Plaça Catalunya were cleared by the officials, the movements did not simply disappear, the authors suggest, but they spread out into the neighbourhoods setting up alternative structures of social reproduction ranging from social kitchens, solidarity clinics and time banks to community gardens, libraries and art spaces. Rejecting the widespread assumption that beyond their active phase protest mobilisations either disintegrate or turn into a latent phase in which they either hibernate, the authors argue that the myriad of collective everyday institutions set up by the activists rather signal a *transmutation* of the square movements. Making conceptual links between theories of the commons and the literature on the consequences of social movements, Varvarousis and colleagues define these transformations as the occupations' *social outcomes*. It is exactly the latter, the authors suggest, that have spatialised and embodied the claims of the square movements, weaving new social fabrics through novel relationships of reciprocity and care and alternative imaginations of society and the economy. Yet, the movements' success in setting up alternative infrastructures and creating new commons, the authors note, have also increased the risk of co-optation and being turned into service-providers.

Joost de Moor, Brian Doherty and Philip Catney set off from the problem of resource trade-offs between organising resistance and promoting alternatives. Based on extensive participant observation and interviews, they analyse the discourse of activists in the UK who were previously organised in environmental direct action groups and then continued their work in two organisations dedicated to diffusing sustainable housing and food, respectively. De Moor and colleagues point out that debates about the repoliticisation and depoliticisation of these and similar initiatives tend to suffer from a simplistic understanding of *the political*. Politicisation and its counterpart, they suggest, can be observed at different levels or layers. The two organisations they investigate clearly subscribe to critical ideas that defy the capitalist way of thinking. Yet, whilst stressing the necessity of direct action, neither of them engages in contentious confrontations with their opponents. With the neoliberalisation in Britain of public welfare provision, local administration and environmental politics, the authors argue, engagement in the development of practical solutions becomes a tempting option for activist groups. It generates income for financially precarious members, but at the same time leads to economic dependence which reduces the likelihood of transgressive actions.

Sherilyn MacGregor in her contribution takes issue with those celebrating the *new politics of everyday activism* as well as those criticising the *simulative style* of many contemporary mobilisations. Both of them, she believes, invariably miss the complex character of local grassroots initiatives. Rejecting what she calls *strong theory*, *thin description* approaches, MacGregor focuses on the case of 'Upping it', a local initiative in Manchester, in order to conduct situated research that pays close attention to the interpretations, hopes and pressures of those engaged, and thus to reveal the ambiguities of their politics. 'Upping it', a group of citizens that works on the removal of litter and

greening their neighbourhood in Moss Side, one of the most deprived and racialised areas in Manchester with a high student population, engages in information campaigning about the correct use of trash bins, voluntary neighbourhood litter picking, and the installing of beds for flowers and vegetables in order to prevent further fly-tipping. These practices, MacGregor suggests, can be seen as the self-responsibilisation of individuals following the neoliberal city council's cuts in public services. But they also politicise the city government's failure to address the situation of the racialised poor and the undesirable effects of the studentification of neighbourhoods. Small-scale collective action, MacGregor argues, must always be seen as mobilising under and against the neoliberal constraints of contemporary cities, and thus as coping strategies, contentious politics and co-opted service provision, all at the same time. Either-or approaches in contrast, she believes, do not allow researchers to see both the limitations of local grassroots initiatives and their transformative potential as experimental and interstitial interventions into the status quo.

This position is shared by Michael Deflorian, who deals with the volatile engagement of critical creatives in *collective alternative everyday practices*, such as community gardens, repair cafés and clothing swaps. Reports of practitioners participating in such initiatives whilst at the same time holding on to unsustainable practices in other contexts of everyday life, have triggered doubts about the seriousness, prefigurative potential and scalability of such alternative practices. But Deflorian cautions against moralising accounts. Such doubts, he argues, are based on the idealist expectation of individuals fully embodying their critique of the status quo and consistently adopting alternative lifeworlds. For a more nuanced assessment Deflorian draws on theories of late-modern society, which suggest that contemporary individuals increasingly construct their identities through the market and in a multi-faceted way. Applying this perspective to existing qualitative case studies, he argues that volatile participants attempt to embody an idealised Self, but are unable to achieve this in a consistent manner, due to the structural constraints they encounter in their everyday lives and because such consistency would impair their personal liberties. Rather than as *prefigurations*, he therefore describes these ever renewed attempts as *refigurations*, which still convey a critique of and an alternative to the neoliberal status quo, even if they consistently fail.

In the final contribution, Luigi Pellizzoni highlights that both positive and critical readings of prefiguration locate the latter's transformative potential in the *affirmation* of alternative ways of doing. This way of thinking, Pellizzoni argues, reconfirms the biopolitical rationality of neoliberal government, which utilises the vital forces of subjects, for its agenda of capital valorisation. The celebration of alternative forms of production and consumption, then, merely copies this affirmative strategy, not noticing its powerlessness against the extraction and accumulation of capital from (non-)human energies. Thus, prefiguration risks being nothing more than a consolatory exercise of simulation, post-political already in its conception. However, rather than fully dismissing the transformative potential of prefiguration, Pellizzoni finds some promise in the element of *subtraction* – the activity of rejecting and disengaging from something – that is always inherent in prefiguration. Drawing on the writings of Adorno and Agamben, he argues that acts of withdrawal hold the potential of making the valorisation processes of neoliberal capitalism *inoperative*. Not doing something, leaving one's potentials unused

and unrealised may ultimately, he believes, have more emancipatory potential than practices of prefiguration in the more common understanding.

5. A reconfigured discursive space

The analyses collated here are but snapshots and, unsurprisingly, do not add up to a comprehensive and consistent picture. Where they draw on empirical case studies, these relate to polities with diverse social, economic and political conditions in which both the post-political constellation and its repoliticisation by bottom-up initiatives play out in very different ways. As regards the transformative capacities of social movements repoliticising post-politics, most of the authors retain some confidence, but they also harbour doubts. Novák illustrates how progressive-cosmopolitan repoliticisations can easily trigger counter-mobilisations from the authoritarian right. Varvarousis and colleagues hope that the new commons built up by the square movements will retain their political and transformative edge but also see the danger of them turning into depoliticised and service-providing community organisations. De Moor and his co-authors show that under conditions of austerity, in particular, efforts of repoliticisation are limited because austerity regimes can severely drain activists' financial and motivational capacities. MacGregor calls on social movement researchers not to romanticise, but also not underestimate, activist experiments flourishing in the cracks and niches of late-capitalist societies. Deflorian believes that even temporary performances and experiences of alternative subjectivities and social relations may help to politicise the order of unsustainability and nurture alternative imaginaries, but he acknowledges the transformative limitations of merely short-term figurations. And Pellizzoni suggests that, in any case, more transformative potential may lie in social practices of withdrawal than in the experimental prefiguration of alternative socio-ecological arrangements.

As regards the three analytical lenses distinguished above – prefiguration, co-optation and simulation – the authors come to varied results on their applicability and usefulness. Yet, common to all contributions is that they investigate the repoliticisation beyond post-politics from the perspective of the emancipatory values, progressive agenda and transformative commitments which have always underpinned social movement research in the post-Marxian critical tradition. Even when pointing out that repoliticisations may be inconsistent and contradictory, and when applying alternative frames of interpretation such as *co-optation* and *simulation*, the prevailing perspective adopted by all authors remains the ideal of a socially and ecologically pacified cosmopolitan society that guarantees a good life for all within ecological boundaries. In the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008/9 this perspective has proven suitable for the investigation of new social movements and forms of political activism. Yet, more recently, further developments which the authors could not take into account have changed the political context and normative framework for emergent repoliticisations quite substantially. As if to confirm Streeck's prediction of 'a long and painful period of cumulative decay: of intensifying frictions, fragility and uncertainty' (Streeck, 2014, p. 64), a series of further crises have occurred in quick succession: the refugee crisis in Europe of 2015; the social and democratic crises that led to an international boost to right-wing populist politics most notably through the election of Donald Trump in 2016; the intensifying climate crisis that propelled the comet-like rise of Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion in

2019 and the declaration of a climate emergency by the European Parliament later that year; and then the COVID-19 pandemic since the beginning of 2020.

Collectively, these crises have profoundly reconfigured the normative frame of reference of protest movements and the repoliticisation of the post-political condition. They have much increased public awareness of the social, economic, political and ecological fragility and unsustainability of consumer capitalist societies. Indeed, this awareness is now more widespread and deeply rooted than ever before. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has massively exacerbated the problem as well as the public perception of social inequality, injustice and exclusion worldwide. And it has heightened concerns that the unprecedented investment of public money undertaken by national governments and transnational organisations such as the EU or the IMF in order to prop up the ailing economy may only *buy* some extra *time* (Streeck, 2014) for a socio-economic system that is destined to collapse, nevertheless. As accelerating climate change, profound changes in the geo-political power structure, the tightening crisis of neo-liberal capitalism and the digital revolution signal that a profound transformation will indeed be inescapable, significant parts of societies are harbouring concerns about the impact of this transformation on their rights, their freedom, their lifestyles, and what they regard as their non-negotiable entitlements. And for some, the restrictions now imposed by governments in order to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, just foreshadow much more draconian restrictions which governments may well impose as part of a socio-ecological transformation towards sustainability.

Thus, the new constellation fuels new conflicts over social opportunities and triggers powerful reflexes of defence and exclusion, just as much as it reinvigorates campaigns for an egalitarian, inclusive and democratic post-growth society. On both sides of this divide *politicisation* continues to mean the contestation of supposedly non-negotiable truths and the conviction that things could also be different. For both, *depoliticisation* and *post-politics* continue to mean the construction of a hegemonic consensus that does not tolerate any alternative perspectives. And *repoliticisation* continues to mean the contestation of exactly this non-negotiability. But in the current constellation, the repoliticisation of the post-political constellation might now be seen as being structured along two axes: firstly, the repoliticisation of the neoliberal consensus and, secondly, the contestation of the ever more widespread belief that for post-industrial consumer societies *business as usual is no longer an option* and that a *socio-ecological transformation to sustainability is a non-negotiable necessity*. The former, that is, the credo of the lean state, economic deregulation, globalised capitalism, individual freedom and the rule of market imperatives, had been repoliticised already by the movements and initiatives emerging in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008. This kind of repoliticisation is the focus of the contributions collated here; and there is a wealth of movements today further pursuing this agenda. Yet, since the refugee crisis and the election of Donald Trump, in particular, the neoliberal consensus is vociferously repoliticised by right-wing populist movements, too.

The second axis, that is, the repoliticisation of the increasingly accepted view that the multi-dimensional sustainability crisis renders a profound socio-ecological transformation of contemporary consumer societies urgent and inescapable, gained significance only much more recently. This new eco-political (almost-)consensus – now dubbed by the populist right the *opinion dictatorship of the intellectual elite* – gradually built up over

several decades, is based on the ever increasing wealth of scientific evidence provided by climate and sustainability researchers, and became most powerful in 2019, when Great Thunberg and the internationally successful Fridays for Future movement found support from political elites worldwide and coincided with unprecedented fires in the Amazon, Canada, Greenland, Siberia, Australia and elsewhere. And in the wake of the COVID pandemic the contestation of this science-based climate and sustainability consensus was supplemented by the contestation of restrictive measures taken by governments in line with the advice of health experts.

For understanding the repoliticisations on this second axis, it is essential to recognise that, as signalled above, this new eco-political and COVID-consensus, too, bear features of post-democracy and post-politics (Swyngedouw, 2010a, 2010b) – at least from the perspective of those concerned that the respective policy measures (will) impair their personal freedom, lifestyle, achievements and aspirations. With regard to eco-politics, these features include, inter alia, the activist demand for a strong interventionist and regulatory environmental state, the belief in scientifically determined eco-imperatives which are deemed objective and non-negotiable, the explicit self-description of some radical movements as being beyond politics and the political as defined above, the belief in one singular eco-political truth and reason justifying the categorisation of political opponents as irrational, irresponsible, immature and immoral, as well as the elitist – often implicit rather than explicit – belief that with regard to some parts of society it might be desirable to restrict rather than further extend their opportunities for direct political participation (Brennan, 2016; Rancière, 2006; Van Reybrouck, 2016). In all these respects, the new science-based climate and sustainability consensus – and *mutatis mutandis* the COVID containment agenda, too – may be perceived as being no less post-democratic and post-political than the neoliberal dogma of market imperatives. Unsurprisingly, therefore, they trigger passionate reflexes of defence not only among right-wing populists, but among liberals, too, who see their personal freedoms under threat.

Thus, in contemporary consumer societies the repoliticisation of post-politics is happening along at least two major axes on each of which very different political actors are mobilising. Accordingly, the discursive space for the repoliticisation of the post-political constellation may now be envisaged as being divided into four partially overlapping segments each of them representing – as tentatively distinguished in Figure 1 – a different pattern of contesting supposedly non-negotiable necessities and impositions, and reclaiming agency and self-determination. Each of them formulates its own responses to the inescapable experience of new limits, limitations and boundaries. They all conceive of themselves as struggling against a self-imposing, authoritarian system and, ultimately, they all focus on the defence – and inescapable limitation – of particular understandings of freedom. Yet, given the extent to which the post-political constellation has refashioned eco-emancipatory thinking, too, none of the four patterns of repoliticising post-politics can still be conceptualised as the reinvention of politics in the sense of Ulrich Beck or Chantal Mouffe, that is, as the return to the democratic-egalitarian beliefs of the emancipatory movements preceding the hegemony of neoliberalism. In the new matrix of repoliticisation, the family of eco-emancipatory movements – also including those that are frequently called prefigurative – has lost their distinctive role as the avantgarde that mobilizes against a depoliticised social order. Other actors, too, are repoliticising post-politics and they have different understandings of the post-

Target	Normative orientation	
Neoliberal consensus	cosmopolitan inclusive	nationalist exclusive
Eco-political consensus	neoliberal non-egalitarian	denialist post-truth

Figure 1. Repoliticisations beyond post-politics.

political that they are contesting, of the norms of freedom, empowerment or democracy they invoke and of the societal transformations they are interested in.

So, moving beyond overly simplistic notions of prefigurative and transformative social movement activism, the contributions to this special issue go a significant step towards recognising the new ambiguities of repoliticised post-politics. They demonstrate that prefigurative politics can easily coincide with the depoliticising processes of co-optation and simulation. They situate collective action between post-politics and repoliticisation. In light of the most recent crises and the reconfiguration of political discourse, however, it becomes clear that social movement research will need to move even further. When exploring how diverse actors now understand post-politics and its repoliticisation and how they appropriate and interpret the notions of democracy, self-determination, empowerment and progressiveness, social movement researchers will need to adopt a more encompassing perspective – and be much more aware of the fragility and contingency of their own positions. For, from the perspective shaped by the norms that have traditionally underpinned critical sociology and much of social movement research, the complexity and ambiguities of today's repoliticisation of post-politics can barely be captured. For social movement research this remains a formidable challenge.

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