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Social Climate – Green Social Work and Green Social Policy

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Green and social

Some of you may have wondered about the title of my lecture. What is "green" in a scientific lecture on social work and social policy? We associate "green" with a party-political marker, and that doesn't belong at a university. Therefore, I would like to emphasize right away that I took the term from the IUW stream "Green Social Work", which I want to expand into social policy, and thus implicitly assumed that the organizers of the IUW did not intend party politics, but a scientific focus. "Green" is, according to my assumption, used as a placeholder for "ecological" or for "sustainable". You may place my cautious considerations in the line of thought of the German sociologist Max Weber, who distinguished between "ethics of conviction" (*Gesinnungsethik*) and "ethics of responsibility" (*Verantwortungsethik*) and doubted whether there can be "objectivity" of social science knowledge at all. What there can be, however, is value reflexivity – and that's what I wanted to bring to you with these introductory remarks. We are moving into a slippery terrain where normatives and empiricism, zeal and analysis quickly get mixed up.

On the other hand, without zeal and normatives, there is neither social work nor social policy. You are all familiar with the "Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles" of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the General Assembly of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the latest version of which dates back to 2018.[1] Right at the beginning of this Code of Ethics, it is defined what social work actually is: "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that facilitates social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and

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[1] https://www.ifsw.org/global-social-work-statement-of-ethical-principles/

respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing." I could now underline the words that express obvious normatives. One could list all the many appeals in the further course of the text, such as "Social workers promote social justice" or "Social workers challenge discrimination" or the "must hold" and "must act". You will say, well, this is applied ethics, which must strike a high note even as professional ethics. That's not science yet. But it's not that simple. Professional research has enlightened us that there is no profession without professional ethics, only it guarantees the autonomy of professionals at the highest level of reflection, at least basic formats of professional jurisdiction. As we can see, there are strong normatives built into the social work profession itself, which aim at human rights and equality-oriented social reforms.

The situation is no different for the field of social policy. Here, too, I could refer to Max Weber, who emphasizes the proximity of sociology and social policy, to Ferdinand Tönnies, the author of the famous book "Community and Society", who, as the first president of the German Sociological Association, did not regret the social reform impulse of social policy, but welcomed it. Historically, social policy has also had a tendency towards equality, towards reducing the market power of capitalism, which Gøsta Esping-Andersen described as "decommodification", as securing life chances beyond market socialisation. There is a wealth of literature on this.[2]

Now you could say: the speaker casts out the devil with Beelzebub. Instead of soberly analyzing reality, he sees jealousy, the utopian at work everywhere, he justifies the green by the social. Well, I might argue, isn't that the case everywhere? Does the engineer simply want to accept that death rates in road traffic are high or does she not tend to develop seat belts and impact protection? Does the doctor simply accept that patients suffer and die from inadequate cancer medication, or does he not tend to develop better cures, safer therapies?

So in the field of social reform, we are doing nothing other than engineers and doctors. We want to make the world a better place, more efficient, more effective, more beautiful, more pleasant and not just for a few, but for as many people as possible and, this is where the green, ecological, sustainable is expressed, not only for people, but also for animals, biodiversity, the nature of the earth itself.

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[2] See Opielka 2008. 2017

Social climate

I have set a headline on the topic of "Green Social Work and Green Social Policy". It is called "Social Climate". That sounds a bit strange at first. What does the climate, what does climate change have to do with the social? First of all, it simply has to do with the fact that my book "Social Climate" was published a few days ago[3] – initially on German, so that the non-German-speaking people have nothing to gain from it. I would therefore like to refer to a recent English-language article published in a Swiss journal for social policy, which also found its way into the book and can be found online.[4] "Social Climate" has the subtitle: "The struggle for the sustainability of the social". This already makes it clear that it is a description of a field of conflict. Sustainable – or "green" – is by no means so self-evident, by no means consensus, by no means conflict-free. In one of the central chapters of the book, I approvingly discuss the "Memorandum" by Bruno Latour and Nikolaj Schultz, published in 2022, "On the Emergence of an Ecological Class".[5] Latour uses Marxist vocabulary to argue in a radically ecological way.

Both liberalism and socialism, according to Latour, were completely united in increasing material production. The "ecological class" overturns the picture, it is the living beings of the world that make human existence possible in the first place: "The production system is only a part and not even the most important of this totality."[6] The ecological class can therefore no longer be defined by the mode of production: "The point at which the new ecological class separates itself from all others is that it wants to *reduce* the position of the relations of production, while the others want to strengthen them."[7]

With the perspective of "social climate", the view is changed, the consciousness is diverted. The social is part of the world context, man is part of the earth, the world. This is not an argument against methodological anthropocentrism. We cannot blame insects for the lack of insects and species for the extinction of species politically. Biocentrism seems to me to be a cheap relief of man from his responsibility for the world.

We also find this ecological decentering or recentering in the advanced sectors of social work. For example, IFSW, the International Federation of Social Workers, already makes common cause on its homepage with a document it co-initiated[8] and supported by numerous other

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[3] Opielka 2023
[4] Opielka 2022
[5] Latour/Schultz 2022
[6] Latour/Schultz 2022, p. 27
[7] Ibid., p. 28
[8] https://newecosocialworld.com/partners

organizations, which was submitted to the "United Nations High-Level Political Forum and General Assembly": "The People's Charter for an Eco-Social World"[9] from 2022.

These movements, discourses and documents follow on from the major movement of the "Sustainable Development Goals" of the United Nations in autumn 2015, with which, shortly after the Paris Climate Summit, the international community adopted an "Agenda 2030" for the next 15 years, which for the first time in human history considered social and ecological goals together. It is now significant and professional that the United Nations has decided to subject this enormous program for the future to a complex monitoring process. Partial and complete reports are published regularly, some of which are available online and some of which are well worth reading.[10] This achieves benchmarking between member states, which was of course affected by Putin's invasion of Ukraine, but not stopped. Of course, fossil energy sources have regained momentum, but the downwind is on its heels.

The relationship between social and environmental goals has led to numerous initiatives in science and policy consulting that investigate the interaction between the Sustainable Development Goals. How can target dimensions – social and ecological – reinforce each other positively instead of neutralizing each other negatively? In the field of policy consulting, Stefan Bach and Michael Opielka published the DIFIS study "Climate/Environmental and Social Policy in the New Legislative Period – Problems and Tasks" in March 2023, which examined the relationship between the two policy fields from a social policy science perspective. In addition to the study, DIFIS – German Institute for Interdisciplinary Social Policy Research – has also published the videos of the highly interesting workshop from June 2022 on which the study was based.[11]

So is the answer to the "eco-social question", as I once called it[12], near? Are we moving towards a better, a good society, a realistic utopia, so to speak? Or is the picture deceptive, does the socio-ecological situation actually look much more bitter than the international documents show? Aren't we actually standing on the edge of the abyss and are the climate protests of "Extinction Rebellion" or "Last Generation" just as right as the hundreds of thousands of social demonstrators in France who are outraged by pension policy?

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[9] https://newecosocialworld.com/the-peoples-charter-for-an-eco-social-world/ See also the climate justice projects that IFSW supports: https://www.ifsw.org/social-work-action/climate-justice-program/
[10] E.g. United Nations 2022
[11] https://difis.org/institut/publikationen/publikation/40
[12] Opielka 1985

Societal division?

I would therefore like to pause for a moment on my so far rather optimistic argumentation tour and investigate what the social cohesion that a turning point towards sustainability needs. Isn't reality more characterized by social division?

I would like to examine this question with a European perspective and a German focus. Certainly, the global focus would be interesting, what about social divisions in South America, Africa or Asia? But you immediately suspect that you need to know a little about the societies. So we are sticking pragmatically to our last and can already see how little we usually already know about our European neighbors and – in relation to Germany – how little West knows about East Germany.

Based on solid social science findings, I will argue that we have *no social division* in Europe and especially in Germany, on the contrary, that social cohesion is surprisingly high.

Since you were certainly expecting the opposite, I would like to add a little sugar to your doubts and fears of division. I will take an example from the Netherlands. In March 2023, elections for the provincial parliaments were held. In the Dutch provincial elections, the populist BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB) immediately became the strongest political force, winning 15 of the 75 seats in the Senate, while the coalition parties in The Hague suffered drastic losses. With the 2023 provincial elections, "something like a left-wing pole of social democrats and green-left is emerging in a completely crumbled party structure (14 parties are represented in parliament)."[13] This may please the Left and the Greens, but the crumbling of the party landscape may be worrying. But then another piece of information follows: "Voter turnout in the provincial elections was 61%, the highest in 30 years, and ballots ran out at several polling stations."[14] First of all, this means that people believe in democracy. They participate. They did not split off.

But even there is water in the wine possible. For example, Bettina Kohlrausch, director of the trade union-affiliated Economic and Social Research Institute WSI, recently asked: "Is there a threat of social division?" And she already sees this division: "More than 40% of the working population now stated that they had little or no confidence in the federal government. These are indications of a fundamental political alienation, which – as more complex statistical analyses show – is driven by financial worries and burdens. At the same time, there is a correlation between political alienation and the willingness to believe conspiracy narratives

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[13] https://www.sozialismus.de/kommentare_analysen/detail/artikel/gesellschaftliche-spaltung-in-den-niederlanden/
[14] Ibid.

and/or devalue refugees from Ukraine."[15] Surveys on trust in French governments currently show an even more disastrous picture at the beginning of 2023. So is there any reason for concern after all?

The data mentioned by Kohlrausch refer to population surveys. We must be aware that this is only one, namely the subjective perspective on social cohesion and division. On the other hand, I'll get to this in a moment, the most scientifically plausible "objective" ones are of no use if people see it differently. It is good for you to say that you, as listeners here and now, who are better off than a large part of the world's population, even as the poorest students, may not dispel their subjective sense of division. So let's look at the subjective perspective. At the end of 2022, a relevant text was published by one of the most renowned German sociologists of inequality, Steffen Mau, and his team.[16] They ask about "new cleavages" in Europe and we take a quick look at the results.

Against the background of new social conflict issues, the authors ask about the socio-structural foundation of inequality attitudes. They focus on four axes of inequality: (1) **top-bottom inequalities**, which focus on the economic distribution of resources, (2**) internal-external inequalities**, which relate to territorial access, migration, and membership, (3**) us-them inequalities**, which encompass societal recognition of diversity, and (4) **today-tomorrow inequalities,** which address issues of intergenerational justice and environmental sustainability. In each area, they show the characteristics and structuring of social orientations and test common expectations in the literature. The central question is whether the attitude patterns go hand in hand with socio-structural differentiations in such a way that one could speak of cleavages, i.e. lines of division.

On the basis of the European Social Survey from 2016, the attitude structures are examined descriptively as well as factor- and regression-analytically for a selected group of European countries (Sweden, France, Italy, Germany, Poland and Hungary). The key finding is that, firstly, there is no two-dimensional attitude space in which the old economic inequalities are juxtaposed with the new inequalities, and, secondly, strong cleavages can only be found selectively and not in all countries studied. These are most likely to be seen in the migration issue.

These are undoubtedly interesting results. Now one can methodically complain, the data is from 2016, the year of the migration crisis, the climate crisis only penetrated the public later, the Ukraine invasion is even newer. And even at the ESS there is nagging, albeit quietly. But if

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[15] Kohlrausch 2022
[16] Lux et al. 2022

we trust our colleagues first, then we see a great deal of confusion, which is neither new –
Jürgen Habermas already spoke in 1985 of the "New lack of clarity" and the crisis of the
welfare state as well as the exhaustion of utopian energies – nor surprising, as a look at the
helplessness of many election campaigners in most countries shows, which cannot be
explained by "individualization".

Let's look at a second study, this time for Germany, by one of Germany's most renowned
inequality researchers, Stefan Hradil. Together with his co-authors, he examines the question
"Divided society?" and comes to similar conclusions. Here, too, I summarize the study, which is
available online with helpful data and graphs.[17]

According to the authors, current discourses also say that German society is drifting further
and further apart in a threatening way. Almost half of Germans suspect that society is divided.
The theory- and fact-based analysis can show to what extent this debate is strongly influenced
and promoted by the normative position (liberal, conservative, left or right). In addition,
exaggerated, one could also say: romanticizing ideals of the cohesion of a society can have a
counterproductive effect in modern societies. Five common myths are debunked by facts in
the study. Societies are differentiating and becoming more heterogeneous, but this does not
necessarily divide them. A few selected empirical indicators illustrate the differences between
the EU-27 countries in the extent of divisive tendencies. In Germany, compared to many other
EU countries, it is better to ensure the cohesion of society. The interim summary of the
question of social division is therefore quite reassuring. However, I would like to make
something explicit that is only implicitly included in the quoted texts or is at best formulated as
marginal thoughts, for example in Stefan Hradil's concluding thought, how integrative the
"social market economy" (*Soziale Marktwirtschaft*) is.[18]

For our lecture, however, we have to deconstruct this typical German post-war construct
somewhat: it is primarily about social policy and social work – as well as, but we cannot
pursue this further here, about health and education as welfare state institutions; but social
work also takes place in them. So, let's assume that social work and social policy in modern
societies are social capital and have a socially inclusive effect, without pursuing all the
subtleties and contradictions. Then the question arises as to how they can contribute to the
"greening" of society, to its social sustainability. I would like to discuss this in the last section

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[17] Hradil et al. 2022
[18] Kumkar 2022 comes to a similar conclusion, cleverly reviewing a volume edited by FAZ editors Kaube
and Kieserling.

of the lecture. I try to break down the really complex and refer to the publications already presented at the beginning for the nuances.[19]

Social sustainability and social policy

First of all, we have to be aware that it is only in recent years that the social dimension of sustainability in the sustainability discussion has become more aware of and the focus of research. Jennifer McGuinn and her co-authors have vividly described the evolving situation of social sustainability in a study for the European Parliament.[20]

If I distinguish between four conceptions of social sustainability in the following, there is a sociological theory behind it, which I cannot elaborate on here.[21] Now the distinction should be plausible on its own. The four conceptions of social sustainability are incorporated into a system of the theory of welfare regimes, the basic structure of which was developed by Gøsta Esping-Andersen and extended by me to include the regime type "garantism":

1. A *narrow* understanding of social sustainability as "social redistribution": Here, "the social" is conceived as one of the "three pillars" of sustainability, as conflict reduction and redistribution, antagonistic to (rather economically liberally interpreted) economic sustainability and as an accompaniment to ecological sustainability, which is at the center of this concept. In this perspective, it is more likely to assume social *democratic-socialist* politics or such a regime and thus the genesis of the third "social" pillar as a trade union-left, political program against a dominance of the "economic" (capital) pillar. The discursive understanding of "social" thus corresponds to today's frequent use of "social" in the sense of vertical distributive justice.

2. An *internal* understanding of social sustainability as the sustainability of the social: This conception initially has little to do with ecology and the concept of sustainability that is common today. It refers primarily to the social itself, to the preservation and reproduction of the communal core systems of a society. This understanding comes close to a *conservative* political or regime principle, as advocated, for example, by the ordoliberal Freiburg School of Economics. It is about a sustainable wealth culture, for example through the promotion of family businesses or increased foundation establishments, or about "good governance", about the long-term stability of institutions. This concept builds a bridge to responsibility towards nature and the environment through the so-called "commons". Air, biodiversity, water and natural beauty are threatened by selfishness and short-term thinking, the view of the common

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[19] Opielka 2022, 2023
[20] McGuinn et al. 2020, p. 21
[21] Opielka 2023 with further evidence.

in a concrete smaller society up to the world society includes the ecology of the social, from nature to the spiritual world heritage. In these rather *conservative* discourses, the term "social sustainability" is used to try to avoid a transformation of institutions or redistribution processes and instead, without changing society, to protect nature immanently, internally.

3. A *sceptical* understanding of social sustainability as the sustainability of economic functionalities. This is about intergenerational justice – close to the internal understanding, but with emphasis on market control – for example in the distribution of the financial burden of pension insurance between young and old, in terms of fiscal policy about limiting government debt ("black zero") and also about preventing a growing demand for public investment in the promotion of sustainability by taking on new (state) debt. In this type of liberal politics or regime, social sustainability is *conceived* sceptically, often with aversion and negatively, and as a positive concept it has hardly been found in these discourses so far.

4. Finally, there is also a broad understanding of social sustainability, in which the "social" is understood as the "societal": Social sustainability is conceived here as a societal project, as a transformation project. In this arena, discussions are held about the post-growth society, about "green growth" and "degrowth". Social sustainability is developed in the garantistic political or regime type as an umbrella concept for the sustainability discussion. The term "garantism" needs to be explained: The classic political legitimations of liberal/socialist/conservative – i.e. center/left/right – have been challenged in recent decades by a global agenda of fundamental social rights that cannot be subordinated to this triad without further ado. There is a strong argument that democracies develop an evolutionary dynamic towards basic social rights, which are supported by appropriate policy structures. In Figure 1, the four conceptions of social sustainability are inserted into the systematic presentation of welfare regimes. All four concepts of social sustainability include essential and future-proof aspects. As politically and normatively constructed as they are, they are at the same time analytical concepts for investigating the control performance of social systems. The *narrow* understanding focuses on the socio-economic conflict that Thomas Piketty interpreted as a process of worldwide dominance of returns on capital over employee income. It is staged in the discussions about energy prices or (lignite) coal mining, according to which climate protection measures have a socially unequal effect and threaten to exacerbate existing disadvantages.

	Types of welfare regime			
	liberal	*social democratic*	*conservative*	*garantistic*
Control/Governance: market state family/community human rights	**central** marginal marginal medium-high	marginal **central** marginal medium	marginal subsidiary **central** marginal	medium subsidiary medium **central**
Dominant form of welfare state solidarity	individualistic	wage labor-centered	communitarian-statist	Citizen status, universalist
Full Employment Guarantee	weak	strong	medium	medium
Dominant form of welfare state governance	market	state	morality	ethics
Concepts of social sustainability	sceptical	narrow	internal	broad
Empirical examples in social policy	United States	Sweden	Germany, Italy	Switzerland ("soft G.")

Source: Opielka 2008, p. 35, abridged and expanded to include concepts of social sustainability

Figure 1: Types of welfare regime and conceptions of social sustainability

The *internal* understanding, on the other hand, focuses on community design options, mental changes (behavior, consumption) and technical innovations, institutional changes are unfair to this politically rather conservative faction. The *sceptical* (liberal) understanding also wants to avoid institutional changes and essentially relies on technological solutions to the sustainability problem. Finally, the *broad* (garantistic) understanding of social sustainability could become a guiding principle of the sustainability discourse as a whole. By emphasizing the social, societal and institutional aspects of a transformation to a more sustainable society, without being satisfied with this, it is made clear that a primarily technological or economic strategy misses the systemic character of the socio-ecological problem.

A broad understanding of social sustainability aims at a comprehensive reorganization of politics, as was successfully achieved worldwide in the 20th century with the idea of the

welfare state and the establishment of various forms of a "welfare regime".[22] It is to be hoped that the sustainability movement, like the workers' movement before it, will succeed in demanding and promoting new institutions that systematically develop the social balancing impulse of the welfare state into a kind of "eco-welfare regime".

What is the topic at stake when we talk about a *broad* understanding of social sustainability? Presumably, at the beginning of the 21st century, the transformative sustainability sciences fulfill a similar function as the social sciences did at the beginning of the 20th century. At that time, it was not only sociology that saw itself as a medium of social reform and an answer to the social question as a class question. The result was the welfare state. A good century later, if things go well, the eco-social question will be answered with a global "eco-welfare regime".

I have summarized some of the elements of a socio-ecological design of society from the spirit of a green social work and a green social policy in the concluding figure 2. They are not party-political, but systematic, from the point of view of the individual, from the point of view of human rights, and for a sustainable embedding of our actions in the whole of nature and the world.

Approach	Program	Examples
Methodology *(polity)*	Holistic (systemic)	SDG-Interaction
Society *(policy)*	Criticism of externalization, **program of internalization**	Garantism Human rights, capabilities Commons
Politics *(politics)*	Social Innovation	Basic Income Agrarian turnaround Energy transition Incentives, Nudging Positive Migration

Figure 2: Social sustainability as a socio-political program

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[22] Opielka 2008, 2017 following the work of Gøsta Esping-Andersen.

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