**Imagination and Critique in Environmental Politics**

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**Abstract**

Against environmentalism’s roots in radical re-thinking of society, mainstream environmental politics has become a largely technical, problem-solving matter of realising concrete targets. Environmental politics scholarship seems to have followed suit, with most publications in journals such as *Environmental Politics* focusing on realist analyses of mainstream politics as opposed to radical and critical thought. This article contends a solely target-driven discourse loses sight of two vital dimensions of environmental politics: radical imagination and ideology critique. Insofar as the late-capitalist mainstream drives both environmental destruction itself and forms of political domination entwined with it – such as depoliticisation and colonisation – critical and imaginative research that challenges this is urgently needed. I argue environmental politics scholarship, and thus the journals that give it its platform, have a responsibility to actively withstand the biases produced by ideology, by promoting critical and radical work and engaging with the movements for democratisation and decolonisation of academic practice.

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1. **Introduction**

It is clear that urgent action is needed in environmental politics today. The climate crisis is now acute, with numerous governments declaring emergencies. Anthropogenic pressures on several ‘planetary boundaries’ have created an ‘existential’ risk (Rockström 2015; see also Steffen et al. 2015). In the context of such urgency, it has become commonplace in the formal political and mainstream societal discourse to see environmental politics as the targeted realisation of concrete goals and indicators. High-level examples include the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Kanie and Biermann 2017) and the centrality of numerical targets in climate governance, such as targets for national greenhouse gas emission reductions (Fankhauser 2011). Albeit intuitive in one sense, I argue the problem-solving focus of this approach is problematic insofar as it forefronts a managerial approach to environmental politics at the expense of room in the political – and, I will show, even scholarly – discussion for the critical and imaginative thought that would be needed to address the most significant political dimension of the environmental crisis: the role of (late-capitalist) ideology in driving both environmental destruction itself and the deep injustices of political domination that are entwined with it, such as depoliticisation and colonisation.

A managerial problem-solving perspective, broadly, sees the parameters guiding the necessary action as set by scientific measures of ecological boundaries (Rockström 2015; Rockström et al. 2009) which, through the architecture of multilateral environmental governance, are translated into national-level targets and then policy through the specialised administrative and regulatory structures of ‘environmental states’ (Duit et al. 2016). Characterised by ostensibly *objective* goals and administrative efficiency in translating these into policy, a managerial perspective sidelines *the political* within environmental politics; the contestations, deeper value discussions, and alternative worldviews. In particular, I argue, it therefore obscures the forms of political domination that are entwined with the crisis of unsustainability: the ways in which environmental destruction is not an isolated or coincidental problem, but rather interacts with, and is conditioned by, the stronghold of ideology over political structures and processes, including its effects of depoliticisation and colonisation. A managerial problem-solving perspective predestines environmental politics to remain within the bounds of mainstream environmentalism, which seeks environmental improvement compatible with, and ultimately in service of, the prevailing ideology of late capitalism that reproduces and normalises these structures. What remains outside of the picture of mainstream environmentalism is the ‘ecocritique’ of critical and ‘deep’ environmentalists who seek to unsettle this very ideology’s assumptions about Western dominance over the rest of the planet (Luke 2019). Such a critical perspective, in contrast to mainstream environmentalism, seeks to show that these assumptions are not inevitable or without alternative, by

‘unsettling conventional ways of seeing and doing things; casting things in a new light; making quick judgements and small violences more problematic; increasing the political and conceptual resources available to those who have been marginalised, silenced, or damaged; and disrupting the status quo’ (Death 2014, 6).

Yet in the mainstream and formal political discourse across Western societies, and thus in what is translated into policy, the critical perspective remains marginalised next to the managerial problem-solving perspective.

Since ‘universities do much to construct our understanding of the natural world’, it is imperative to reflect on the role of academic publishing on environmental politics in contributing to the primacy of either a foremost problem-solving and managerial, or a critical discourse (and corresponding policy-making) in the mainstream of society (Luke 1999, 103). In what follows, I argue that the bias within the mainstream discourse on the environment toward target-driven problem-solving action is reflected in academic scholarship in the field of environmental politics, including in the journal *Environmental Politics*. I argue this is a deeply problematic bias within the field of environmental politics scholarship, which should centrally feature critical and imaginative thought alongside more narrowly realist and problem-solving approaches. Arguably its central sub-dimensions today, as illustrated by *Environmental Politics* as a leading generalist journal within the field, are Western perspectives on, and analyses of, environmental policy, international environmental negotiations and agreements, green party performance, stakeholder governance, and mainstream public opinion. This bias is problematic insofar as it undergirds a view or even an expectation of environmental politics scholarship; one that is naturally oriented toward, and in service of, identifying and explaining the patterns and conditions of (in mainstream-managerialist terms) *successful* environmental politics. Notwithstanding the valuable insight produced by this work, environmental politics scholarship is also uniquely placed, and thus has a responsibility, to uncover the highly political nature of the environmental crisis, both in order to address the crisis at its roots as opposed to merely treating its symptoms, and to contribute to correcting the deep injustice of political domination that is as much part of this crisis as its directly ecological manifestations. Therefore, I argue journals such as *Environmental Politics* should proactively aim to redress this bias by inviting and promoting scholarly work that challenges any overly dominant, ideological mainstream; that is, by inviting and promoting work from a more diverse set of perspectives within explicitly critical and imaginative environmental thought, and democratising and decolonising its own practice.

To make this argument, I first highlight why targeted problem-solving action within realist parameters is not only ineffective in the current context, but indeed complicit in the perpetuation of existing unsustainability, domination, and colonisation. The current deadlock is political and cultural in nature, and reproduced by the covert power of ideology. To break through what has been termed a resulting ‘glass ceiling’ of transformation of environmental states (Hausknost 2020; Hammond 2020), it is therefore not just managerial solutions that are needed, but rather new perspectives and forms of knowledge that politicise, democratise, decolonise, or otherwise unsettle the ideological nature of the technical-scientific discourse and open up imaginative visions of alternative future paths. Next, I argue environmental politics scholarship has been complicit in, rather than a counterforce to, the strategic bias in contemporary environmental politics by favouring a pragmatic-realist, yet overly narrow stance. I illustrate the failure thus far of environmental politics scholarship to sufficiently foreground critical and imaginative thought with a simple analysis of abstracts in one of the field’s leading journals, *Environmental Politics*. I conclude with some reflections on how a journal like this might tap into democratisation and decolonisation movements to help free academic scholarship on environmental politics from the influence of ideology, and redress the current bias.

1. **Environmental Politics between Targeted Problem-Solving and Critical Imagination**

*Problem-solving versus critical environmental politics*

In the contemporary political discourse, environmental politics is often portrayed as a matter of turning scientific guidance into behaviour change so as to achieve specific environmental targets. This view, which I term the ‘problem-solving view’, is well-summarised as follows: ‘[a]nthropogenic climate change is a *problem* in need of a *solution*; […] confirmation of the problem is rooted in science; solutions are linked to energy technologies, economics and politics, as well as to human operations and behavior’ (Incropera 2016, 13-4, emphases added). Thus the scientific assessments of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) set the parameters for international negotiations about climate goals and targets, and national governments and their administrations then translate these into effective policy solutions. The modern administration of environmental states cannot admit a fundamental, systemic crisis; rather, ‘the “crisis” ha[s] to be viewed and treated in a manner which identifie[s] *manageable* problems […] capable of being solved in a manner which [match] the functional differentiation of the administrative apparatus’ (Torgerson 2005, 106, original emphasis).

Needless to say, these targets matter: a world in which global warming has been limited to 1.5 degrees Celsius will be very different from one in which there has been global warming of 2, 3 or 4 or more degrees Celsius. Yet a discourse revolving around ‘solutions’ and numerical targets portrays the matter as a technical one. Rather than calling for political action, science has itself become regulatory (Beck and Mahony 2018). The administrative, problem-solving nature of the policy process in turn leaves insufficient room for creative and imaginative responses to the complexity of the crisis (Connelly et al. 2012, 155). Instead, the target-setting approach is followed up with sets of measurable *indicators* to define a successful policy response. For example, the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) in the UK assesses progress toward the ‘net zero’ emissions target by 2050 with the help of ‘indicators [that] are based on our assessment of the cost-effective path to meeting the targets’ (CCC 2019, 51). Indicators are grouped by sector and include targets for items such as the uptake of electric cars and biofuels, building insulations, and CO2 emissions from manufacturing, power generation, agriculture, and transport. According to their latest report, seven out of 24 climate indicators from the previous year were met (CCC 2019, 52-3). Meeting the net zero emissions target by 2050, another report argues, will depend on ‘behavioural shifts’ and ‘household consumption’ urgently playing a greater role (Carmichael 2019, 5). Tellingly, the report stresses the behaviour change should ‘build optimism’, it ‘need not be expensive or reduce well-being’, and key to it is ‘consumer choice’ (Carmichael 2019, 5). Issues such as meat consumption can be ‘approached as a technical rather than societal challenge’ through new technologies and the creation of new markets; and paternalistic labelling such as ‘traffic light’ food labelling is sold as responding to ‘consumer demand’ (Carmichael 2019, 8).

As the CCC indicator list shows, being guided by measurable and achievable targets focuses the policy response to climate change on the technological solutions fitting with an ecological modernisation approach. Ecological modernisation theory challenges deep environmentalism’s claim that fundamental social change, away from capitalism and industrialism, is necessary to solve the environmental crisis, and instead deliberately sees as the solution not the abolishment, but rather the adaptation of capitalism such that it integrates environmental concern into its logic (Mol and Spaargaaren 2009). Thus environmental improvement is sought with the very instruments of neoliberal capitalism, such as technological innovation, individual consumerism, and economic incentives. While some of these undoubtedly promise valuable improvements in the short run, I problematise any approach or scholarship that remains consistent with, and thus further buttresses, the underlying late-capitalist ideology in light of its producing and normalising structures of political domination, exploitation, and colonisation – of people as well as Nature. This mainstream, formal – and, I argue below, scholarly – discourse is consistent with Robert Cox’s characterisation of a ‘problem-solving theory’ as ‘a guide to tactical actions which, intended or unintended, *sustain the existing order*’ (Cox 1981, 130, emphasis added). The managerial administration of environmental states can thus at best aim for a form of ‘lifestyle sustainability’ in the form of perceived environmental quality in Western societies that, however, remains predicated on a fundamentally unsustainable reproductive system (Hausknost 2020).

Cox juxtaposes ‘problem-solving theory’ with ‘critical theory’ that is concerned with ‘big picture’ analysis of the underlying system and geared towards bringing about an *alternative* order (Cox 1981; Death 2014). An alternative order here encompasses the deep socio-ecological change required for systemic sustainability, including not only ‘a massive reduction of overall environmental throughput’ (Hausknost 2020, 17) but a transformation also of the society’s fundamental values, beliefs, and developmental patterns (Olsson et al. 2014) beyond the norms valued by the late-capitalist ideology. According to Connelly et al. (2012, 159), deflecting such critiques in the mainstream discourse amounts to a covert exercise of power – that form of power which critical theorists refer to as ideology – that ensures that

‘there is a societal “consensus” around the value of the market economy and therefore it is conceptions of sustainable development such as ecological modernisation that do not offer a structural challenge to economic relations that find favour and are reproduced by the daily activities of governments, businesses, consumers and other actors.’

*Unsustainability and political domination driven by ideology*

Ideology is the form of power that covertly exerts domination by compelling individuals to develop false belief systems that legitimate the given order and hide its contradictions (Strecker 2008, 86; Flood 2002). For Habermas, the late-capitalist ideology stabilises its social order by ‘colonising’ people’s lifeworlds; it ‘serves to legitimate existing conditions by unilaterally substituting its own instrumental sphere of validity for the multivalent whole’, in other words, for any more holistic, systemic sense-making of the state of the world (Cook 2004, 110). Rather than exerting power in an open, repressive manner, ideology penetrates citizens’ very thinking, ‘delud[ing] actors about their actual interests and their visions of a good life’ and masking the structural power pervading the functioning of social structures (Strecker 2008, 86, 88-9). At the level of the society, this power is reproduced through a discursive sphere that is not a rational space, but one in which arational myths and symbols decisively influence behaviour and decision-making – even ‘what is unconsciously felt’ (Bottici and Kühner 2012, 99; see also Bottici 2007). Precisely because of the intangibility of something ‘unconsciously felt’, myths are a covert, but exceedingly pervasive and powerful way in which political ideology influences people to ‘act and think’ in the way that supports the functioning of a particular social order (Fromm 2009 [1962], 70). For example, Christopher Wright and Daniel Nyberg (2014, 206) show how the centrality of technological innovation and greener production and consumption in the public-political discourse on climate change has created a myth of the corporation as an omnipotent civil actor well-placed to deliver social and economic needs – and thereby absorbed any political critique of capitalism.

Myths arise and evolve when a certain narrative responds to a need for significance in a group or population, and in turn justify certain political conditions (Bottici and Kühner 2012, 99). Crucially, the more threatening a reality – for instance, due to an unprecedented sense of ecological emergency and unpredictability – the greater people’s psychological need for significance. Thus, even – or *particularly* – in the face of clear evidence of the ever more acute climate crisis, ideology is able to influence the political discourse toward power being maintained, and social transformation prevented, by making the status quo appear normal, beyond critique, or without alternative.

In late-capitalist societies, politics itself is thus structured so as to legitimate and entrench those political players that benefit from capitalism (Holcombe 2016). Ever less room remains for democracy, which would demand an open rather than a priori unequal discursive space to be meaningful. Within this space, an emancipatory and critical politics could then act as the social force unmasking and challenging ideological power, opening up alternative visions for the world (Hammond 2020). Yet the very structures of the modern state, and liberal democracy, have evolved with the imperative to prioritise economic growth over ecological sustainability – to the point that, according to Ingolfur Blühdorn, *even democracy itself* is being hollowed out and rendered complicit in the perpetuation of unsustainability (Blühdorn 2020). Without a change in politics itself, environmental politics thus effects only the re-interpretation of the formerly critical environmentalist agenda into a distinctly neoliberal, status quo-supporting line as the dominant discursive framing of the crisis and its required response.

In describing this dynamic, Habermas and Frankfurt School critical theory, which puzzlingly has not substantively engaged with the emancipatory project of postcolonial and decolonial theory (Allen 2016), might rightly be criticised for using the term ‘colonisation’ as a metaphor that equivocates and thus dilutes its actual meaning (Tuck and Yang 2012). Yet in the context of environmental sustainability, it is indeed a political dynamic of colonisation that is at the bottom of driving ecological destruction *and* political domination in simultaneous and intertwined ways. Colonisation is ‘a form of domination in which at least one society seeks to exploit some set of benefits believed to be found in the territory of one or more societies, from farm land to precious minerals to labor’ (Whyte 2017, 154). Colonialism is entwined with the environmentally destructive ideological domination implied by capitalism insofar as it has at its root the same profit-driven exploitation of people and land by self-proclaimed rightful ‘owners’ that also drives capitalist societies’ exploitation of the natural environment (Whyte 2017). It was colonial exploitation that decisively ‘grease[d] the wheels of capitalism’ (Olivier 2019, 9), based on rationalising as supposed property Indigenous lands and people as much as – or indeed (in settler logic) as part of – Nature as a whole (Whyte 2017; Tuck and Yang 2012). Resulting crises, such as anthropogenic climate change, are thus themselves a colonial legacy, and the colonisation of Indigenous domains its underlying political dynamic and driving force (Howitt 2020, 5884).

The way in which capitalism drives unsustainability, then, is not just in the form of concrete environmental externalities of production, but more fundamentally through a worldview that sees capitalist elites as having a rightful claim to ‘stewarding’ and exploiting the planet and its resources – including people. Because environmental crises such as climate change are global in nature, an approach to environmental politics that normalises this underlying anthropo- and Western-centric worldview, by portraying it as scientific and non-political, effectively extends such a claim of rightful mastery to the planet as a whole. This not only ‘neo-colonises’ non-Western domains (Olivier 2019), but also once more overpowers alternative forms of knowledge and perspectives on environmental politics that are not in the same way predicated upon exploitation and domination – such as the Indigenous ‘memories, knowledges, histories, and experiences of oppression that differ from many of the nonindigenous scientists, environmentalists, and politicians who are prominent in the framing of the issue of climate change today’ (Whyte 2017, 153).

The way in which these forms of pervasive domination implied by the late-capitalist ideology – depoliticisation and colonisation – underlie the environmental crisis and undermine transitions to sustainability is what makes threats such as climate change a political rather than technical challenge: a political crisis (Parr 2014). The case of climate change illustrates particularly well the ‘inverse relationship between power and privilege, on the one hand, and the interest to transform social structures, on the other’ (Eckersley 2016, 352). Inasmuch as it is power-stabilising ideological myths and worldviews, not a lack of technical solutions to the known problems, that play the key role in obstructing effective action on climate change, critiques of ideological and colonial power and alternative imaginaries and knowledges are all the more needed in environmental politics the more urgent the crisis becomes. Both externally (in the domains effectively (neo-)colonised by Western settlers) and internally (within the myth-driven political discourses of Western societies themselves), environmental politics can be effective in addressing the crisis of unsustainability only insofar as it decolonises (in both the literal and the Habermasian sense) and democratises its discourses and practices.

*Critique and imagination as safeguards against ideology*

For a more radical environmental discourse and transformative environmental politics, then, *the very terms of politics* would need to change, through contestation and critique that stems from *outside* of the given order (Machin 2020; Hammond 2020). In this context, I want to make a case in particular for critical and imaginative thought channelled into the wider political discourse through environmental politics scholarship. Perspectives on environmental politics that are deliberately critical or imaginative in a mainstream-transcending sense have the potential to change the way we see the world; to effect the ‘defamiliar[isation] [of] the familiar’ (Levitas 2007, 56) that is the starting point towards alternative pathways away from the status quo.

As defined above, critical theory (or broader: thought) is the intellectual movement aimed at exactly this; the unsettling of the dominant order so as to uncover the domination inherent in it, with the practical aim of ‘man’s emancipation from slavery’ (Horkheimer 1982, 246). Critical theory challenges the ‘instrumental rationality’ of targeted problem-solving through the critical clarification of pertinent human ‘struggles and wishes’ it otherwise represses and hides (Biro 2016, 89-91). Critique can be defined as a reflexive process that illuminates and ameliorates the contradictions of modernity – such as totalitarian conceptions of progress – through dialogue and democracy (Death 2014, 4). Moreover, although it has only recently been incorporated into the scholarly field of critical theory in the narrower sense, the wider intellectual project of emancipation from slavery must also logically includethe work of postcolonial and decolonial theorising (Allen 2016, xiv). Indeed, this implies that ‘the emancipatory transformations in the world may follow grammars and scripts other than those developed by Western-centric critical theory’ (de Sousa Santos 2014, viii), and the definition of critical theory must thus expanded beyond a narrow Western-led definition. Likewise under the umbrella of a wide definition of critical theory falls any political theory that promotes emancipatory aims by uncovering injustices, power structures, and problematic assumptions within the ideological status quo, such as feminist theory, poststructuralism, critiques of capitalism, and environmental justice and ecocentric thought.

Imagination, in turn, is not a distinct intellectual project, but it also unsettles the familiar for the sake of opening up new realms of possibility. Radical imagination – utopian thought or art – presents alternative views on the world not as pointless dreaming, but as a cognitive shift resisting an undesirable state of society and enabling critique (Böker 2017). Imaginative visions deliberately ignore the assumptions and transcend the boundaries of the status quo with the effect of not only exploring new alternatives, but also uncovering supposed boundaries that may have only been portrayed as unmovable by powerful interests vested in the status quo, such as corporate interest in late capitalism(Levitas 1990, 21). Thus, radical imagination is itself an important form of political critique, and entirely compatible with democracy (Böker 2017). Imaginative impulses can come not just from utopian studies and from engagement with the full diversity of non-Western thought but also from the emerging field of interdisciplinary environmental humanities, which are set to inhabit the space ‘between, on the one hand, the common focus of the humanities on critique and an “unsettling” of dominant narratives, and on the other, the dire need for all peoples to be constructively involved in helping to shape better possibilities in these dark times’ (Rose et al. 2012, 3). Moreover, the arts play a key creative role in ‘unlocking’ and thus enabling the imagination of new, previous unthinkable societal futures by ‘exploring, shaping, testing and challenging reality and images, thoughts and definitions of reality’ (Dieleman 2008, 2; see also Clammer 2014; Hammond and Ward 2019).

1. **The role of environmental politics scholarship**

In this context, scholars have highlighted the urgent relevance of critical perspectives on the environmental crisis, in light of their potential impact on mainstream discourse and on formal politics. Its reflexivity can offer a ‘contrapuntal schematization to those advanced by big business, grand science, or national governments’ – in short, those driving the formal political discourse in Western societies – ‘about what the future good life could be’ (Luke 2003, 239). Eva Lövbrand and her co-authors argue the more recent ‘Anthropocene’ framing of the crisis in particular has over-emphasised the role of the natural sciences, producing a post-political narrative around ‘*environmental* rather than *social* change’ (Lövbrand et al. 2015, 212, original emphasis). They argue critical and interpretive social sciences are needed to re-politicise the discussion and to diagnose and destabilise the institutions and power relations at fault (Lövbrand et al. 2015, 215). Rather than painting a picture of a singular crisis facing humanity as a whole, this requires research that is attentive to the diversity of human experiences as a result of ‘space, place, politics, power and culture’ (O’Brien 2012, 593), and thus also to how this diversity is conditioned by colonialism (Whyte 2017, 159).

These perspectives imply a link between the nature and ambition of environmental politics scholarship, on the one hand, and environmental politics and resulting policy-making as practiced in a given society, on the other. Critical and imaginative environmental politics scholarship is uniquely placed to challenge an overly managerial, non-critical practice of environmental politics in society. Albeit itself impeded by the effects of neoliberalism (Canaan and Shumar 2008), academia ought to be a space of unconstrained, unbiased research and critical reflection on the state of society and its ideology. Yet, at the same time, academic environmental politics scholarship is not *necessarily* critical; it also comprises non-critical, problem-solving scholarship that itself matches the assumptions and ambition behind problem-solving environmental political practice. Thus, it is imperative to reflect on any biases within environmental scholarship itself, and to challenge an overly non-critical culture within this field.

As a simple, illustrative analysis, it is instructive (although the reality is always more complex than conceptual categories could capture) to categorise environmental politics scholarship into what can be termed ‘problem-solving’ (or targeted, realist) environmental politics scholarship, on the one hand, and ‘critical’ as well as ‘imaginative’ environmental politics scholarship, on the other. Critical and imaginative scholarship together form the overall category of scholarship that challenges the opposing problem-solving scholarship and practice. The critical approach, on the one hand, challenges problem-solving scholarship and practice in that its ‘big picture analysis’ (Death 2014, 5) is expressly oriented toward questioning the state of society, its institutions and power dynamics. Imaginative scholarship, in turn, challenges the implicit ambition behind a problem-solving approach to sustain the current order by exposing this ambition as an unnecessary bias through the envisioning, formulation, and practical realisation of alternative orders that the ideological (in this case, late-capitalist) status quo would have otherwise portrayed as unavailable. Together, contributions on this side of the overall dichotomy thus ‘[unsettle] conventional ways of seeing and doing things’ (Death 2014, 6) so as to cast them in a new light and thereby ‘extend the realm of the possible for environmental politics’ (Lövbrand et al. 2015, 212). Indeed, as one subtype of critical theorising, the poststructuralist tradition is especially concerned with the role of thought and theory itself in maintaining a harmful or inequitable status quo (Death 2014, 4). This implies a need for critical analysis of pertinent scholarship itself.

Here I focus on the journal *Environmental Politics* to evaluate where its role falls in terms of advancing a targeted-realist discourse committed to solving problems within the existing order, on the one hand, or unsettling this very discourse through critical-imaginative thought that extends its remit toward alternative orders, on the other. *Environmental Politics* is a good candidate for this analysis in that it is widely regarded as one of the leading journals in the field. Founded in 1992, its importance in the field of environmental politics, and indeed political science in general, is underscored by its impact factor of 4.320 (2019), which in the metricised culture of global academic publishing makes it the third most influential journal in political science.[[1]](#footnote-1) Reflecting its growth and success, its frequency increased from six to seven issues per year in 2019.[[2]](#footnote-2) Its scope is general, as opposed to tied from the outset to one particular sub-tradition within environmental politics scholarship. Indeed, there is no indication that it would marginalise critical and imaginative thought as a matter of editorial preference, with critical environmental scholars well-represented on the editorial board.[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, I take *Environmental Politics* to be one of the most important generalist journals in the area of environmental politics, and as such likely to be broadly reflective of the overall orientation of, and research undertaken by, scholars in this field of Western academia.

Of course, what a journal publishes depends on the submissions it receives, which are not fully in its control; and while journal editors inevitably play a role in steering academic discourse, it would compromise their integrity to do so for any self-interested reasons. However, inasmuch as an overly targeted-realist focus ends up being counterproductive to actual sustainability as well as reproductive of political domination, the journal has a responsibility to help *reduce this existing bias* by prioritising – not out of personal interest, but for the sake of the very openness and integrity of academic publishing – scholarship that has thus far been marginalised, and promoting the overall diversity and inclusivity within the scholarly discourse it facilitates.

*Method*

Based on Meyer and Chang’s (2021) dataset of abstracts of articles published in *Environmental Politics* from its first issue in 1992 to issue 28(4) in 2019, I analysed, as a snapshot of what is *currently* being published, the perspectives of published research articles since 2015 (issues 24(1) in 2015 to 28(4) in 2019). Only the abstracts of research articles were included in the analysis. On the basis of how the abstracts described the respective article approach and contribution, my aim was to categorise each article into either a problem-solving, status quo-supporting contribution or a critical/imaginative and thus status quo-transcending one. The analysis of abstracts quickly showed more nuanced categories to be needed. Table 1 lists the categories employed for the analysis.

(Table 1 about here)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Problem-solving / status quo-supporting* | *Status quo-transcending* |
| Problem-solving perspectives | **Critical perspectives** | **Imaginative visions** |
| Realist analysis of status quo environmental politics | Realist analysis specifically of radical politics | Critical theory | Non-critical, but status quo-transcending theoretical visions |

Table 1: Analytical categories

On the ‘problem-solving’ side, there is only one category of articles very clearly falling into this perspective; namely, articles that analyse – whether empirically or conceptually – instances of concrete real-world environmental politics, including scholarship in the areas of public policy, public opinion, comparative politics, governance, and also green parties and green movements, *unless* they specifically engaged with radical politics. Despite employing a wide range of substantive foci, and not necessarily consciously aiming to support the social order of the status quo, the articles in this category appear to stay within the assumptions defining the political status quo, in which policy targets and their realisation through the administration of environmental states are central.

On the ‘status quo-transcending’ side, I include in the first sub-category analyses also of ‘real-world’ environmental politics if these specifically engage with radical politics or radical possibilities, including politicisation, radical protest, deep societal transformation, agonism, alternative environmental narratives, or indeed an explicit focus on ‘counter-hegemonic potential’, as in Shane Gunster and Robert J. Neubauer’s (2019) article on de-legitimating extractivism. Other articles in this sub-category include, for example, Erik Hysing and colleagues’ (2016) survey research with a specific focus on radicalism, and Carolina Valladares’ and Rutgerd Boelens’ (2017) research specifically laying bare how the re-politicisation of an environmental issue against the government’s attempt to portray it as a mere technical issue opens up new space for different political outcomes.

In a second sub-category, articles are included if they expressly employ critical theory; that is, if they unmask and challenge the influence of hegemonic ideology over environmental discourses (or other contradictions within the given order). Thus articles were categorised into this sub-category if their abstract either explicitly mentioned a critical theory approach, or if the article undertook a discourse analysis of a particular phenomenon that laid bare the neoliberal framing of environmental politics. Examples include Elise Remling’s (2018) poststructuralist analysis of the implicit values and assumptions behind European Union Green and White Papers on climate adaptation, Brian Coffey’s (2016) critical discourse analysis of the role of economic metaphors in environmental policy discourse, and Lucian Vesalon and Remus Creţan’s (2015) examination of the neoliberalisation of natural resources in Romania.

Finally, a third sub-category, imaginative perspectives, is included for completeness’ sake in line with the above theorisation of status quo-transcending perspectives; however, no publication fell into this sub-category.

Categorisations like this one are crude simplifications. Judging a research contribution by the abstract only could have resulted in wrong judgements at times, and even without errors it is only a weak indication of the researcher’s full perspective and ambition behind their work. However, as I show below, even such an approximate analysis reveals a significant imbalance between research published within the ideological frame and focus of the status quo, on the one hand, and critical or otherwise radical or imaginative perspectives, on the other. This suggests that, even in the event of any minor misjudgements, these would not have made a difference. Moreover, if in doubt, a paper was assigned to the radical category. The analysis is intended only as a simple illustration of how little critical and imaginative thought features in contemporary environmental political scholarship. Future research building on this, employing more extensive or intricate analysis techniques, would no doubt be a useful addition to this debate.

*Findings and discussion*

Not unremarkably, over the past five years, 17 pieces were published that employ an explicitly critical perspective and methodology. However, out of a total 226 research articles in this time frame, 176, or 77.9 per cent, were in the category of ‘realist-*status quo*-oriented’ work. 33, or 14.6 per cent, fell into the category of ‘realist-radical’. The 17 explicitly ‘critical’ publications amount to 7.5 per cent of the total.

(Figure 1 about here)



Figure 1: Share of each category of article in overall articles published in EP between 2015 and 2019

This shows that there is an overwhelming bias toward reformist perspectives working within, and thus implicitly reproducing, the dominant ideological framing of mainstream, problem-solving environmentalism. Radical perspectives, critical analysis, and imaginative theoretical work together make up less than a quarter of recent publications.

In light of the influence of mainstream-normalising ideology as a form of covert power and political domination, this is problematic both from an environmental sustainability perspective and for politics in general. Inasmuch as socio-environmental crises such as climate change constitute structural injustices – ‘undeserved harms that are collectively produced through recurrent social practices that are considered “normal”’ – which all social actors are answerable for (Eckersley 2016, 436-7; see also Young 2011), *Environmental Politics*, too, is complicit in entrenching this ideology. From the injustice – let alone the planetary state of emergency – created and reproduced by the discursive power game it, too, is part of, follows a responsibility to promote scholarly discourse within the journal that is as free from, and resilient toward, (any) ideology as possible, in the face of a clear risk of otherwise being affected by it. Promoting a greater share of a broad range of critical work and engaging with and providing a platform for imaginative thought would contribute to this end.

*A journal’s contribution to the movements for democratisation and decolonisation*

Finally, while much has been written about the neoliberalisation of (that is, the influence of the late-capitalist ideology on) Western academia (Canaan and Shumar 2008), movements toward democratisation and decolonisation are playing an increasingly important role as well. Beyond encouraging and publishing more diverse, critical and imaginative scholarship, journals such as *Environmental Politics* may also contribute to and learn from these wider movements in order to rethink not just their practice, but also their self-understanding as actors within the wider politics of knowledge and discourse.

To start with, the democratisation of academic practice is one direct implication of a critical focus, whose commitment to uncovering and challenging domination applies not only to the substance matter a researcher addresses, but also to their own practice. Thus critical theorists ought to ‘[pay] close attention to the role played in social change by intellectuals and academics themselves’ (Death 2014, 5). In order to actually reduce, and not inadvertently perpetuate, ideological oppression, critical theory itself must ‘continually hold itself open to the possibility that its own concepts make it blind to some dimensions of power and self-deception’ (White 1986, 424). Rather than theory in a ‘monologic’ or privileged sense (Habermas 1974, 2), it must understand itself as a ‘fallibilistic and open’ practice (Hoy and McCarthy 1994, 19-20) within a wider, democratic social space. The democratisation of academic practice means a transformation of academics’ self-understanding away from any assumption of epistemic or ideological superiority, and instead toward actively cultivating a reach far beyond the academic community so as to submit its own practice to the ‘verification’ (Bohman 1999, 477) provided by ‘reflective participants’ (Bohman 1999, 463-4) within the actual practice of emancipatory social change (Hammond 2019). The democratisation of academia in this sense can act as a check on the influence of ideology on research and publication by fostering a closer dialogue with, and responsiveness to, wider social audiences and their diverse reactions and concerns. Journals such as *Environmental Politics* can support this through internal democratic structures; by broadening their readership towards non-academic audiences; by prioritising norms of academic integrity and inclusivity over being led by metrics such as the impact factor; through open-access publishing; by encouraging research that engages not only narrowly with scholarly theory, but also with non-academic work, including artwork; by encouraging critical responses to scholarly publishing from broader audiences; and by favouring not-for-profit or university presses over corporate control over the journal’s own practice (on the last point, see Padula et al. 2017; Okune 2019).

Decolonisation, when applied to universities or indeed knowledge in general, requires that we recognise that knowledge production is not neutral, but always political (Jansen 2019). This puts journal editors, who have the final decision about what knowledge they ‘allow’ into the scholarly discourse and which is left out, in a position of significant power. Disrupting the undue centrality of Western frameworks of knowledge demands of them not just an openness to including a greater diversity of work, but engagement with a more general ‘forensic understanding and critique of where, how, why and by whom “legitimate” knowledge is produced and […] the way this knowledge does or does not reflect ongoing global political crises and ideological shifts around the world and their effect on subaltern populations’ (Saini and Begum 2020, 1). For example, insofar as the journal invites research from scholars based in non-Western societies, it should then likewise expressly invite and welcome research topics of interest to, and supporting the local well-being of, their own societies, not just Western audiences; as well as reflecting on what its editors regard as high-quality scholarly knowledge, to ensure editorial decision-making does not entrench a Western or corporate-driven bias (see Okune 2019). Recognising ‘that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”, [d]ecolonisation requires a critical historical lens and a transformative approach to knowledge building’ (Saini and Begum 2020, 2), of their (albeit small) part within which a journal editor ought to become aware, for example through genuine engagement with and incorporation of the contingency and multiplicity of knowledge beyond Western assumptions (Clemens 2020). Ultimately, however, decolonisation cannot be a merely symbolic move, but will be complete only when actual change and a shift in power – within society as much as *within global academia* – occur (Prinsloo 2016, 166).

1. **Conclusion**

The fact that times of emergency and unpredictability are psychologically experienced as threatening understandably heightens general interest in effective ‘solutions’ that can promise progress and reassurance. When it comes to environmental sustainability, however, such a focus on targeted goals and solutions is a fallacy: by falsely portraying the crisis as a mere technical matter, obscuring its profound ethical, social, and political dimensions, the progress it promises is an illusion and distraction. In fact, I have argued, such depoliticisation further entrenches unsustainability by serving those who unjustly benefit from the political status quo of late capitalism and preventing the necessary societal transformation beyond it.

In this constellation, the scholarly field of environmental politics – and, within it, the journal *Environmental Politics* – have a responsibility to repoliticise and criticise the role of the pervasive late-capitalist ideology as the underlying driving force toward the exploitation and colonisation of both people and Nature. The opposite to narrow, ideology-entrenching policy and research are critical and radically imaginative interventions which contribute to the democratisation and decolonisation of the knowledge discourse. In light *precisely* of the acute socio-ecological emergency, which is collectively reproduced by all social actors including academics, these must now be the priority.

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3. As of October 2020; <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=editorialBoard&journalCode=fenp20> (last accessed 12/10/2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)