

Introduction: What is critical environmental politics?

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On September 28, 2021 – precisely while we started to collect thoughts and ideas for this introductory chapter – Greta Thunberg addressed the Youth4Climate¹ delegates gathered in Milan for the upcoming Pre-COP 26.² Her ‘Blah blah blah’ speech was to become as iconic – if not more iconic – than her notorious *j’accuse* – ‘How dare you?’ – uttered at the UN Climate Meeting roughly two years prior.

Since Thunberg’s words are very often commented but seldom reported, we find it quite important to quote her at some length:

‘There is no planet B’ there is no planet blah - blah blah blah, blah blah blah.

‘This is not about some expensive politically-correct green-assed bunny-hugging or’ blah blah blah.

‘Green economy’ blah blah blah.

‘Net zero by 2050’ blah blah blah.

‘Net zero’ blah blah blah. [...]

What follows is, we contend, an accurate delimitation of the field of critical environmental politics:

This is all we hear from our so-called leaders: words – words that sound great, but so far have led to no action.

Our hopes and dreams drown in their empty words and promises.

Of course we need constructive dialogue, but they’ve now had 30 years of blah blah blah and where has that led us?

Over 50% of all our CO₂ emissions have occurred since 1990,³ and a third since 2005.⁴

All this while the media is reporting what the leaders say that they are going to do instead of what they are actually doing. [...]

They say they want solutions, but you cannot solve a crisis that you do not fully understand and you cannot balance a budget if you do not count all the numbers.

And as long as we ignore equity and historic emissions, and as long as we don’t include consumption of imported goods, burning of biomass etc. etc., and as long as clever accounting is one of the most efficient ways of reducing emissions, we won’t get anywhere.

And the climate crisis is of course only a symptom of a much larger crisis – the sustainability crisis, the social crisis – a crisis of inequality that dates back to colonialism and beyond – a crisis based on the idea that some people are worth more than others and therefore have a right to exploit and steal other people’s land and resources – and it is very naive to believe that we can solve this crisis

¹ <https://ukcop26.org/pre-cop/youth4climate-2021/>

² <https://ukcop26.org/pre-cop/pre-cop-milan/>

³ Baseline year for the Kyoto Protocol.

⁴ Ratification year of the Kyoto Protocol.

without confronting the roots of it.

Right now we are still very much speeding in the wrong direction [...].⁵

In light of yet another underwhelming outcome at the COP 26 in Glasgow,⁶ it seems to us that Thunberg's words call for a deep rethinking of what *critical environmental politics* has theoretically meant so far (first section below) and on what conjunctural field it will most likely be deployed in the future (second section). After having reflected on such issues, we briefly present the structure of this handbook.

Critical environmental politics: what does it mean?

Critical – environmental – politics. Three words that both individually and taken together hardly seem to require clarifications. That the environment has become a major political issue is uncontested even by most resolute denialists of climate change or its anthropic causes (Jacques et al. 2008; Oreskes and Conway 2010). Moreover, decades of debates and interventions have not produced much, at least if one considers the situation about climate change and other alterations to the processes that, since the inception of the Holocene, about 10,000 years ago, have reportedly ensured a 'safe operating space' for humanity (Rockström et al. 2009). This alone suggests the need for a thorough critique of environmental politics carried out so far.

As a proper field of political intervention, rather than a set of occasional measures, environmental politics began around 1970 in correspondence with government and public acknowledgment of an 'ecological crisis', i.e. of structural problems with the relationship between fast-growing, ever-more industrialized societies and their biophysical milieu. The notion of crisis, incidentally, shares its etymological basis with the notion of critique, as both derive from the Greek word 'krinein': 'judge', 'decide'. In fact, a crisis – especially one that endures and worsens in spite of decades of efforts to tackle it – asks for an assessment of its origins and possible solutions. This basically amounts to being critical, isn't it?

Well, not necessarily. Or, at least, the point needs specification. Is it the same, for example, to write a handbook of *critical* environmental politics rather than a *critical* handbook of environmental politics? A quick reflection suggests this is not the case. Critically addressing a subject matter means essentially to perform sound research: setting good questions, looking for relevant evidence, probing a terrain of inquiry carefully and rigorously. So, a critical handbook of environmental politics should just be a good handbook of environmental politics. Talking of critical environmental politics, instead, gives the work performed a peculiar qualification – a posture. Being critical is not just about doing a *good* job, but first of all addressing the job in a *certain way*.

Yet, what is this way? Most answers to what 'being critical' is focus on the theoretical level, though by no means this rules out empirical research, as long as on-field inquiry is always based on some explicit or implicit theory. In a frequently cited account, Robert W. Cox distinguishes between 'problem-solving' and 'critical' theory. The former aims to 'help solve the problems posed within the terms of a particular perspective which was the point of departure'. It therefore 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for

⁵ See: <https://www.carbonindependent.org/119.html>.

⁶ https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/cop26_auv_2f_cover_decision.pdf

action'. The latter 'stands apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about. Critical theory, unlike problem-solving theory, does not take institutions and social and power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing' (Cox 1981, pp. 128-129). In this sense a critical outlook is committed to questioning the backdrop against which, or the framework whereby, problems are identified and solutions devised, in so doing being attentive to the origin and contestation of institutional arrangements, power differentials, agency distribution, knowledge and authority claims, reality definitions, interest and identity attributions, and the transformative potential of alternative approaches and social struggles. It is therefore sensitive to historical change. For Nancy Fraser critical theory is the 'self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age' (Fraser 1989, p. 113). Likewise for Max Horkheimer – exponent of a school including several generations of German philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition that, being called 'Critical Theory' (see Görg, this volume), should epitomize what a critical posture is about – holds that a critical theory 'never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such' but at 'emancipation from slavery' (Horkheimer [1937]1982, p. 246). Leaving aside for the moment who the subject of emancipation is, being critical thus entails both doing good research (increase of knowledge) *and* making such research instrumental to tackling domination. This goal reminds the Enlightenment principle of human progress, a famous description of which comes from Kant. For him (Kant [1784]2009), enlightenment is the task for humanity to emerge from immaturity, which depends on a lack of courage to use one's reason, intellect, and wisdom without the guidance of another. His famous motto is *Sapere aude!* (Dare to be wise!) – a call for the use of reason to emancipate oneself addressed to each and every human being. However, there is a difference between, so to say, assuming that just by letting reason do its job (e.g. doing good research) domination will eventually be wiped out, and claiming that reason cannot do its job well unless domination itself falls under its gaze. Which means also, and perhaps first of all, being alert to the dominative assumptions and outcomes hidden within one's own intellectual posture. Postcolonial and decolonial scholarship has been particularly effective in denouncing the dominative implications of a pretended universalism of reason. In the words of Edward Said, the critical tradition stemming from, or aligned with, the Kantian framework, performs a false universalism that 'assume[s] and incorporate[s] the inequality of races, the subordination of inferior cultures, the acquiescence of those who, in Marx's words, cannot represent themselves and therefore must be represented by others' (Said 1993, pp. 278-279). This false universalism, which has effectively supported Western imperialism, is endorsed for Said also by Critical Theory. This claim finds some support in Horkheimer's own words. He contrasts traditional theoretical thinking, with its outlook on 'the genesis of particular objective facts, the practical application of the conceptual systems by which it grasps the facts and the role of such systems in action [as] external' to itself, with the critical questioning of the dominative grounds and implications of such endeavour; yet he also holds that 'the free development of individuals depends on the rational constitution of society' (Horkheimer [1937]1982, pp. 208, 246), suggesting the presence of an ordering principle that should be brought to light and let unfold or promoted against reactionary forces. In other words, on one side Horkheimer questions the dominative implications of the case for what Thomas Nagel (1986) has aptly called the 'view from nowhere' – the distinctive objectivism of western civilization that has as a cornerstone Descartes's idea of a mind separated from the body yet capable of apprehending the world as it is, and that finds

a functional equivalent in Kant's a-priori elements of Reason. On the other side Horkheimer seems to believe in a critique of western Reason from within such very Reason, according to the latter's view of history, subscribing to the idea of a 'progress' over premodern or non-modern forms of life. This standpoint, postcolonial and decolonial scholars claim, makes it impossible to address coloniality as an imperialist endeavour repeated time and again through a systematic devaluation and subjection of peoples and places under the justification of helping these to catch up with the 'advanced' part of the world. The problem with the Enlightenment's equation between Reason and freedom, notes Amy Allen, is that 'the language of progress and development is the language of oppression and domination for two-thirds of the world's people' (Allen 2014, p. 185).

Once acknowledged this, however, where do we go? To make its point postcolonial and decolonial scholarship has built to a significant extent on French poststructuralism (Eagleton 1998; Go 2016), and namely its deconstruction of the modern case for universal reason and progress as a narrative among others, with no superior access to a trans-historical or transcultural truth. This entails that social arrangements can and should be questioned only in their own terms and within their own boundaries, without a possibility of appealing to an external principle. Hence, among other things, the controversy over the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Such conclusion has however recently met with growing concerns that this may entail a weakening of the possibility to challenge the global reach of a ruling order that, through technological advancement, corporate expansion and neoliberal regulation, is entailing a growing exploitation of humans and nonhumans. The question, more precisely, is that contestations of injustices grounded on difference rather than inequality (a concept that entails some standard for comparison) may be a blunt weapon against a hegemonic ideology that portrays market differentiation, individual competition and a 'flat' ontology of monetary equivalents as the only Reason of the world (Dardot and Laval 2014). Can this new type of universalism – not of principles or ends but of results, the unpredictable combination of myriad of independent decisions, whose necessity is testified by its very actualization – be tackled through a case for radical diversity and incommensurability? Preoccupations that this may not be the case are expressed from various perspectives: for example that late feminism's focus on difference to the detriment of redistribution and representation may have come up to effectively support neoliberal politics (Fraser 2009); or that mobilizations based on claims about identity and lifestyles are proving ineffective in engendering political change (Poupeau 2012; Mouffe 2013); or else that the deconstruction of scientific assertions is benefitting ruling elites, corporate interests and reactionary forces rather than disadvantaged groups and unrepresented ecological concerns (Latour 2004; McIntyre 2018).

Yet, if both the case for a view from nowhere and for a view from anywhere – which replicates the former in reverse (poststructuralism may repudiate western reason but is an offspring of the latter!), becoming in this way *more* resistant to contestation – can hardly serve the purpose of a critique aimed at emancipation from domination, does the idea of a critical posture keep any meaning and purpose? A first reply is that it actually does *not*; namely, that the traditional notion of critique as based on claims, counter-arguments, protests, is doomed. This case has been made by scholarship, especially feminist, partaking in so-called 'new materialisms' (Coole and Frost 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012), aka the 'ontological turn' (Pellizzoni 2016; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017) that has involved philosophy, the social sciences and the humanities at the turn of the century, gaining momentum in subsequent years. Shared tenet of an otherwise diversified intellectual tide is

a case against both naturalism and culturalism: the former for its several dualisms (mind/body, masculine/feminine, nature/culture etc.), all of which implies the dominance of one polarity over the other, deemed passive, deaf, valueless; the latter for its failure to question the language/matter duality ending up with the same result and an inability to acknowledge the agency and vitality of matter and the body. Critique, new materialist scholars remark, has traditionally dealt with concepts and discourses, focusing on 'errors and points of contention' (Grosz 2005, p. 27), regarding materiality as passive and limiting and positioning the critic 'as the dispassionate outsider who stands above and outside the epistemological or philosophical fray' (McNeil 2010, p. 433). This has been unable to yield social and political change. Critique as discourse deconstruction is therefore to be replaced with embodied practices, where alternative ways of living are experimented and affirmed. This, one may argue, is what is actually happening with a host of 'prefigurative' mobilizations where corporeality and new socio-material entanglements become sites of resistance, creativity and hope (e.g. Yates 2015; Schlosberg 2019; see Asara, this volume; Dal Gobbo, this volume).

A critique embodied in materiality and everyday practices should ostensibly circumvent the politically disabling alternative between the view from nowhere and the view from anywhere. Yet, the case for prefiguration has been targeted with the very same criticism of ineffectiveness it addresses to traditional protest. If discourse deconstruction is a blunt weapon against a ruling order based on violence, exploitation, systematic devaluation and, increasingly, the adoption of deconstructive styles by ruling elites themselves, some scholars wonder how effective can be an embodied politics that struggles to transcend the level of small groups, that the commodity system intercepts as lifestyle, profitable market niches, and that governments ever-more leaning towards the market ideology welcome as a self-help reply to a shrinking welfare state (De Angelis 2013; Haiven 2016; Pellizzoni 2021a). Yet, does the alternative between the view from nowhere and the view from anywhere, or between a discursive and an embodied approach, exhaust the space for conceiving and enacting critique? Not necessarily. There is a line of argument, connecting otherwise distant scholars such as Michel Foucault and Theodor W. Adorno, that opens up a possibility for critique to be both historically and culturally located *and* transformative (Allen 2014). Both Foucault and Adorno subscribe to the emancipative ethos of Enlightenment without endorsing its metaphysical assumptions about progress as the universal affirmation of western modernity as it is and as a whole, making a case for an immanent critique, that is, a critique that turns against themselves the assumptions and conceptual tools available in the historical moment, questioning their foundation as bound up with specific power relations, hence raising the issue of 'how not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them' (Foucault 2007a, p. 44). For Foucault the task of a critique so conceived is to bring into question the ruling 'problematization' – why and how certain issues emerge as problems and the horizon of meaning that even opposed solutions share – from within itself. Think, for example, of how, in the debate over the ecological crisis, those who call for more technology and those who call for a return to 'simpler' ways of living generally share a same understanding of what technology is about. Problematizing such understanding, then, means regarding technology, as presently conceived and implemented, as neither 'good' nor 'bad' but – using Foucault's term – 'dangerous', by which he means that, whatever the situation and its dominant accounts, 'we have always something to do' (Foucault 2000, p. 256). This amounts to saying that technologies are

amenable to different developments according to different *goals*, rather than just different *ways* of fulfilling same purposes, as if these were self-evident and constrained by the materiality of devices and by their conditions of production. Existing socio-material arrangements can and should instead be just the starting point for a rethinking and transformation of technologies that builds on contesting their very matter-of-factness, their apparent necessity. Likewise, Adorno proposes the 'non-identical' as an alternative to 'identity-thinking', the matter-of-fact appearance taken by historically located and culturally loaded apprehensions of the world. Against the case for an actualization of socio-technical potentialities that can be fostered or hampered but not diverted, 'negative dialectics' means for him a 'historically situated response to a particular form of social organization and its accompanying worldview' (Allen 2014, p. 194), showing precisely its non-necessity: that 'it need not be' (Adorno 1973, p. 321). On this view, 'the positive meaning of freedom lies in the potential, in the possibility, of breaking the spell or escaping from it' (Adorno 2006, p. 174). The separation between nature and society and the domination of the latter over the former in the name of progress represents a key element of such spell, to which even Critical Theorists have proven sensitive. Habermas, for example, has claimed that 'for the sake of removing socially unnecessary repression we cannot do without the exploitation of external nature necessary for life' (1983, p. 108). A statement to which, in spite of his nuanced account of the relationship between humans and nature, Marx would arguably subscribe (see Leonardi and Torre, this volume).

It is of the utmost relevance for a critical environmental politics, then, that for Adorno it is not possible to instrumentalize and exploit nonhumans without doing the same to humans. Even for the late Foucault (in spite of his well-known disregard for nature), freedom builds on a certain relation with oneself *and* with the world (Iofrida and Melegari 2017). For both these scholars, moreover, it is not possible to predict where critique will lead to, precisely for its immanent character, alien to any destinal claim. Its only normative benchmark is freedom from domination (of humans and nonhumans alike, and together: a point on which, as said, Adorno is most explicit), which means inclusion, justice and respect for the Other. Its way of proceeding is contestatory, first and foremost of the aprioristic assumptions that naturalize power relations foreclosing imagination and acknowledgment of alternatives, in so doing giving relevance to embodied experiences, especially of injustice and suffering, which are neither ruled out nor hypostatized but seen as affecting and effecting thinking, and vice versa (see e.g. Adorno 1998a; Foucault 1988). An immanent critique, moreover, acknowledges that experiences of injustice and domination never repeat themselves just in the same way, yet they can be recognised across time and place. It is on this recognisability, which Michael Walzer (1990) calls minimal or reiterative universalism, that emancipatory thrusts can build up and find support beyond the confines of specific communities or social groups.

Equally important is to take notice that a critical posture so conceived entails a peculiar relation with uncertainty or non-knowledge. The case for progress as a pathway towards the full realization of universal Reason crucially builds on science, and namely on the incomplete, ever-revisable character of scientific knowledge. Outside the lab or the university lecture hall the assumption of knowledge perfectibility has effectively authorised a sort of retroactive application of its future accomplishment in terms of sufficiency for the purposes at hand. This has led, among the other things, to a neglect of early warnings of 'unpredictable' adverse effects of technology, preference for amount of yield against resilience and reversibility, assumption of resolute technical progress, and so on. The

tendency to conflate knowledge exhaustiveness as a normative ideal – the vanishing point of the scientific enterprise – with the capacity of handling of biophysical processes has actually gained momentum in recent years, the purpose of basic research having been increasingly diverted from cognition to ‘usability’ (Stokes 1997). Acknowledgment of incompleteness, in the Adornian account of non-identity, means instead that the anticipated matter-of-factness to which action should conform is incompleteness itself (Pellizzoni 2021b). In the lexicon of Adorno, it is impossible to do full justice to the Other – and all the better with that if it leads to an attitude of humbleness and respect; a care in avoiding smugness and assimilation; a demand of friendship rather than an attempt at lordship; a search for ‘agreement between human beings and things’ (Adorno 1998b, p. 247). A position inspired to Walter Benjamin’s claim that a kind of labour is possible which ‘far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her of the creations which lie dormant in her womb as potentials’ (2019, p. 203). This horizon envisaged by Benjamin appears today ever-more crucial, yet foreclosed by a critique of technology harnessed in a conflict between technophiles and technophobes that is largely fictitious and instrumental to dominative designs.

If the above provides an account of the type of job ‘being critical’ entails, be it a matter of academic work, action research or civic mobilization, such an account cannot but invest the notions of environment and politics themselves. Environment is not the same as nature. The latter is a complex concept which, according to Raymond Williams (1983), can be drawn to three main meanings: the whole material reality, the opposite of culture (i.e. the sphere of what is not altered by humans), and the essence or distinctive features of a being. This, at least, in the western tradition, as all these meanings presume the external similarity and internal difference between humans and non-humans that Philippe Descola (2014) Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014) and other anthropologists have shown to be specific of western ontology. Environment, on the other hand, is a relational concept. When applied to the biophysical world it draws attention to interaction rather than identity. Not by chance has it become synonymous with ecology, the study of the relations between organisms and their biotic and abiotic surroundings, whose official birthday is 1866, when the German biologist Ernst Haeckel reportedly coined it. The rise of this relational perspective is thus concomitant, and hardly unconnected, with what Foucault (2007b) calls the liberal problem of government, as a political focus on the handling of the dynamics involving populations and their biophysical milieu, with the crucial help of specialised knowledges. Environment, therefore, is a concept where knowledge and power are deeply intertwined from the outset. Political and cognitive aspects are constitutive of the notion. The environmental crisis is a crisis in the relationship between humans and nature, surely not a crisis of nature as such, if by this we mean the planet. Life has proven capable of surviving the most adverse conditions, as the vestiges of past geological eras indicate.

So, a critical outlook cannot but scrutinize the notion of environment, a task that should also involve a critique of what counts as ‘environmental’ and what constitutes ‘environmentalism’. This has traditionally been set by Western standards, the bounds of which have coincided with the legitimisation of ‘white’ and colonial visions, and the delegitimization of other, indigenous, non-white and non-modern visions, ontologies and knowledges not oriented towards extractive relationships. While the environment has been framed as a ‘an exotic elsewhere’ (Di Chiro 2008, p. 286), environmentalism has traditionally been constructed as a ‘cult of wilderness’ legitimating the dispossession of peoples from their land, and as an approach that should not be concerned with livelihoods, human labour,

and materiality, but rather with presumed 'post-material' values and issues (see Bresnihan and Millner, this volume; Ferdinand, this volume; Asara, this volume). Decolonising the notion of the environment hence means to visibilise the alternative genealogies of environmental thought that have been silenced by an assumed universal meaning of green concerns.

Furthermore, scrutinizing the notion of environment also entails an investigation of how it is put at work in political action and struggles. A scrutiny which brings into question a lot: for example, the type of value humans assign to the biophysical world, and how such value comes to existence. Without pre-empting a point touched in various chapters of the book, a critical posture should ostensibly question the idea that value is a thing or an intrinsic quality of things, conceiving of it as a result of acts of valuation and evaluation (Muniesa 2011; Lamont 2012), as this allows inquiry into the underlying assumptions about worthiness and how to protect or increase it, and related power relations, bringing to light conflicting moral economies and challenging the claim that any judgement of worth can ultimately be traced back to a single metric. Indeed, many emergent mobilizations in the global South and North contest precisely this, enacting what Laura Centemeri (2018) calls 'alternative value practices'.

Undoubtedly, a critical outlook should also extend its gaze to the very notion of politics. This entails taking a post-foundationalist posture, that is 'a constant interrogation of the metaphysical figures of foundation' (Marchart 2007, p. 2), whereby politics is not simply the ontic manifestations of conventional politics (including for instance the political system and institutions, or politics meant as the 'art of government'), but also encompasses 'the political', the ontological dimension of the institution of society which is characterised by the absence of a final ground or 'closure' of the social. Political difference explains the 'unbridgeable gap' (ibid., p. 6) between, on the one hand, concepts such as polity, policy, politics and police, and on the other 'the political' or radical antagonism, that is the instituting moment of the social.

A critical approach should also involve a critique of those instituted forms of conventional politics that contribute to mark the present socio-ecological crisis. It is in this sense that, as political ecology has forcefully voiced since at least the 1970s, dealing with the environmental question is an inescapably political endeavour, and, vice versa, politics cannot prescind from its environmental groundedness and implications. In other words, a critical approach to politics is intimately tied to a critical approach to the environment. This involves critiquing the continuous 'displacement (or denial) of the Real socio-ecological processes' (Swyngedouw, this volume) that drive the socio-ecological crisis, such as the capitalist mode of production and consumption and its generalisation through an 'imperial mode of living' (Brand and Wissen 2012) that is deeply rooted in everyday practices. Such a suppression occurs by means of a politics of unsustainability (Blühdorn, this volume) that has turned the 'ecological transition' into a new orthodoxy (Brand 2016) where, as in the famous novel *The Leopard* by Tomasi di Lampedusa, 'for things to remain the same, everything must change'. A paradigmatic case is the EU, an actor traditionally considered as environmentally progressive. Here, while the environment has moved centre stage, with the ecological transition raised to the rank of newly established ministries in several European countries and the Next Generation EU mobilising unprecedented funds with the goal of climate protection, eco-politics is reduced to a techno-managerial issue, revolving around issues such as green finance, commodification of nature, circular economy and, most likely, even reliance on nuclear energy and fossil gas as tools for win-win solutions that can

harness momentum for further economic growth.⁷ Such politics of unsustainability involves, as we argue in the next section, on the one hand a new approach to the environmental challenge, whereby ecological limits are turned into an opportunity for market-led valorisation, and on the other an intimate relationship with the slippage into post-democratic governance through consensual governing and a mainstreamed environmental discourse that attempts to erase social antagonism (see Swyngedouw, this volume). Relatedly, a noteworthy direction of inquiry over politics and its ongoing transformations considers the change occurred to the very notion of crisis. According to the modern conception of reality, time and the human agent, crisis meant a decisive moment of confirmation or upheaval of the political order (Koselleck and Richter 2006), yet it now increasingly expresses a permanent situation from which there is no exit. This is well exemplified by the growth of debt as a structural condition at individual and collective level (Graeber 2011; Lazzarato 2012), or by the shift from an ecological emergency to the next (heath waves, hurricanes, pandemics, industrial accidents...) with hardly any break. In other words, some scholars contend, crisis has become a way of governing (Lazzarato 2015; Gentili 2018). Namely, we would be witnessing an intensification of the 'administrative' concept of government that Foucault (2007b; 2008) had detected first in liberalism and then in neoliberalism; an intensification possibly engendering a new political condition, with novel forms of domination. The project for this book started before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The book was developed alongside its unfolding and completed before its end. Various chapters touch it though without giving it central stage, which in our opinion is correct as the scope of a handbook must transcend the headlines, dramatic that these may be. That said, voices have been raised claiming that the Covid-19 pandemic is a crucial step towards the normalization of the state of emergency, major restrictions over fundamental rights in the name of a biopolitical necessity being bound to endure in some form or another after the end of the pandemic (Agamben 2021). Be it as it may, and beyond the specific case, an administrative declension of crises has an impact on critique, as it increasingly crushes the latter on a problem-solving plane, foreclosing, among the other things, the possibility to question the growing account of adaptation as the sole sensible approach to climate change, pandemics, job precarisation and a host of biophysical and social issues. A claim that not only assumes that the status quo is unchangeable (not 'in time', at least), but opens avenues for a growing sector of economy working on emergencies, the endless modulation of which corresponds to endless opportunities of profit. Also on this view, a critical approach to environmental politics is more necessary than ever. Finally, another emergent line of inquiry in recent environmental politics scholarship comes from new materialist scholarship, especially at the crossroads between science and technology studies (STS) and feminist and post-colonial theory. What has come under the spotlight is the way 'knowing, the words of knowing, and texts do not describe a pre-existing world [but] are part of a practice of handling, intervening in, the world and thereby of enacting one of its versions – up to bringing it into being' (Mol and Law 2006, p. 19). The world, it is claimed, takes shape and meaning, emerging from an indistinctiveness that constitutes the (moveable) border of thinkability, only together with a cognitive act which is inseparable from history and flesh. Moreover, 'if reality is done, if it is historically, culturally and materially located, then it is also multiple' (Mol 1999, p. 75). It is 'open to an alternative

⁷ At the moment of writing this chapter, gas and nuclear energy as seriously being considered for the inclusion in the EU sustainable investment taxonomy, see <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/gas-and-nuclear-fate-of-eu-green-taxonomy-now-in-the-hands-of-von-der-leyen/>.

ordering or recomposition of the relational field' (Clark 2013, p. 2828). Hence, a focus on emergent 'ontological struggles', in the sense of their crucial building on a denaturalization of Western dualisms in favour of perspectives by which 'all beings exist always in relation and never as "objects" or individuals' (Escobar 2010, p. 39). This is linked to the notion of pluriverse (Kothari et al. 2019), as not a kaleidoscope of declensions of a same world but a world made up of many worlds (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018).

Critical environmental politics: conjunctural elements and future scenarios

Task of a handbook, we believe, is to offer an updated compass of a problem-field without succumbing to the lure of fashionability, using interpretive lenses provided with a focus deep enough to help the reader discern what is most relevant in ongoing events and emergent trends. In this sense, on one side we have to acknowledge the growing significance of the ontological politics practiced by socio-ecological mobilisations and initiatives in the Global South and also increasingly in the North, as underpinning a new type of emancipatory politics – for humans and nonhumans alike, and together – grounded in materiality that can itself nurture critical environmental politics. On the other side it is important to take note of how environmental movements' approach towards global environmental governance has evolved in recent years – actually in such a way that it becomes hard to talk of 'traditional' mobilizations, in the sense of a usual politics of discourse (voicing and lobbying). Both issues are addressed from different perspectives in a number of chapters. It may however be useful to delve here on the latter as a way to contextualise the book in its entirety vis-à-vis the challenge of climate change, which today ostensibly encompasses and synthesises the whole case for an environmental politics. The current historical conjuncture is in fact marked by a key relationship, that between ecological issues and transnational governance. Our main point is that Greta Thunberg's words – and, more importantly, the massive movements they inspired – constitute a remarkable shift in the history of that relationship. In a nutshell: they put an end to the UNFCCC⁸ as the *centripetal force for climate-related imagination*, as the main attractor of ecology-related policy efforts. This does not mean, of course, that post-Greta critical environmental politics is entirely unprecedented: many features of Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion were certainly present in previous mobilizations, especially those of the alter-globalization cycle. Yet, what we believe is important to emphasize is the progressive disintegration – endogenous as well as exogenous – of the UN-led governance process, which represents a moment of discontinuity both from an institutional perspective and a social movements' one.

Starting from the 1960s, due to convergent pressures by engaged scientific communities and vocal social movements, ecological issues have gradually become pivotal both in national and supranational political agendas. Up until the late 1980s, however, such

⁸ The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) established an international environmental treaty to tackle 'dangerous human interference with the climate system'. It was signed by 154 states at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), informally known as the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. It established a Secretariat headquartered in Bonn and entered into force on March 1994. The treaty called for ongoing scientific research and regular meetings, negotiations, and future policy agreements designed to both reduce GHGs and allow ecosystems to adapt to climate change.

unprecedented importance constituted a *barrier* to capital accumulation. As James O'Connor (1973) and André Gorz ([1978]1980) remarkably showed, environmental protection was seen as a necessary evil, an additional cost to be either internalized within firms or externalized onto governmental budget – but eventually driving to an identical outcome: an increase in market prices for ‘dirty’ commodities. Although historical evidence suggests that ruling elites were most often willing to privilege profits over a livable planet, it is worth noting that legal controversies over ecological issues – most often following socio-ecological mobilizations – were usually regulated within a command-and-control legal framework (Klein 2015), or else public regulation. The best example of such procedure is the Montreal Protocol which, in 1987, phased out a number of substances that were industrially useful but also detrimental to the stratospheric ozone layer (Epstein et al. 2014).

This situation significantly changed with the rhetoric of ‘Sustainable Development’ (SD) (1987) and was eventually reversed by the discursive formation of ‘Green Economy’ (GE), arisen within innovative business circles in the early 1990s. Whereas the main tenet of SD is the conviction that economic growth, biospheric health and future generations’ best interests may go hand in hand (if properly balanced), the disruptive kernel of GE is the idea that what was once conceived as crisis *of* capitalism (i.e. the ecological crisis) is from now on to be regarded as a crisis *for* capital. In other words, GE postulates that the internalization of environmental limits does not constitute a burden but, rather, opens up a new strategy for market-led valorization (Leonardi 2019). This also resulted in major shifts in environmental policy discourse since the 1970s. On the one hand, a change in discourse from ‘growth *versus* the environment’, which characterized international environmental governance of the 1970s (more particularly, global forums such as the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment and the 1974 Cocoyoc Symposium), to ‘growth *for* the environment’ – emerged since the Brundtland report and further strengthened in later UN conference (the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development and the 2002 Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development), most especially with the 2012 Rio + 20 summit under the aegis of the new GE concept (Gómez and Naredo 2015). On the other hand, a shift from a political discourse, characterizing the early days of global environmental governance, to an increasingly technocratic discourse where the ecological crisis is set as an apolitical problem requiring techno-managerial fixes.

A brief glance at the historical development of global climate governance can show the connection between the emergence of SD and GE and the governmental design of market-based schemes. The KP is the first legally binding agreement on climate change whose main tenet is undoubtedly the beginning of *carbon trading*, for which it unmistakably represents an ‘official’ date of birth. The basic economic rationale which frames the so-called flexibility mechanisms is that trading emissions permits and credits on dedicated markets would simultaneously reduce the aggregate cost of meeting the targets, foster sustainable development in non-industrialized countries and create profitable opportunities for green business. In a nutshell, this formula indicates that the global reliance on specifically dedicated markets as exclusive policy option is connected to an extremely entrenched political belief according to which climate change, although a historical market failure (since negative externalities were not accounted for), could be viably solved only by further marketization.

Such an assumption has represented the red thread of climate governance as a whole and remained intact in the much-celebrated Paris Agreement (signed at COP 21, in 2015). In passing, this uncontested centrality is consistent with the hypothesis according to which the

environmental limit is turned by GE into an element of the process of valorization. That the COP-system is entirely reliant on this wager is shown once more by the inability of delegates at COP 26 to move beyond exclusive market mechanisms and design (also) a non-market mechanism – as prescribed by art. 6 of the Paris Agreement. As far as carbon trading is concerned, it must be noted that negotiators in Glasgow reached an agreement over transparency by detailing the so-called *rulebook*, whose impact on fraudulent practices such as double counting is expected to be significant. Yet, the main flaw of the *Clean Development Mechanism* still undermines all efforts: carbon offsets – awkwardly renamed *Article 6, paragraph 4, emission reductions (A6.4ERs)* – do not achieve actual mitigation as they simply shift emissions from one side of the world to the other without any benefit for the atmosphere (Leonardi 2017).

For our purposes, it is key to assess the disruptive nature of SD/GE also on social movements' side. Our main point is that from the 1990s the policy framework aimed at posing ecological issues as drivers of capital accumulation has attracted even radical imaginaries as it ostracized denialists of various forms. Again, global warming is a case in point: the UNFCCC process being a centripetal force for social advocacy, most Climate Justice (CJ) actors ended up playing as legitimacy providers for climate governance (at the very least from Kyoto 1997 to Paris 2015).

As is well-established, CJ as a political tool for social mobilizations has emerged in close connection with the anti-globalization cycle of struggles, also referred to as no-global, new-global or 'movement of movements' (Jacobsen and Hunt, this volume). It was at that juncture in fact, that ecology ceased to be perceived as an area among other areas, as a specific sector to be linked to others, to rather be turned into a systemic viewpoint, a general connective tissue, a broad perspective through which the traditional dualism between nature and society could be redefined. It is no coincidence, in fact, that the very expression *climate justice* was coined in a 1999 text circulated on the eve of the Seattle uprising.

In that context, what the movement of movements wanted to emphasize was 'the ethical and political dimension of global warming', conceived of as a 'not purely environmental or climatic issue' (Corporate Watch 1999). Quite correctly, climate naysayers – or, *merchants of doubt* (Oreskes and Conway 2010) – were indicated as reactionaries unable to face an enormous and unprecedented challenge: making atmospheric stability a political stake. Perhaps less correctly – in hindsight – the UN-led climate governance was seen as a meaningful response: if not immediately effective, at least politically adequate to this challenge. In this sense, every preliminary definition of 'alterglobal' CJ cannot but be based on the recognition that those who have been least responsible for the historical volume of emissions are the ones who are most vulnerable to pay the price it entails. In this perspective, CJ was originally for the most part a geopolitical critique dealing especially with historical responsibility (for cumulative emissions) (Carbon Brief 2021) and (repayment of) climate debt. Against this background, it is possible to distinguish amongst three different strands of self-portrayed CJ:

1) Pro-corporate elites (e.g. World Resource Institute) – *progressive neoliberals*, in Nancy Fraser's (2019) terms, according to which eco-competition + the Green Climate Fund⁹ would be effective in tackling carbon inequality;

⁹ The Green Climate Fund is a fund established within the framework of the UNFCCC as an operating entity of the Financial Mechanism to assist so-called developing countries in adaptation and mitigation practices. The objective of the Green Climate Fund is to 'support projects, programmes, policies and other activities in

- 2) Large Environmentalist NGOs (e.g. Greenpeace), often part of the Climate Action Network, according to which divestment strategies + the Green Climate Fund could be better candidates;
- 3) Radical unions, global networks and LULU movements from below (e.g. Climate Justice Now!), according to which market-based solutions + money transfers *per se* could not work without a deep restructuring of exploitative social relations.

Schematically, and in the absence of a mass movement, the following can be stated: group 1 has consistently supported the COP-system; group 3 has mostly opposed the COP-system; group 2 – by far the largest civil society advocate of CJ – has oscillated between tepid endorsement and mild criticism, but has nonetheless consistently provided climate governance with political legitimacy. A significant confirmation can be found in this 2010 interview to Kumi Naidoo, Executive Director of Greenpeace; asked about the NGO strategy in the dramatic aftermath of COP 15, Naidoo explains that campaigning within the UNFCCC was still to be a key component of it:

At Greenpeace we are intensifying our efforts and we have an effort to put more pressure on the US, China, the basic countries in general as well as trying to see if the European Union which were fairly marginal in the politics played out in Copenhagen, can get their act together and add some momentum to the talks. The UNFCCC is also going through a transition because with de Boer¹⁰ leaving there is anticipation that perhaps someone from a developing country might be appointed who would bring urgency to the negotiations.¹¹

These words echo the typical group 2 comment at the end of every COP: ‘it’s not enough, but it’s a first step in the right direction’. In our interpretation, however, this course of actions progressively lost support to eventually end in Katowice at COP 24 (2018). As the climate movement’s confidence in COPs’ ability to produce substantive progress and handle the climate crisis in an efficacious and socially just manner progressively weakened, strand 2 got closer to strand 3’s positions, because a reformist approach aiming at influencing the COPs was gradually discarded in favour of a more radical one, thus facilitating a relative unification of the climate movement (see also De Moor 2018). The very core of climate governance (global warming exists *and* can only be solved by markets) was undermined by two unexpected events:

- 1) the rise of a ‘denialist front’ within the COP-system itself (USA, Russia, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia). These four countries obtained that the latest IPCC report was not to be ‘welcome’ but, rather, ‘taken note of’;
- 2) the withdrawal of legitimacy of climate negotiations from group 2 of the CJ camp. If Donald Trump was the political personification of the first process, Greta Thunberg played the same function with regard to the second. Her message, already in Katowice, was threefold:
 - a) delegitimation of the UNFCCC elites: ‘our political leaders have failed us’ so ‘I will not ask them anything. Instead, I will ask the media to start treating the crisis as a crisis’ [Katowice, Dec 3, 2018];

developing country Parties using thematic funding windows’. It is intended that the Green Climate Fund be the centrepiece of efforts to raise Climate Finance under the UNFCCC.

¹⁰ Yvo de Boer, Dutch, has been Executive Secretary of UNFCCC from 2006 to 2010. After him, the role has been filled by Costa Rican Cristina Figueres (2010-2016) and Mexican Patricia Espinosa (2016-ongoing).

¹¹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/climate-2010-an-exclusive_b_520531.

b) inversion of the relationship between economy and ecology: ‘some companies and some decision makers’ are to blame for the climate crisis. They ‘have known exactly what priceless values they are sacrificing to continue making unimaginable amounts of money’ [Davos, Jan 22, 2019];

c) call for action rather than negotiation: ‘We’ve had 30 years of pep talking and selling positive ideas and I’m sorry but it doesn’t work. Because if it would have, the emissions would have gone down by now (...). The one thing we need more than hope is action’ [Stockholm, Nov 24, 2018]

All these speeches by Thunberg heavily impacted on group 2 of CJ, as shown by the reaction of Greenpeace at the end of COP 24: ‘People expected action and that is what governments did not deliver. This is morally unacceptable and they must now carry with them the outrage of people and come to the UN Secretary General’s summit in 2019 with higher climate action targets’ (Greenpeace International Executive Director, Jennifer Morgan). More importantly, these speeches fueled a political process which eventually erupted in the first global climate strike on March 15, 2019. Instead of NGOs providing legitimacy, 2019 brought to the UNFCCC a mass movement undermining its very *raison d’être*.

Such mass movement for CJ is marked by some key features. First, it thoroughly changed the social perception of global warming: from apocalyptic scenario to driver of youth worldwide mobilization. Second, it incorporated the centrality of transfeminism not only with regard to critical repertoires, but also, more directly, within its structure of leadership: Greta Thunberg is accompanied with young women such as Vanessa Nakate, Luisa Neubauer, Angela Valenzuela. Third, within and against the institutional process of *climatization of the world* (Aykut 2020), it turned CJ from an oppositional stance to a general political framework for the convergence of different struggles.

From this perspective, it is important to highlight that the four climate strikes of 2019 progressively enlarged CJ’s focus on geopolitics so that it now includes social inequality *within* national communities as a key target of its critical endeavor. What is now explicitly posed is an unprecedented proximity between social equality and conflicts for atmospheric stabilization (linked primarily to emissions reduction). In order to properly grasp this fundamental extension of the scope of CJ it may be useful to link it to the crisis of the UNFCCC as the *centripetal force for climate-related imagination*. We contend that such crisis is an instance of what Wolfgang Sachs has described as the *crisis of development* as West-centric *Weltanschauung* of the post-WWII world:

A suspicion spreads among the global middle class that the expectations kindled by development are not going to be fulfilled. Alienated from their traditions, aware of Western living styles through their smart phones, yet excluded from the modern world, this is the fate of too many people, and not only in poor countries. Thus, cultural confusion and ecological crises fuel fear of the future (Sachs 2019, p. xv).

Elaborating on Sachs’ crucial insight, we may say that the UNFCCC’s promise of social inclusion through green growth (or, climate mitigation as achieved through carbon trading) has not materialized. To the contrary, inequality worldwide has been increasing since the 1980s. With specific regard to the US and EU, the *World Inequality Report* contains a remarkable graph:

[Insert Figure 1 \(indicated as Figure 11 in the picture\) about here](#)

However, what is even more remarkable is that such data is openly connected with GHGs emissions not at the country level – where oftentimes inequality gets obfuscated by the failure to account for imported emissions due to offshoring heavy industries – but, rather, at the per capita level, as the following figures show¹²:

[Insert Figure 2 \(indicated as Figure 15\) and Figure 3 about here](#)

This interest on carbon inequality is a direct consequence of CJ's 'new clothes' and can be appreciated in this insightful figure from an Oxfam Media briefing in September 2020:

[Insert Figure 4 about here](#)

What is key here is a new understanding of what has to change in order for the 1.5° target (set by the Paris Agreement) to be achieved: not the lifestyle of developed countries in general but, primarily, the lifestyle of the richest 10%, worldwide. This does not mean that individual contributions are to be considered unimportant; quite the opposite is true – when it comes to climate activists (Wahlström et al. 2019). Simply, contemporary CJ postulates that individual efforts can be effective only against the background of more systemic transformations.

While it is not possible to anticipate how the climate movement will fare in the face of the mounting challenges of the politics of unsustainability, what we have tried to show in this section is that a critical take on environmental politics cannot leave aside not only the 'ontological' struggles developing in the Global South and North at different scales, from the everyday to the national, but also the current historical conjuncture concerning global environmental governance and movements' positioning in and contribution to it. That is, a critical outlook should consider *praxis* as a fundamental dimension for nourishing the sociological imagination, so that observing, investigating and even partaking in social processes and practices can generate grounded theoretical reflection eventually feeding into emancipatory and transformative processes.

Structure of the book

In the sections above we have depicted our understanding of a critical approach to environmental politics – its rationale and distinctive outlook. Of course we neither expected nor pushed the contributors to endorse this account; all the more so considering the number of issues worthy of entering a handbook, and the variety of perspectives from which they could be addressed. However, browsing the pages of the book our feeling is that the authors collected may not explicitly or entirely subscribe to what we have said about immanent critique, yet at least endorse its spirit. This, therefore, can be regarded as a common denominator of otherwise varied, sometimes contrasting, theoretical orientations and substantive focuses. Likewise, we have suggested that chapters included a section devoted to introducing the topic and its genealogy, subsequently addressing its problem-

¹² It should be underlined that these figures refer to production-based rather than consumption-based emissions, thus, due to far-reaching processes of delocalization, we can expect that they underestimate the Global North's contribution to carbon emissions, as demonstrated by some studies (Peters et al. 2012; Steinberg et al. 2012; Wiedman et al. 2015).

framing and relevant ideas and contentious issues, ending with open questions and transformative potentials. Some authors felt comfortable with this structure; others interpreted their remit more freely. Contributors chose equally freely how to connect and balance conceptual elaboration, literature discussion and empirical insight. We believe all this provides the pages of the book with a healthy variety and individuality of approaches. Indeed, the field of environmental politics cannot be delimited according to well-established criteria, nor can the issues addressed be displayed according to a consensual organization. That said, the book aims to, and we think does, offer an overview of the state of the art, covering questions of major relevance for a critical take on environmental politics. Entries have been selected after much discussion and some inevitable sacrifice – otherwise the reader would be now holding or watching a much bulkier text: too much, we felt. Yet, topics that were not attributed an entry of their own are often addressed within one or more chapters. One example is new materialisms, or the ontological turn. This emergent theoretical perspective is involved in many ways in a number of chapters, which confirms its relevance for a critical approach to environmental politics, as we have stressed above. At the same time, dispensing with an assessment which would inevitably result partial and tentative, given the pervasiveness of new ontological perspectives and above all the pace of their current evolution across the global South and North, was felt to be an acceptable choice faced with space constraints. At the opposite side of the spectrum of potentially significant topics, we have sacrificed issues boasting a long-established literature to the benefit of less covered issues, or to ways of addressing them in an exploratory, even challenging way. All things considered, we believe the entries included offer a comprehensive array of questions and outlooks that move across a variety of temporal and spatial scales, institutional levels and cultural perspectives, though – for the reasons outlined above – special emphasis is given to the impact of western modernity and capitalism on socio-material organization and human-nonhuman relations, and how such impact has been and is being strengthened and challenged.

For the sake of space, and given that chapters are preceded by a summary of their contents, we will not follow the usage of synthesising here each contribution. Giving a sense of the book's structure may suffice to conclude this introduction

The book is organized in six sections. The first one is devoted to theoretical strands of major relevance in constituting the framework of a critical outlook on environmental politics:

Critical Theory, Decolonial ecologies, Feminisms, and Marxism.

The second section addresses notions the contested status of which makes them pivotal to the articulation of academic debates, political actions and societal struggles: Anthropocene, Buen Vivir, Degrowth, Limits, and Sustainability.

The third section focuses on key issues, some referring to resources, others to challenges, conflicts, institutional arrangements, knowledge and regulatory approaches, namely: Agrarian development and food security, Bioeconomies, Cities and the environment, Climate justice and global politics, the Commons, the Cultural political economy of research and innovation, Disasters and catastrophes, Energy politics and energy transition, Expertise, lay/local knowledge and the environment, Extractivism and neo-extractivism, Religion and ecology, Social metabolism, Technological fixes, and the Values of nature.

The fourth section deals with how the relationship between nature and society is regulated and governed (or allegedly so), by means of different sorts of institutionalised arrangements, with related power effects and agency implications. The chapters included are: Democracy and democratisation, Environmental violence, Environment-related human

mobility, Financialisation of nature, Fossil fuels and state-industry relations, Global environmental governance and the state, Just transition, Sustainable welfare.

The fifth section takes a perspective opposite to the former, namely a bottom-up one. It addresses manifestations of social effervescence concerning the environment, all important but differing according to focus, conception, target, organization, cultural background, and location. The chapters included are: Climate change consensus, Ecological mobilisations in the Global South, Engaging the everyday, Environmental movements, More-than-social movements.

The last section is devoted to emergent issues and perspectives. These are fundamentally concerned with whether and how human and nonhuman agential powers and societal goals can or should be reframed, also as a result of technological change. The chapters included are: Decolonising environmental politics, Digitalisation and other promissory infrastructures for environmental politics, Eco-feminism and the commons, Geopower, Post-work and ecology, and Transformative innovation.

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