Planetary boundaries, societal boundaries, and collective self-limitation: moving beyond the post-Marxist comfort zone

Ingolfur Blühdorn

Institute for Social Change and Sustainability (IGN), Vienna University of Economics and Business, Vienna, Austria

ABSTRACT

Issues of boundaries, limits, and restriction have shifted, once again, into the center of eco-political debates. An article recently published in this journal by Ulrich Brand and colleagues made the case that supposedly objective planetary boundaries, as specified by Earth-system scientists, always remain contingent on social norms. Hence, the debate on planetary boundaries needs to be supplemented, they argue, by a debate on societal boundaries. Addressing the critical social sciences, in particular, they seek to open a dialogue on collectively defined self-limitation, which they regard as a promising means for setting such boundaries. This article aims to contribute to, and help shape, this dialogue. Taking the intervention by Brand and his co-authors as a prompt, and focusing on so-called advanced modern societies in the Global North, this article flags up important parameters that condition the success or failure of any attempt at collective self-limitation. Calling to mind the dual commitment of eco-critical social science not only to transforming contemporary society but, no less importantly, to providing a nuanced diagnosis and analysis of its present condition, the article calls on critical social science to move beyond the established claims, hopes, and beliefs of post-Marxist analysis, conceptualized here as the post-Marxist comfort zone. In particular, the article draws attention to the dilemma that the logic and dynamic of emancipation, which (eco-)critical social theorists and sociologists commonly present as the centerpiece of their transformative agenda, can itself negatively impact the prospects for collective self-limitation.

Introduction

The development of affluent consumer societies has for decades been determined by the principles of growth and expansion, but more recently issues of finiteness and limitation have begun to loom large again. It has become increasingly obvious that understandings of a good and fulfilled life prevailing in large sections of contemporary consumer societies cannot be extended to all (e.g., Lessenich 2019). As climate and Earth-system scientists diagnose the transgression of planetary boundaries (Rockström et al. 2009a, 2009b) triggering potentially catastrophic environmental change, issues of boundaries and limits have moved into the very center of political discourse. Ecological tipping points are complemented by social tipping points threatening societal coherence and peace and by political tipping points unhinging the institutions and order of liberal democracy (e.g., Lenton et al. 2008; Blühdorn 2020a; Stadelmann-Steffen et al. 2021), and further increase the pressure for and the urgency of limitation and restriction. Looking from diverse perspectives, a variety of political actors ranging from the protagonists of market-liberalism to climate activists and degrowth movements to right-wing populists and protesters against COVID-19 policies have all come to recognize the significance of limits and boundaries, with each of them framing and addressing these issues in their own particular ways. The critical social sciences, too, are taking a keen interest. From their vantage point, the crucial question is how the transition from growth and expansion to finiteness and limitation might be rendered compatible with the most precious of modern values and principles, that of autonomy. But some parts of eco-critical social science remain caught up in reassuringly simplistic patterns of argument and analysis.

Writing in this journal, 29 scholars recently joined forces (Brand et al. 2020) to make the case that “critical social science is essential for going beyond” merely diagnosing planetary boundaries and their transgression toward explaining “the dynamics and lock-ins of modern societies” (Brand et al. 2020, 266) and signposting “ways forward”
(Brand et al. 2020, 275ff) toward a socio-ecological transformation of society for a "good life for all" (266). The debate on planetary boundaries, they insist, needs to be supplemented by a debate on societal boundaries which, as social scientists have always argued, ultimately, determine what kind and level of socio-environmental change is deemed socially acceptable. Aiming to reconcile the emancipatory belief in autonomy with the imperative of limitation, they make "an argument for collectively defined self-limitation" and "seek to open a dialogue" on the controversies and political struggles such an endeavor invariably entails (265–266).

Critical social science does indeed have an indispensable contribution to make to the debate on limits and limitation, not only when it comes to averting the naturalistic misunderstanding (Beck 1995, 45) that eco-political imperatives can be derived directly from the natural sciences, and to spelling out why supposedly objective and scientifically defined planetary boundaries and notions of a safe operating space for humanity (Rockström et al. 2009a, 2009b) always remain contingent on social values and thresholds of acceptability. Also, a debate about democratically negotiated collective self-limitation is indeed urgent. This is because the clash between the defense of non-generalizable achievements in terms of freedom and material wealth by some and the participatory demands articulated by those whose exclusion currently secures the former’s imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen 2018) is getting increasingly violent. Furthermore, Brand et al.’s contribution is also timely and important because recent debates on the Anthropocene, too, have placed new emphasis on social norms. The end of the established nature/society dualism renders everything radically negotiable and political, one might say. Sustainability turns into “an inherently open principle for guiding social action” and “discussing the kind of society we wish to have” (Arias-Maldonado 2013, 17). And as the boundaries between nature and society are getting blurred, emancipation and autonomy may radically change their meaning (Dobson 2022).

Yet, what Brand and colleagues are offering in terms of an explanation for the apparent lock-in of contemporary consumer societies into the logic of unsustainability (Bluhdorn 2007, 2013, 2014), and in terms of collectively determined self-limitation as a strategy for a socio-ecological transformation, remains oddly simplistic and urgently needs to be supplemented. Their patterns of analysis and argument are widely shared—as signaled, not least, by the sheer number of co-authors—in the more activist eco-sociological literature, in particular. But at the current conjuncture, they may obstruct rather than further a constructive critical social science debate on societal boundaries and collective self-limitation. Critical social science has an important contribution to make especially if it honors its dual commitment to providing a nuanced diagnosis of contemporary societies and to transforming them. To connect “the normative aspect of critique with the social-theoretical,” leading critical theorists tell us, is “the hallmark of critical theory” (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 122). Yet, if it prioritizes the transformative over the diagnostic commitment and, for the benefit of the former, confines itself to reproducing well-rehearsed—but overly simplistic—analyses, arguments, and hopes, critical social science may end up, I will argue, contributing more to stabilizing the order of unsustainability than to changing it.

The objective of this article is to reinforce the demand for collectively defined self-limitation and the call for a new debate on this challenge. I fully subscribe to the view that issues of limits and limitation cannot be left to the natural sciences alone, and must not be left to market-liberals, authoritarians, and other enemies of egalitarian democracy. But eco-critical social science has to make sure that it does not just re-open old debates on collective self-limitation which we have been having for several decades. It should seek to open genuinely new ones which take full account of the historical conjuncture at which so-called advanced modern societies presently are, and thus, ideally, increase the potential for transformative impacts. There is no guarantee, of course, that a socio-ecological transformation as envisaged by political ecologists can be achieved at all. But if it can, a nuanced diagnosis of modern societies’ present condition is, undoubtedly, an indispensable prerequisite. And in order to gain a more complex understanding of the sustainability crisis, its causes, the transformations it triggers, and the prospects for democratically legitimated collective self-limitation, critical social science, arguably, needs to move beyond the well-known narratives which it has rehearsed for so long. Inter alia, it needs to probe the established beliefs and assumptions about autonomy, emancipation, and democracy which eco-critical social scientists often leave unquestioned.

In trying to achieve this objective, I am focusing specifically on so-called advanced modern societies, which have made the largest contribution to the climate and global sustainability crisis, where, for this reason, a socio-ecological transformation is most urgently required, but which are most adamant in defending their established order of unsustainability. I am reading Brand et al.’s large group-authored contribution as an articulation of many critical
orthodoxies widely shared in the post-Marxist eco-activist literature, and take it as a prompt for sketching a much more encompassing and ambitious research agenda for the (eco-)critical social sciences. The next section recaps and critically assesses key elements of the argument presented by Brand and his co-authors. Moving beyond their contribution, section three then captures some characteristics constitutive of the historical conjuncture at which the required debate on collective self-limitation is situated, which, inescapably, condition any such debate as well as the prospects of this project’s success or failure—and which painfully challenge the reassuring beliefs and arguments furnishing what I will call the post-Marxist comfort zone. Section four focuses on the problem that the logic and dynamic of emancipation, which (eco-)critical social theorists and sociologists commonly present as the centerpiece of their transformative agenda, has itself contributed to dampening the prospects for collective self-limitation. The conclusion returns to the question of what may be gained by moving beyond the post-Marxist comfort zone.

Critical orthodoxies

Brand et al. start out from the concern that the concepts of planetary boundaries and the safe operating space for humanity (Rockström et al. 2009a, 2009b), which have gained much prominence in the recent debate, while sounding innovative and promising, will not be able to deliver what they promise, what many activists and policy makers expect from them, and what is, indeed, urgently required: clear guidance, a road map and goals, signposts, and imperatives for a socio-ecological transformation of modern consumer societies. They are picking up on the point that, as Rockström et al. (2009b, 32) themselves acknowledge, the notions of planetary boundaries and the safe operating space for humanity are only seemingly objective points of reference and guidance for eco-politics, but—as was the case with all earlier attempts to establish a scientific foundation for eco-politics—in fact always remain contingent on social norms. In the eco-sociological literature, this is a well-established—albeit notoriously unpalatable—point. Biophysical and scientifically measurable facts, conditions, and changes are never problematic in themselves, but only a problem, and only unfold societal resonance and perhaps political relevance if, and to the extent that, they are being socially perceived and communicated as violating established social norms, values, and expectations (e.g., Luhmann 1989; Hajer 1995; Eder 1996; Blühdorn 2000; Latour 2004). Put differently, eco-political imperatives cannot be specified by the natural sciences or directly read off biophysical facts, conditions, and changes. Hence, the attempt of Earth-system scientists to specify planetary boundaries and a safe operating space for humanity does not relieve polities and policy makers from the task of specifying thresholds or boundaries of the socially acceptable, of, as cited above, “the kind of society we wish to have” (Arias-Maldonado 2013; Brand et al. 2020, 275). This is, and always remains, a political task. The natural sciences and scientific knowledge about bio-physical facts, conditions, and changes may inform the process of socially negotiating and politically legitimating environmental goals and policy agendas. But, ultimately, the limits and boundaries of social acceptability (Beck 1995) are the crucial point of reference for eco-politics—and for all democratic agendas of socio-ecological transformation, in particular.

With this shift of focus and perspective from supposedly objective and scientifically measurable planetary boundaries to the centrality of social norms and values, and to the task of politically negotiating and institutionalizing norms on which policy agendas of limits and limitation might be based, Brand et al. specify the research gap and open up the discursive space which eco-critical social science needs to fill. They call to mind that, as McKibben famously put it, after the end of nature “there is nothing but us” (McKibben 1990, 58). The questions eco-critical theory and sociology now need to address are: What are the normative resources for a post-natural (McKibben 1990), post-foundational (Marchart 2007), or post-ecologist (Blühdorn 2000) eco-politics, including the project of collective self-limitation? How might a societal consensus about norms of self-limitation be generated and sustained in contemporary consumer societies? Which parameters further or, reversely, obstruct the formation and maintenance of such a consensus? Why have eco-political movements—which have dealt with issues of limits and limitation ever since their very beginnings—so far not been more successful in generating a consensus for collective self-limitation and a structural socio-ecological transformation of modern societies toward the goal of securing a good life for all?

With regard to this latter question, in particular, Brand and colleagues raise expectations by pointing out that the planetary boundaries framework leaves too “little space for more comprehensive analyses
that address societal root causes of urgent problems,” and by demanding not to “overlook broad and rich debates on societal drivers” of the ecological crisis and the crossing of planetary boundaries (Brand et al. 2020, 269). Yet, having highlighted that for a societal transformation to occur, the societal negotiation and political institutionalization of norms, limits, and boundaries will be indispensable, the authors do not engage with any of the above questions in innovative ways. In conceptualizing and explaining the crisis with which advanced modern societies are confronted, and in exploring the “societal root causes of urgent problems” (Brand et al. 2020, 269), they focus narrowly on one single parameter: “the growth imperative of capitalist economies” (268). Although they explicitly state that they are aiming “for a more nuanced understanding” of the “causes of crossing planetary boundaries” (266); although they promise to consider the “broad and rich debates on societal drivers” (269) of the ecological crisis and the sustained politics of unsustainability (Blühdorn 2007, 2011, 2013), they offer a monocausal explanation that focuses on the one factor which is probably the most-debated and best-explored. Yet, the current sustainability crisis of advanced modern societies cannot be conceptualized and explained only in terms of the logic of capitalism. Nor is there much reason, today, to assume that the collapse of capitalism would provide favorable conditions for “collectively and democratically establishing rules that ensure social freedom and the conditions for a collective good life” (Brand et al. 2020, 266).

But with regard to the ways forward, that is, the strategies and perspectives of transformation, too, Brand et al. only renew demands which emancipatory eco-movements and eco-critical theorists and sociologists have been making for several decades: that “we limit ourselves collectively and make space for others to share the resources” the planet “has to offer in a responsible way among currently living and future generations”; and in doing so, we also ought to ensure “respectful cohabitation with non-human others” (276). They do acknowledge that “formulating societal boundaries implies a controversial process—based on normative judgments, ethical concerns, and socio-political struggles” (265). But rather than exploring, in a critical social science manner, the grammar of the struggles which are factually going on and the prospects and conditions for the project of “self-limitation that makes space to all for a good life” (278) to succeed, they simply restate the well-familiar beliefs that these struggles “have the potential to offer guidelines for a just, social-ecological transformation through the development of collective autonomy” (265, 266), that autonomy “implies the liberation from the heteronomous, pervasive logic of unfettered expansion and acceleration,” and that this liberation “offers the possibility of collectively and democratically establishing rules that ensure social freedom and the conditions for a collective good life” (266).

These beliefs and demands are well-known from the political ecologists of the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Marcuse 1972; Goldsmith 1972; Die Grünen 1983; Gorz 1987; Lipietz 1995), some of whom Brand et al. actually cite; and there is nothing wrong, of course, with holding on to them. Why should one give up one’s values and ideals just because, as yet, they have not been realized? But critical social science is about more than the declaration of ideals; and in renewing these claims and demands today, the authors entirely disregard that in the interim major societal transformations have taken place which have changed academic debates. As detailed further below, prevailing notions of freedom, subjectivity, responsibility, or a good life have substantially changed (e.g., Bröckling 2015; Reckwitz 2020); technological, economic, and cultural shifts have substantially impaired the earlier confidence in participative and deliberative democracy (e.g., Shearman and Smith 2007; Brennan 2016); the post-democratic and the autocratic-authoritarian turn are being widely debated (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Blühdorn 2020b). Yet, none of this is reflected in the authors’ plea for collective self-limitation. And with these crucial contextual developments being disregarded, the progress expected from the authors’ shift of focus from the depoliticized planetary boundaries framework to the social norms on which, in practical terms, this framework always remains contingent, turns out to be little more than the return to demands and debates environmental sociologists were having a good while ago—with critical social science failing to deliver on its diagnostic-analytical commitment.

Of course, the critique of the planetary boundaries framework is valuable, and so is Brand et al.’s analysis of capitalism as an important driver of the ecological crisis and modern societies’ lock-in to the politics of unsustainability. But these explorations do not reveal innovative insights, and this also applies to Brand et al.’s comments on a prospective socio-ecological transformation: “Alternatives to the escalatory dynamics of capitalist societies” and “bottom-up mobilizations for more sustainable and socially just uses of the environment,” they note, “occur worldwide” (278), often emerging “out of social-ecological conflicts and mobilizations” (277). Many of them, they tell us, “are reassertions of ancient and traditional approaches, emerging from marginalized peoples and movements of resistance.
to the dominant system” (279). “For centuries,” they assert, “the democratic governance of the natural commons, as common wealth in the global North and South, gave us practice in self-limitation” (276), and “the idea of autonomy as self-limitation is present in different variations in many traditions, societies, and communities across the world” (277). “Individually and collectively these conceptions,” Brand and colleagues believe, “embody alternatives in worldview and practices that challenge the structures of inequality, oppression, and unsustainability” (279), and “point to a comprehensive transformation in political, economic, social cultural, and ecological spheres of life” (280). Once “progressive social movements and other political actors” have embedded “sociocultural values and norms rooted in social justice considerations…in social relations and institutions,” “the value of such boundaries” will, supposedly, become “more or less accepted throughout societies, and…inform…policy-making processes” (276).

Again, these are the claims, hopes, and beliefs which social movement activists and critical sociologists have entertained since the early 1970s, and longer. It is true, of course, that bottom-up mobilizations for more sustainable and socially just uses of the environment occur both within advanced modern societies and worldwide. But they have been emerging for many decades, have always remained marginal, and there is no reason to assume that they are more likely to trigger a structural transformation today than at any earlier point in time. Quite the contrary, from today’s perspective the well-established claims and assumptions Brand et al. present sound strangely naïve, romanticizing, and detached from the political realities of advanced modern societies. These well-familiar demands and assumptions may, in fact, be referred to as the critical orthodoxies of critical theory, critical sociology, and the critical social sciences in the Western post-Marxist tradition. Brand et al. themselves use this term to describe the prevailing eco-political approaches which claim to acknowledge the severity of the sustainability crisis but frame environmental problems and related remedial policies in ways that leave the underlying structural causes and conditions unchanged (Brand 2016; Brand et al. 2020, 269). But critical theory and sociology clearly have their own orthodoxies, and the belief in the transformative potentials of progressive social movements is definitely one of them.

Yet, from today’s perspective, there is mounting evidence, for example, that “bottom-up mobilizations” may also campaign for anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian, and anti-ecological “alternatives,” and that these mobilizations often have much more political impact than their eco-egalitarian counterparts (e.g., Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019; Lütjen 2022). Also, it is well-established, by now, that in advanced modern societies, in particular, even eco-egalitarian bottom-up emancipatory movements have often achieved much more for their privileged middle-class supporters than for a socio-ecological transformation of society. Not only have Green Parties fully embraced eco-political mainstream policies of green growth, but the dominant currents of the new social movements, Nancy Fraser and many others have argued, have themselves contributed to preparing the soil that nourished the Right (Fraser and Monticelli 2021; Inglehart and Norris 2017; Lilla 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

None of this means to deny the achievements and potentials of eco-emancipatory movements. But not touching upon any of this, Brand et al. give the impression that eco-critical social science does not have much new to say—neither in terms of conceptualizing, theorizing, or explaining the systemic crisis advanced modern societies are caught up in, nor in terms of identifying and mobilizing transformative potentials. This said, both the societal demand for the narratives they rehearse and the attachment of some parts of eco-critical social science to these narratives are substantial. In a sense, there is a parallel to the broad societal demand for and attachment to the ecological modernization narratives which promise that modern societies can modernize themselves and grow out of their systemic crisis without having to undergo structural change, economically, politically, and culturally. The two narratives, obviously, service different clienteles. Yet, they have more in common than that their respective clientele is firmly attached to them. First, in both these narratives matters are reassuringly well arranged: the cause of the current malaise is clearly identified (lack of efficiency; the capitalist growth economy), there is a distinct vision of a much better society (fully managed high-tech society; post-capitalist society), and there is a subject and strategy for the transformation toward the desired future (accelerated techno-managerial innovation; radical social movements). For their respective clientele and user community, these narratives offer order, normative orientation, and meaning. It is in this particular sense, that the critical orthodoxies of eco-critical theory and sociology may be said to constitute and furnish the post-Marxist comfort zone.

Second, both these narratives have been around for several decades, and although significant eco-social reforms have been achieved within the established structures, neither of them has, as yet, induced the kind of structural change that many
eco-movements and scientists are saying is necessary to avert socio-ecological catastrophes.

And finally, just like its eco-modernist counterpart, the critical orthodoxy of eco-critical theory and sociology, too, may ultimately contribute to stabilizing rather than challenging the established order of unsustainability. For, at the current conjuncture, the narrative of capitalism’s inherent contradictions and radical social movements pioneering collective self-limitation for the good life for all—while being reassuringly critical, anti-capitalist, and alternative—does not represent any challenge or threat to the established order of unsustainability. In a context where capitalism, despite all signals of socio-ecological crisis, shows no signs of imminent collapse; in a context, where major social movements such as Fridays for Future largely rely on science, technological innovation, and the state as if they were neutral agents (Brand et al. 2020); and in a context where even rapid technological development, market liberalism, and commodification do not seem to trigger experiences of alienation, colonization, and domination strong enough to induce system-challenging counter-mobilization in the ecologist sense, the cultivation of these critical orthodoxies may, more than anything, provide reassurance to parts of the critical intelligentsia and the remains of the egalitarian left. In terms of the diagnostic and transformative commitments of critical social science, however, these well-rehearsed narratives have little to offer and, in particular, they do not open any constructive debate on today’s prospects for and obstacles to collective self-limitation. Yet, in view of the brutalization of social conflicts (Honneth 2012; Latour 2017) and the autocratic-authoritarianism turn (Lühmann and Lindberg 2019; Blühdorn 2022), the project of collective self-limitation is too important as to be left to the critical orthodoxies. Critical social science needs to move beyond its post-Marxist comfort zone.

### The historical conjuncture

In order to understand the conditions of collective self-limitation and for a socio-ecological transformation of advanced modern societies to succeed, we need to look out for, conceptualize, and explore those parameters which are distinctive of and constitutive for the historical conjuncture at which these societies aim to achieve this transformation and which invariably condition any societal debate on collective self-limitation. This exercise of conjunctural analysis will necessarily take critical social science beyond its critical orthodoxies and the post-Marxist comfort zone. In fact, in as much as it entails revisiting fundamental assumptions underpinning critical sociology, it predictably takes critical social science into rather uncomfortable terrains. Yet, as leading critical and eco-political theorists remind us, the commitment highlighted above to connect “the normative aspect of critique with the social-theoretical” (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 122) also entails historically situating the dual critique and exploring “the standpoint of situated agents who are potential participants in social struggle aimed at transforming the system” (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 123). Providing an account of “what spurs” these agents “to act politically,” Fraser notes, is an “essential ingredient” of critical theory and sociology, and indispensable for “the task of clarifying the grammar of social struggle and the prospects for social transformation” (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 123). Conjunctural analysis, Eckersley (2021) points out, is crucial “to determine where opportunities may lie,” to grasp the “potential for a systematic reconfiguration,” and “to realise” critical political ecology’s “practical emancipatory intent” (Eckersley 2021, 17, 10, 11).

Some of these new and distinctive parameters which at the current conjuncture, invariably, condition any meaningful critical social science debate on collective self-limitation as well as the prospects of this project to succeed include:

- The condition where the legitimation crisis of capitalism that Habermas (1975) once diagnosed seems to be largely resolved, and capitalism, essentially, seems to have emancipated itself from the need for any political—most notably democratic—legitimation (Streeck 2014, 2016). In this condition of capitalist realism (Fisher 2009), politics is no longer guided by the prospect of the improvement, or even a good life for all, but, to a significant extent, driven by the desire to defend the standards achieved and by dystopic fears of catastrophe. The project of reflexive modernization and the cosmopolitan society (Beck 1997, 2007), which had been supposed to fulfill the, as yet, unfulfilled promises of modernity, seems essentially exhausted.

- Advanced modern societies are caught up in a seemingly paradoxical tension between, on one hand, the unprecedented level of knowledge about anthropogenic changes in the biophysical environment and their social and ecological consequences and, on the other hand, the comprehensive political inability and unwillingness, despite ubiquitous declarations to the contrary, to implement and sustain commensurate policies of restriction and limitation. Inter alia, this tension unhinges the established eco-political beliefs that for contemporary consumer societies,
business as usual is no longer an option, and that severe ecological catastrophes will, eventually, catapult these societies into action and force them to implement the necessary changes (Blühdorn 2011, 2020a, 2022).

- Social movements such as Occupy Wall Street and its European counterparts, the post-growth and degrowth movements, and, most recently, the new international climate-protection movements had all been invested with major transformative hope, but none has been able to suspend the logic governing modern societies. Instead, even the Fridays for Future movement seems to have been largely neutralized, politically, translated into a driver for the decarbonization and digitalization industries, and thus absorbed into the capitalist growth economy. Meanwhile, as noted above, the social movements of the 1970s and 1980s are, retrospectively, accused of having pursued, more than anything, narrowly defined interests of a privileged middle class, and having entered an “unholy alliance” (Fraser and Monticelli 2021, 14) with neoliberalism paving the way for today’s hegemony of “progressive neoliberalism” (Fraser 2017a, 2017b).

- Processes of hyper-individualization, singularization, and cultural pluralization, on the one hand, as described by Bauman (2001), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), Reckwitz (2020) and many others and, on the other hand, the relative independence of modern societies’ function systems (economy, politics, science, health, justice, media, and so forth) through which societal challenges are practically addressed (Luhmann 1989, 1995) have an unexpected cumulative effect: At the level of societal norms and values, which underpin social problem-perceptions and condition societal debates on potential restrictions and boundaries, these processes of differentiation obstruct the formation of political consensus and collective subjectivities. At the level of the practical processing of societal challenges within the diverse function systems, this differentiation substantially impairs the capacity for swift, coordinated, pro-active, and sustained policy action. Further aggravating the problem, there is a structural disjuncture between the two levels. Against this backdrop, moral appeals for urgent, collective action (e.g., self-limitation) tend to remain, for structural reasons, largely ineffective.

- There is a striking proliferation of democratic ambivalence and the erosion of the belief that the democratization of liberal representative democracy is a promising strategy for resolving modern societies’ multiple crises (e.g., Shearman and Smith 2007; Blühdorn 2020a, 2020b). While at the turn to the new millennium there was still considerable hope that the diagnosis and critique of post-democracy (Crouch 2004) might re-energize the democratic spirit and project, this optimism has meanwhile—not least in the wake of Trumpism and the politics of alternative facts—become counterbalanced by concerns that democracy and democratization might, in fact, be part of the problem, and that authoritarian systems might, after all, be better positioned than their liberal counterparts to cope with the crises which are, increasingly, part of contemporary normality (Wainwright and Mann 2013; Reybrouck 2016; Brennan 2016). In any case, neither democratic movements nor experiments in participatory and deliberative democracy have been able to halt the global recession of democracy (Mair 2013; Diamond 2015, 2021, Streeck 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) and the autocratic-authoritarian turn (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Blühdorn 2022).

- Prevailing understandings of subjectivity, autonomy, self-realization, and a good life are more consumption-based and transgressive than ever (Bauman 2007; Brückling 2015; Reckwitz 2020; Swyngedouw 2022). More evidently, they rely on the principles of social inequality, injustice, and exclusion (Blühdorn 2007, 2011, 2017; Brand and Wissen 2018; Lessenich 2019). Despite their obvious incompatibility with declared commitments to equality, justice, and human rights, these prevailing notions of autonomy and subjectivity seem to be, for significant societal majorities, essentially non-negotiable and sustained, inter alia, by the progressive loosening of commitments to established social-ecological imperatives and responsibilities (Blühdorn 2022).

- The central norms of egalitarian, ecological, democratic, and cosmopolitan movements have been appropriated and reinterpreted by movements pursuing opposite political agendas. Concepts such as emancipation, autonomy, or self-determination, as well as agendas of elite critique, independent critical thinking, or grassroots empowerment (Beck 1997; Norris 2002; Dalton 2008) have recently been claimed by social movements and other political actors—neoliberals, right-wing populists, those protesting against COVID restrictions, conspiracy theorists—whose political agendas are very different from those promoted by the previous owners of the emancipatory project (Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2019; Lütjen 2022). While the latter are losing political impact, the new proprietors are most effective in setting political agendas and reshaping public political discourse.
• Advanced modern societies are transitioning from what has been labeled post-industrial, second, or reflexive modernity (Beck) toward a third, digital modernity where the Enlightenment norm of autonomy is no longer exclusively, or even primarily, ascribed to human subjects (individual or collective), nor to societal function systems (Luhmann 1995), but progressively and willfully transferred to algorithms and artificial intelligence. Against this backdrop, the traditional alienation hypothesis and colonization hypothesis which figured prominently in (eco-)critical theory and sociology need to be supplemented by the hypothesis of the voluntary severance of earlier notions of autonomy (Blühdorn 2020a, 2020b, 2022).

• There is a new global competition between liberal-democratic and autocratic-authoritarian systems. At the current conjuncture advanced modern Western societies are struggling against the force of Hegelian dialectic that is rearranging the established global configuration of masters, that is, supposedly advanced modern societies, and slaves, that is, the countries from which they source their raw materials and cheap consumer products. In this struggle for global supremacy, the competitors are no longer capitalism and socialism but democratic-liberal and autocratic-authoritarian capitalism; and the attempt to defend the liberal-democratic variety powerfully reinforces the well-established growth imperative—and its socio-ecological implications.

Further points could be added to this list. Also, each of those mentioned needs to be explored in much more detail. But the objective here is merely to flag up some of the key parameters which are distinctive of the historical conjuncture at which any new debate on collectively defined self-limitation is situated. Listing these parameters does not imply any normative endorsement of the developments described, nor any suggestion that they cannot or should not be politically challenged. But these parameters, invariably, condition any such debate as well as the prospects of collective self-limitation to succeed. Therefore, any analysis aiming “to provide a more nuanced understanding of the social nature of thresholds” (Brand et al. 2020, 265) and any politically meaningful debate on democratically negotiated collective self-limitation needs to take these parameters into account—but in Brand et al.’s article and much of the activist eco-critical literature they remain strikingly absent. There is nothing wrong, of course, with the normative demand for collective self-limitation. Quite the contrary. But from a social-theoretical perspective, critical social science needs to take into account that, individually and collectively, these parameters effectively block this project and a socio-ecological transformation of advanced modern societies. They leave space for reformist policies, of course, which work within and reproduce the established structures and logic of these societies. But in this constellation, even modest and incremental reforms easily trigger major counter-reactions by social groups (or function systems) that feel negatively affected—or that regard the respective policies as a welcome opportunity to mobilize protest and further their own political agenda.

Against this backdrop, the confidence and reassurance that “alternatives to the escalatory dynamics of capitalist societies” and “bottom-up mobilizations for more sustainable and socially just uses of the environment occur worldwide” (Brand et al. 2020, 278) and “point to a comprehensive transformation in political, economic, social cultural, and ecological spheres of life” (280) appear as wishful thinking entirely—perhaps even dangerously—out of sync with contemporary theory and analysis of advanced modern societies. Also, even a cursory look at these parameters reveals that, and demonstrates why, at today’s historical conjuncture, critical social science needs to move beyond conceptualizing the challenge and crisis of these societies primarily as a crisis of capitalism. Of course, analysis in terms of the social structures, dynamics, and inherent contradictions of capitalism retains its relevance. But from this perspective, key dimensions of the systemic crisis that advanced modern societies are having to confront remain invisible. Indeed, this perspective has the effect of sunglasses which filter particularly dangerous parts of the light and offer a protected, more palatable, but untruthful view of this crisis. For, it systematically eclipses that, for the time being at least, neither the collapse of capitalism nor the emergence of a post-capitalist society that will overcome the multiple problems of the established order of unsustainability seem particularly likely. Much more probable than the emergence of a post-capitalist order facilitating a good life for all is that capitalism, having survived the legitimation crisis that Habermas once diagnosed, will survive the current sustainability crisis, too, with the norms, values, and ideals on the basis of which present conditions could be categorized as a crisis and as unsustainable—democracy, ecology, human rights, autonomy, social justice, inclusion—being suspended, suppressed, or fully reframed to comply with the prevailing order. Put differently, what is proving unsustainable at today’s historical conjuncture may well be these norms rather than
capitalism—and there is plenty of empirical evidence to illustrate this observation.

Thus, the crisis and transformation that advanced modern societies are confronted with is not just about the assumed unsustainability of capitalism but just as much about the unsustainability of the norms and values underpinning its critique and the project of a socio-ecological transformation. And this crisis and transformation is by no means caused and driven only by the logic and dynamic of capitalism but, as signaled above and further explicated below, also by the logic and dynamic of what critical sociology sees as capitalism’s counterpart: the emancipatory project. This, too, that is, the suspicion that the logic and dynamic of emancipation may itself be co-responsible for both the notorious problems with the socio-ecological transformation and the striking resilience of the order of unsustainability is a crucial parameter which any serious critical social science has persistently lost out against the logic and dynamic of emancipation may itself be co-responsible for both the notorious problems with the socio-ecological transformation and the striking resilience of the order of unsustainability is a crucial parameter which any serious critical social science and formulating ecological imperatives cannot be delegated to science, the exploration of this parameter is a very significant part of the contribution critical social science can and ought to make to the discussion on collective self-limitation.

The dilemma of eco-emancipatory politics

For this purpose, it is useful to put the attempt to refocus on self-limitation into context, for, the problem of the normative foundations of eco-politics is not new, of course. Environmental movements have always been critical of the modernist agenda of mastering, controlling, instrumentalizing, and exploiting nature. They have always been committed to reverence to nature, simplicity, sufficiency, and limitation. Yet, they never managed to underpin their ecological ideals, visions, and demands with a normative foundation strong enough to support the kind of economic, political, and cultural transformations they believed were required to avert social and ecological catastrophes. Ever since their emergence, eco-political movements have struggled with the problem that they could offer only esthetic, religious, moral, and ethical justifications for their agendas—all of them remaining notoriously weak and insufficient to generate the legitimation and authority required to trigger and sustain comprehensive change—beyond the personal level, in particular. Attempts to derive categorical eco-imperatives from reason and rationality, that is, to base them on the unforced force of the better argument, in the Habermasian sense, were not successful either, nor were efforts to determine them by means of participatory and deliberative democracy (beyond the level of small-scale experiments). All imperatives remained too soft, subjective, arbitrary, and political to support any sustained structural socio-ecological transformation of modern societies. While reformist and techno-managerial policies designed to leave the structural framework untouched have secured many improvements, the ambition to reconfigure this framework itself has persistently lost out against other societal interests and priorities.

From the 1980s, in particular, the newly emerging environmental and sustainability sciences sought to minimize and ideally eliminate the normative core of eco-politics and provide it with an objective, scientific foundation. This effort of depoliticization by means of delegation to science continues to the present. In diversified and pluralist societies, public policy making is supposed to be evidence-based rather than value-based, and guided by objective necessities to which there is—supposedly or ideally—no alternative. Accordingly, the definition of ecological problems and remedial strategies have to be externalized, objectified, and detached from subjective values. It is against this particular background that the notions of planetary boundaries and the safe operating space for humanity developed their irresistible attraction and appeal. Arguably, these concepts were taken up so enthusiastically—like earlier attempts to scientifically specify limits and boundaries had been before them—because they were hoped to finally resolve the perennial problem of the normative foundation of eco-politics—at a point in time when the abyss between, on one hand, the severity and urgency of the climate, ecological, and sustainability crisis and, on the other hand, the inability of eco-political actors to generate the transformative momentum required to trigger and sustain a structural transformation had become wider and more unbearable than ever.

But, as Brand et al. remind us, this strategy does not work. It is based on a naturalistic misunderstanding (Beck 1995). It can conceal the irrevocably political character of all environmental policy, at best, partially and temporarily. And as political conflicts of interests bring to the fore again that, ultimately, social values, preferences, and boundaries of acceptability are the relevant point of reference, another problem of eco-politics becomes virulent, which is a problem specific to emancipatory eco-movements and politics, in particular: This is the dual commitment of emancipatory eco-politics to, on one hand, limitation and restriction and, on the other hand, emancipation and the transgression of established boundaries. Although their visions of a
socially and ecologically liberated and pacified society have always assumed that limits and restraint are indispensable, emancipatory social movements and critical sociologists have never managed to supplement their logic of liberation with an equally powerful logic of limitation (Blühdorn 2022). In the name of autonomy and self-determination, emancipatory eco-movements themselves actively contested all restrictive norms which seemed unjustified and externally imposed. They challenged and deconstructed all existing norms and normative institutions—including science. But they consistently failed in trying to agree upon, mainstream, and sustain their own criteria for limitation and boundaries of acceptability. Put differently, getting caught up in the tension between its two commitments emancipatory eco-politics further aggravated the weakness of eco-politics in general. Emancipatory eco-movements and politics themselves consistently enlarged the normative vacuum which environmentalists desperately desired to fill, and they had nothing to put into the gap but abstract ideals such as democracy, autonomy, emancipation, sustainability, or the good life for all. Yet, all these are essentially contested concepts (Gallie 1956), that is, their meaning is not fixed but continuously being renegotiated, always reflecting the societal conditions prevailing in a particular polity at a particular point in time. Thus, the logic of emancipation and liberation itself steadily reinforced the notorious imbalance in eco-politics between the proclaimed commitment to setting limits and the actual ability to establish and sustain boundaries of acceptability.

In any serious debate on collective self-limitation this dilemma of eco-politics—the problem that emancipatory eco-movements are themselves driven by a logic of pushing and transgressing boundaries—ought to figure prominently. Yet, in Brand et al. it does not figure at all. This omission is significant, for, as signaled above, the progressive, privileged, successful, politically influential, and standard-setting sections of advanced modern societies, in particular, have steadily pushed prevailing understandings of freedom, subjectivity, self-realization, and a good life in a manner that renders their generalization ever less likely and physically possible. In doing so they have facilitated the proliferation of the imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen 2018) and living well at others’ expense (Lessenich 2019). This value and culture shift has often been explained, quite rightly, as being driven by the hegemonic power of the capitalist system over social imaginaries (e.g., Boltanski and Chiapello 2017). Yet, it is evident that it is also driven by the logic of emancipation itself, inescapably leading into a condition where the supposedly universal norms and values which advanced modern societies—and eco-critical theorists and sociologists—have always committed to are, ever more openly, being suspended—in the name of their defense and sustainability for the privileged (Blühdorn 2020a, 2022). Put differently, the imperial mode of living and the good life at the expense of others are, in a sense, emancipatory achievements and are adamantly defended as such. To a significant extent, this explains the striking resilience of unsustainability—and it has major implications for the project of collective self-limitation.

In this context, two particularly significant aspects are, first, that the norms, assumptions, and institutions which had once been constitutive of the (eco-)emancipatory project—imperatives of reason, ecological necessities, universal human rights, public reason, ecological rationality, the notion of civic maturity, and so forth—have themselves become the target of emancipatory critiques—by feminist, post-colonial, ecological, and other movements (Davis 1982; Nandy 1983; Chakrabarty 2000; Fraser 2013; Dobson 2022; Pellizzoni 2022; Arias-Maldonado 2022)—a process which I have conceptualized elsewhere as second order emancipation (Blühdorn 2013, 2020a, 2020b). Second, seeking to avoid that the subject they aim to liberate is immediately subjected again to new rules, restrictions, and disciplinary power, emancipatory movements and critical theorists have become increasingly skeptical of positive visions of the liberated condition favoring, instead, negativistic understandings of emancipation which prioritize the struggle against the obstacles to autonomy over the attempt to set and sustain limits (e.g., Foucault 1984, 2008; Laclau 1996; Allen 2015). Thus, in turning the critical project against itself, emancipatory movements are also chipping away at the normative foundations of any eco-emancipatory project of collective self-limitation—and further reinforce the pre-existing imbalance between its rule-transgressing impetus and rule-setting capacities. By the same token, they also facilitate the appropriation of the norms on which their project of collective self-limitation crucially depends—critical thinking, autonomy, democracy, and so forth—by political actors radically opposed to their own vision of a socio-ecological transformation (Lütjjen 2022).

Considering this dilemma of eco-politics—the analysis of which must not be misread as a normative critique of emancipatory eco-movements and politics—it is obvious why it is insufficient to conceptualize the sustainability crisis which advanced modern societies are confronted with primarily as a
crisis of capitalism. At least as much it is a crisis of the normative foundations of eco-politics and of the socio-ecological transformation envisaged by eco-movements and eco-critical sociologists. Advanced modern societies are confronted with, on one hand, the widening discrepancy between the severity of the widely perceived violation of established norms and boundaries of the acceptable and, on the other hand, the crumbling of the normative foundations, political will and political ability required to remedy this problem, that is, to legitimate, to politically organize, and to sustain this kind of transformation. And this discrepancy is widening, not least, because of the logic and dynamic of emancipation. The dilemma of eco-politics and eco-critical sociology is not just that eco-movements have never managed to reconcile their commitment to limitation with their commitment to liberation, but that the logic of emancipation—as an unintended and not anticipated side-effect—actually culminates in the opposite of what they had aimed to achieve: The appropriation and reinterpretation of the norms which were supposed to underpin and signpost the socio-ecological transformation by political actors and alliances—by no means comprising only right-wing populists—aiming in the opposite direction. Elsewhere, I have conceptualized this challenge as the dialectic of emancipation (Blühdorn 2020a, 2020b, 2022).

This dialectic—which is reinforced by, but cannot be reduced to, the logic of capitalism—has taken advanced modern societies into a condition where the politics of unsustainability is more firmly established than ever before—and there is no realistic prospect of supposedly radical alternative movements unhinging this dialectic. Of course, the structural causes of sustained unsustainability are also located in the logic of capitalism, but critical social science needs to confront the inconvenient truth that the logic of emancipation is a significant explanatory parameter, too. In advanced modern societies, it underpins the adamant defence of the imperial mode of living and helps to secure the democratic legitimation of sustained unsustainability. Therefore, simply reiterating the old narratives of democratization and emancipatory movements is no longer sufficient. It is about time that eco-critical theory and sociology actively engage with the appropriation of democracy, liberation, emancipation, and so forth by social actors which are radically opposed to a socio-ecological transformation toward a good life for all within planetary boundaries. A critical social science, however, that confines itself to reproducing its critical orthodoxies and does not venture beyond its post-Marxist comfort zone fails to honor its dual commitment and does not deliver on its purported contribution to a new debate on collective self-limitation.

**Conclusion**

The objective of this article has been to contribute to and help shape a social science debate on collective self-limitation. In view of the high salience of issues of boundaries and limitation; in view of all failed attempts to delegate these issues to the sciences, and of the increasingly explosive conflicts between those adamantly defending what they regard as their freedom, their values, and their way of life, and those demanding participation in all this, this debate is badly overdue. As so-called advanced modern societies are rapidly advancing toward an alarmingly uncivilized, brutalized, and authoritarian condition, critical social science has a substantial contribution to make to the debate on collective self-limitation. If it fails to rise to this challenge, it runs the risk of leaving the issue of limitation and boundaries to other actors—market liberals, right-wing populists, eco-modernists and others—who fully recognize its urgency and are ready to address it in ways which are distinctly exclusive, anti-egalitarian, and non-democratic. Yet, if critical social science engages with these issues only on the basis of its critical orthodoxies and from the perspective of its post-Marxist comfort zone, it will fail to deliver on what may reasonably be expected of it and give the impression that it has become exhausted. Taking Brand et al.’s recent contribution as a prompt and then moving well beyond it, this article, therefore, has drawn attention to a number of features constitutive of the historical conjuncture at which any new debate on collective self-limitation is situated and which, accordingly, must figure prominently in any such debate. In particular, the notorious weakness and dilemma of eco-emancipatory politics needs to take centerstage.

By way of conclusion one might ask: What is to be achieved by moving beyond the critical orthodoxies and the post-Marxist comfort zone? Is not what I have presented here a purely dystopian critique that makes no constructive suggestions regarding the way forward? Indeed, the analysis sketched here suggests that for the project of collective self-limitation the prospects are not very favorable. Worse than that, the perspective for advanced modern societies, in general, and for the Enlightenment values that underpin critical theory and sociology, too, seems rather bleak. Perhaps, it is, therefore, no surprise that critical social science prefers to cultivate its well-known and much more hopeful
narratives. But critical social theory and sociology have a dual commitment! And even if eco-critical sociology cannot itself resolve the normative problems and the dilemma of eco-politics, it can at least provide an as nuanced as possible analysis of them. By critically challenging and moving beyond established critical orthodoxies and the Post-Marxist comfort zone, it can facilitate a more complex conceptualization of the systemic sustainability crisis advanced modern societies are confronted with, and it can open a political space which—rather than immediately populating it with actors and narratives that, today, have lost much of their earlier plausibility—at least for the time being, it may leave empty.

Understandably, some parts of eco-critical theory and sociology succumb to the temptation to prioritize their transformative commitment over their diagnostic and analytical commitment. They conceptualize the condition and crisis of advanced modern societies in a way that allows them to offer a solution. However, this strategy has not been to the benefit of the envisaged transformation—which remains elusive. Therefore, it is time, if only temporarily, to reverse the priorities. Such a reversal and the self-critical reflection on the assumptions and beliefs which have underpinned eco-critical sociology so far, does not entail a normative argument against emancipation, nor against democratically organized collective self-limitation; nor does it mean to embrace anti-emancipatory and anti-democratic agendas. What it means is a critical social science attempt not to exclude from the analysis of modern societies’ multi-dimensional sustainability crisis what, we fear, might get in the way of our normative beliefs and transformative commitments. For the moment, the prospects for collective self-limitation may seem bleak. But a more complex understanding of the condition to be treated and the withdrawal of reassuring but clearly insufficient remedies may open up the space for—and incentivize—the development of more promising prescriptions.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Andrew Dobson, Fred Luks, Hauke Dannemann and three anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on earlier drafts of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Ingolfur Blühdorn http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1774-5984

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