

Challenging change: understanding the role of strategic selectivities in transformative dynamics

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Abstract

The challenge of realizing a social ecological transformation to mitigate the effects of the climate crisis has been a prevailing topic in public debates over the last few years. What has long been negotiated as a rather technical and scientific issue, reached the political agendas with the flare-up of protest by groups such as ‘Fridays for Future’, ‘Extinction Rebellion’ or the campaign ‘Ende Gelände’ in Germany. Even the dominant topic of the Corona pandemic in recent months has not changed the omnipresence of the climate crisis in political debates. Nevertheless, political and structural change seems to be challenging. In this article, we investigate the mechanisms by which an unsustainable mode of living upholds its resilience against transformative attempts. We will illustrate our conceptual models with examples from the field of energy and climate policies in Germany.

Keywords: social movements, social ecological transformation, strategies, selectivities, state theory, climate crisis, transformative dynamics

1) Introduction

The world has warmed more than one degree Celsius since the Industrial Revolution. [...] The climate scientist James Hansen has called two-degree warming ‘a prescription for long-term disaster.’ [...] Is it a comfort or a curse, the knowledge that we could have avoided all this? [...] Why didn’t we act?

(Rich 2018).

Despite shifting public discourses and a high sensibility among citizens for environmental concerns, we witness the failure of transformative strategies to bring about serious social ecological change. How is it possible that peoples’ knowledge about global crisis phenomena, such as global warming or the loss of biodiversity, and their environmental awareness increase (Blühdorn, 2017, 56), while their use of resources and the ecological and social footprint of their lifestyles are only temporarily put on hold by dramatic ruptures such as the recent pandemic-induced lockdowns (Global Footprint Network 2021)? How is it possible that there is an abundance of policy statements, popular and academic books, conferences, events and discussions about the need of a great

transformation towards sustainability (cf. Dörre et al.2019; Steffen et al. 2018; WWF 2016; IPCC 2013), whereas we can simultaneously observe politicians not taking the necessary steps to prevent the planetary crises that has been forecasted for such a long time (Krams 2018), not to speak of its social consequences in terms of global inequality (Bourguignon 2013, 14; 17; Moran 2015, 869)? Why do we need court rulings like those in the Netherlands or, most recently, Germany to get governments to comply with international climate commitments (Oroschakoff 2021)?

The puzzle we are investigating here has been pointedly called the ‘resilience of unsustainability’ (Hausknost, Deflorian and Blühdorn 2018). A telling example in this regard is Germany’s faltering energy transition, in which – despite broad popular support and international commitments – no adequate measures have been taken so far to put Germany on the path to climate neutrality by 2045.

In this article, we will make a *conceptual* contribution to this puzzle by analyzing different movement strategies for change and their interaction with so-called strategic selectivities, a concept borrowed from Cultural Political Economy (CPE). We are convinced that it is crucial to conceptualize and understand what is happening on a more detailed level in order to make sense of transformative processes or their absence. Therefore, we aim to answer the following research question: **What are the mechanisms by which an unsustainable mode of living upholds its resilience against transformative attempts through counter-hegemonic movement strategies?** Answering this question also permits to draw conclusions about the strategic possibilities in dealing with those mechanisms and why some strategies are more successful on specific dimensions than others.

I Research on social ecological transformation

Developments around the international climate movement – especially those before the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 – have revealed the limitations of prominent social movement theories in explaining the success or failure of fundamental transformation efforts beyond capitalism. The movement has succeeded in mobilizing enormous resources in a very short time - financially, organizationally and in terms of personnel. It has made offers of interpretation that have found their way into the population, the media, and numerous political statements. In many contexts, there were also supportive political opportunities - be it through events of climate catastrophes or party political shifts. Nevertheless, it must be noted that for the time being, other than the approaches of resource mobilization, political opportunity structures or framing theories would suggest, the movement has failed on a material level. So far, there has been little acceleration in the phase-out of fossil fuels - the EU, for example, has invested billions more in fossil infrastructure (Ambrose 2020). The fixation of the economy on growth, which underlies the climate crisis, has never been seriously questioned – this also applies to the EU's central sustainability strategy, the European Green Deal (European Commission 2019).

At the same time, the inequalities associated with the climate crisis have become even more pronounced (Banos Ruiz 2019) – a development that has dramatically continued during the corona pandemic (Oxfam 2021). In that context, it also became apparent that the root cause of the global climate crisis - the (almost) unlimited expansion of the appropriation of nature for the production of surplus value - can also result in other global crises: the expansive, habitat-destroying appropriation of nature has also paved the way for zoonosis, the jumping of species boundaries by viruses, and thus potentially unleashed the corona pandemic (Wallace and Davis 2016; Brad, Brand and Krams 2020).

All of this suggests that in order to analyze the preconditions and paths of a fundamental systemic transformation, it is central to consider not only the strategies of the actors but also the context of power and domination. However, prevailing approaches of social movement research often do not take sufficient account of this: the structure of the dominant hegemonic discursive and material order, the power relations underlying it and the contested limits set by this order remain obscure (cf. McAdam and Tarrow 2019: 33). This is expressed, for example, by the lack of a state theoretical underpinning of the analysis. Instead, the state is understood as a neutral battlefield and a rational-intentional conceptualization of actors is used. Important aspects of the interaction between transformation strategies of social movements and structural contextual factors are thus not taken into account (Leinius, Vey and Hagemann 2017: 6).

In this article, we will therefore analyze movement strategies from a Cultural Political Economy (CPE) perspective. In doing so, the context of movement actions is operationalized through the concept of strategic selectivities, thus also taking the interdependencies between strategies and discursive and structural conditions into account. The theoretical toolbox of CPE offers the possibility to bridge theory strands that are more interested in the obstacles of transformation (e.g. Blühdorn 2020, Hausknost 2020, Brand and Wissen 2021; 2018) with those that focus on transformative agency (e.g. Wright 2010; 2019). Let us briefly introduce those strands before we set out our own approach.

The first strand of theory comprises of research that attempts to work out why socio-ecological transformation proves so difficult despite the promising starting conditions of the climate movement. In this line of research, social scientists have been dealing with the ‘paradox’ of the ‘resilience of unsustainability’ for quite some time and have tried to make it more comprehensible by giving different explanations (i.a. Brand and Wissen 2021; Hamilton 2015; Norgaard, 2011). Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen’s (2021; 2018) concept of the ‘imperial mode of living’ provides a comprehensive social economic diagnose of a specific mode of living and production which they identify as ‘imperial’ and which they take as an explanation for the paradox set out in the introduction. The imperial mode of living describes how ‘the everyday life in the capitalist centers is essentially made possible by shaping social relations and society-mature relations *elsewhere*’, which implies the

externalization of its negative consequences (Brand and Wissen 2021: 39; emphasis in original). This mode of living is characterized by specific norms of production, consumption and distribution which are deeply enshrined in political, economic and cultural structures and everyday practices (ibid., 41). Drawing on Gramsci's ideas of hegemony and Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the authors consider this anchoring within common sense and the human body crucial for the reproduction and stabilization of capitalist societies (ibid., 41). The conceptualization of an imperial mode of living allows to articulate societal structures with peoples' everyday life, habits and routines as well as various strategies backing up the prevailing order (ibid., 42; 44). While Brand and Wissen convincingly explain the resilience of capitalism and its forms of unsustainability from an over-arching perspective, there is less attention paid to transformative strategies and their interaction with the different dimension of the imperial mode of living beyond a rough sketch of a solidary way of life and its preconditions.

A second example of a strong analysis of the resilience of unsustainability is Daniel Hausknost's diagnosis of the 'glass ceiling of transformation' (Hausknost 2020). He differentiates two spheres of sustainability: lifeworld and system sustainability. While lifeworld sustainability refers to 'a subjectively desirable and comfortable state of the lifeworld' (ibid., 24), system sustainability is defined as 'the objective biophysical planetary conditions under which a given socio-economic regime *can* be sustained in the long run' (ibid., 25; emphasis in original). Hausknost argues that people are primarily concerned with their lifeworld sustainability and become only interested in system sustainability if the latter negatively impinges on the former. Conversely, if transformative action in favor of system sustainability has negative consequences on lifeworld sustainability, the state is threatened to lose its legitimacy and hence an invisible glass ceiling for transformative actions has been reached. (ibid., 26). However, if the state only takes care of environmental issues, which do immediately impact on peoples' lifeworld, it will not solve the systemic crisis. The analysis primarily focuses on structural imperatives that states need to address if they want to secure their survival. It does not shed much light on the very mechanisms by which lifeworld sustainability receives a specific meaning that demands the resilience of unsustainability rather than an abandonment of ecological destructive economic growth. In that sense, Hausknost does not explain, why people want to sustain unsustainable consumer practices nor does he engage with the contestedness of social relations¹.

¹ Ingolfur Blühdorn has recently expanded on Hausknost's glass ceiling analysis (Blühdorn 2020). He argues that one has to scrutinize social norms and values more thoroughly in order to understand why transformative attempts cannot be successful. According to him, it is the ever increasing emancipation from any boundaries that undermines the normative foundations of democracies and, with it, its companionship with ecologism. While Blühdorn is turning to the sphere of norms, his argument remains on a rather abstract level that does not take societal struggles and their (non-)effects into account.

The second strand of theory focuses more strongly on the possibilities of transformative action. Erik Olin Wright's work on transformative strategies (Wright 2010, 2019) develops a typology of transformative pathways. In his book *Envisioning Real Utopias*, he distinguishes three logics of transforming capitalism towards more emancipatory alternatives: confronting the state, building alternatives outside the state's sphere of influence and using the state². Those logics are connected to the following three strategies, which we will later present in greater detail: 'ruptural', 'interstitial' and 'symbiotic' (ibid., 304; see next section). Wright's main interest is to analyze the potentials and limits of each strategy as well as their possible interplay. Wright, too, offers a quite comprehensive and thus rather abstract conceptualization, even if he draws his categorization from various empirical examples. This means that he is interested in different transformative logics but less so in the fine-grained contextual mechanisms upholding the resilience of unsustainability and shaping the scope for transformative efforts.

In the following we will therefore propose a conceptual approach that focusses on the mechanisms through which structures limit or enable the pursuit of transformative strategies by social movement actors. We will therefore rely on analytical concepts from CPE and bring them into dialogue with Wrights research on transformative strategies.

2) Conceptualizing transformative dynamics: strategies, selectivities and Cultural Political Economy

For a conceptualization of the interaction between structural obstacles and movement strategies, we rely on CPE and link it to the previously mentioned transformation perspectives according to Wright.

CPE, a neo-marxist theory approach with influences from regulation theory and insights from Gramsci and Foucault, attempts to explain the reproduction of power relations within capitalist societies. For this, CPE uses the concept of strategic selectivities. Strategic selectivities function as asymmetrical constraints and opportunities that both condition the outcome of movement actions and can potentially be subverted and modified by strategically reflective actors. With regard to strategic selectivity, Sum and Jessop distinguish structural, discursive, technological and agential selectivities.

We will argue that it is exactly these selectivities that function as the fine-grained mechanisms that can explain the resilience of unsustainability. By analyzing how the three transformation strategies suggested by Wright interact with the four modes of selectivity, we develop a typology of transformative

² In his recent book, Wright differentiates the three transformative logics even further in five strategies (Wright 2019). Since we strive for a parsimonious concept of analysis and since Wright's further subdivision does not provide added value for answering our research question, we retain the distinction between three transformative strategies.

dynamics, which contributes to answering the question of why some movement strategies are more promising in specific contexts than others. Transformative dynamics are understood as the interplay of a strategy's transformative logic with the specific configurations of selectivities in a political context, triggering a certain tendency of development. After developing this typology, it will be applied to the field of energy and climate policies in Germany. Thus, we will demonstrate why fundamental social ecological transformation has thus far been unsuccessful in this field and identify possible counter-strategies that will become politically necessary in order to prevent disastrous climate change.

I Strategic selectivities

Influenced by the works of Marx, Gramsci and Foucault, Sum and Jessop developed CPE to explain the production and reproduction of (capitalist) social relations. For this, they suggest looking at the evolutionary process of variation, selection and retention through which certain imaginaries – 'semiotic systems that frame individual subjects' lived experiences of an inordinately complex world and/or inform collective calculation about that world' – become hegemonic (Sum and Jessop 2013, 165; 403). While there are various ideas, discourses and strategies promoting them in the first place (*variation*), only some of them get selected (*selection*) and then retained within institutions, practices and other types of structural fixes (*retention*). So-called strategic selectivities play a central role in this process: They 'interact across different conjunctures and settings to condition the variation, selection and retention of hegemonic [...] and counter-hegemonic projects and their societal repercussions and contradictions' (ibid., 214). In other words, strategic selectivities explain why some strategies, thoughts, practices, institutional settings are chosen over others and then appear to be naturally and without alternative. Sum and Jessop distinguish four modes of selection, taking into account different dimension of social interaction: structural, discursive, technological (in a Foucauldian sense) and agential. *Structural selectivities* are defined as 'asymmetrical configurations of constraints and opportunities on social forces as they pursue particular projects' (ibid., 214). They appear as institutional arrangements and orders that support specific courses of action and that have a path-shaping effect on further institutionalization.

Discursive selectivities restrict 'what can be enunciated, who is authorized to enunciate, and how enunciations enter intertextual, interdiscursive and contextual fields' (ibid., 215). Empirically, these inscribed asymmetries of meaning production become apparent in the form of dominant ways of framing a situation, in broader cultural norms but also in technical language or in etiquette rules. It is the terrain of what Gramsci called (cultural) hegemony.

Technological selectivities are to be understood in a Foucauldian sense of the term. They refer to 'the asymmetries inscribed in the use of technologies (and their affordances) in producing objects and subject positions that contribute towards the making of dispositives and truth regimes' (ibid., 216). Specific

‘mental infrastructures’ (Welzer 2011, 14) in the form of internalized norms, rationalities and schemata of interpretation function as technological selectivity, thereby not only reproducing social relations but also shaping peoples’ receptivity for certain assemblages of knowledge.

Agential selectivities refer to the varying degree of capacities of agents to exploit or change structures, discourses and technologies in accordance with their interests. This capacity depends very much on agents’ positioning within society, i.e. their power resources, and is hence greatly affected by the configuration of the other selectivities (Sum and Jessop 2013,217; Hauf 2016, 57).

It is at the heart of our argument that strategic selectivities function as the mechanisms by which a hegemonic, unsustainable mode of living upholds its resilience against transformative movement actions and that taking them into account can help to explain why and when a specific transformative strategy is more promising than others. Our thesis is that introducing the four types of selective mechanisms to the analysis promotes the understanding of transformative dynamics or their impediment and thus also enables more robust explanations for movement success. By explaining what is being selected in specific historical conjunctures, why and how, the potentials and limitations of each movement strategy become visible.

II The selectivities of transformative strategies

As set out in the introduction, Wright (2010) categorizes three types of transformative strategies: ruptural, interstitial and symbiotic. We will exemplify our thesis in reference to each of those strategies in turn.

II.1 Ruptural strategy

A ruptural strategy of transformation is guided by the logic of breaking with the hegemonic form of societal organization: ‘Ruptural transformations envision creating new institutions of social empowerment through a sharp break with existing institutions and social structures’ (Wright 2010, 303). The basic idea of a ruptural strategy originates from a revolutionary socialist tradition and is associated with historical events such as the Russian Revolution (Holloway 2010, 21ff.).

In terms of selectivities, a ruptural strategy basically aims at replacing existing selectivities with alternative ones. From a revolutionary understanding, the legitimacy of the hegemonic discourse must be undermined (*discursive selectivity*), institutional fixes would have to be tore down and replaced by new arrangements (*structural selectivity*), new subjectivities formed in the course of the revolution (*technological selectivity*) and ruling elites needed to be exchanged and power resources redistributed (*agential selectivity*). For initiating such a ruptural revolutionary process, particularly the undermining of the hegemonic consent and sufficient power resources seem to be of utmost

importance (ibid., 308; Temper et al. 2018, 754ff; Geels 2010, 501f). A promising starting point for ruptural strategies are situations of systemic crisis in which hegemony cannot be easily upheld.

Wright clarifies, however, that ‘the robustness of the institutions of the state in developed capitalist democracies make ruptural strategies implausible’ as the latter are unlikely to quickly increase the material welfare of the majority and, moreover, to be maintained without becoming authoritarian (Wright 2010, 309; 318; Holloway 2010, 26). However, ‘it is possible that in some unanticipated future the contradictions of these societies could dramatically undermine those institutions’, which paves the way for ruptural strategies to potentially take effect (Wright 2010, 309). To prepare for such situations, other strategies, such as the interstitial strategy, which will be introduced below, lay the foundation, by experimenting with alternative institutional orders and transforming subjectivities in terms of establishing new interpretative frameworks and normative orders.

Limited ruptures

In the current absence of such a situation, Wright points to limited, more temporary ruptures within particular policy fields or institutional settings (ibid., 308). If ruptural strategies are employed on such a more issue-specific or temporal basis, say in occupations or blockades, they ignore *structural selectivity* and serve to disrupt structural processes. They thus challenge the hegemonic consent on progress and open up discursive space for the presentation of alternatives (*discursive selectivity and technological selectivity*). Rather than following up other strategies, they here might even become their precondition, e.g. a strike as door opener for a new round of collective bargaining (see symbiotic strategy below).

A realistic ruptural strategy, aiming at replacing existing selectivities, rarely stands on its own and has to be thought of in combination with the other strategies that will be introduced in the following. Regarding the configuration of selectivities, a ruptural strategy is either dependent on 1) massive power resources (*agential selectivity*) and on tottering *discursive, technological* and particularly *structural selectivities* or - when aiming at more limited forms of rupture - on 2) a strategically well-chosen target for direct action adapted to the capacities available. In the latter case, a ruptural strategy particularly aims at raising attention and opening up new discursive spaces (*discursive selectivity*). If neither of the stated preconditions is in place, a ruptural strategy will have great difficulty to break open the *resilience of unsustainability* by itself or initiate processes that will do so.

II. 2 Interstitial strategy

An interstitial transformation strategy follows the logic of building alternatives ‘outside of the state’: ‘Interstitial transformations seek to build new forms of

social empowerment in the niches and margins of capitalist society, often where they do not seem to pose any immediate threat to dominant classes and elites' (Wright 2010, 303f.) Interstitial strategies can be traced back to an anarchist political tradition and belong to the realm of prefigurative politics (Tokar 2017, 32; cf. Yates 2014; Monticelli 2018). In contrast to ruptural strategies, interstitial transformations can be better understood in terms of metamorphosis than in terms of break (Wright 2010, 303). Wright distinguishes two pathways of interstitial transformations: revolutionary anarchist and evolutionary anarchist (ibid., 328). The first is closely linked to what has been set out in the section on ruptural strategies. Interstitial strategies serve as preconditions for ruptures; they, in Wright's words, 'pave the route to rupture' (ibid., 328). Hence they make rupture possible in the first place once the 'untransgressable limits on the possibilities of democratic egalitarian emancipatory transformations' (ibid., 332) within capitalism have been reached. The second pathway perceives of transformation without the necessity of rupture at all and proclaims a stepwise erosion of the binding limits of capitalism until it will have been completely transformed (ibid., 332ff.; see also the similar concept of 'tipping points' in transformation research: Bender 2012, 229f; Griebhammer and Bohrmann., 24f.).

Using again strategic selectivities as our analytical instrument, we claim that the logic of interstitial strategies is to ignore and circumvent existing selectivities. Instead, niche-spaces will be created – following different logics and rules – that allow for experimenting with alternative, solidary modes of living and producing together. It is key for this transformational path, that people become aware of alternatives to the hegemonic order (Zelik and Tauss 2013; Fisher and Ponniah 2015), thus laying the foundation for and facilitating both ruptural and symbiotic strategies for change (Klein 2014, 106). A regular participation in alternative social practices leads to the experience of new forms of subjectivity and can result in an alteration of identity concepts (*technological selectivity*) (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2016, 15). Niche-spaces also provide room for articulating critical opinions and telling different stories (*discursive selectivity*). There is furthermore the chance to experiment with innovative institutional settings by means of try and error (*structural selectivity*).

One of the biggest challenges regarding interstitial strategies is their parallel existence with capitalism: 'They may even strengthen capitalism by siphoning off discontent and creating the illusion that if people are unhappy with the dominant institutions they can and should just go off and live their lives in alternative settings' (Wright 2010, 326; Graefe, 2006, 97; Schoppek 2020, 12). While interstitial strategies can lead to change and an alteration of selectivities *within* the niche-spaces, it remains unclear, whether and to what extent these new configurations affect agents' capacities (*agential selectivity*) to strategically induce discursive and structural change also in the broader society *discursive and structural selectivity* and thus to break the resilience of unsustainability (Schoppek 2021, 7ff.).

II.3 Symbiotic strategy

The third transformation strategy analyzed by Wright – following a social-democratic, reform-oriented political tradition – adheres to the logic of using the state and collaborating with the ruling class to achieve tangible improvements: ‘Symbiotic transformations involve strategies in which extending and deepening the institutional forms of popular social empowerment simultaneously helps solve certain practical problems [...]’ (Wright 2010, 305; see also the concept of *radical reformism*, e.g. in Roth 2018). They thus alleviate acute situations under which people suffer, they help the dominant classes and elites to react to challenges and they can open up space for interstitial strategies to take effect (Wright 2010, 305, 365).

The strategy of symbiotic transformation aims at a gradual transformation of strategic selectivities. By means of associational power (in terms of institutionalized rights for unions, works councils, and political parties) and by making compromises with the ruling class (*agential selectivity*) the strategy is used to achieve structural adjustments, thus shaping the *structural selectivity* impacting on future transformative attempts (Klein 2014, 105). Wright describes a mutually beneficial cooperation between opposing classes as positive class compromise. Such a class compromise, however, requires the subordinated class to accept the general rules of the game and thus also upholds their dependence on the dominating class (*discursive, technological and agential selectivity*) (Wright 2010, 355). This starting point bears the danger of reproducing the very system that is ought to be transformed. While through small structural changes an increase in social empowerment might be achieved, systemic limits will not be crossed and potentially even stabilized: ‘[...] the historically most impressive examples of symbiotic strategies - [...] franchise [...] and [...] expansive welfare state [...] – both contributed to consolidating very robust forms of capitalism’ (ibid., 364).

The main challenge to a symbiotic strategy therefore is its need for a specific interaction with the other strategies that will render its achievements a transformative instrument in the hands of progressive agents rather than a stabilization of the system. By means of class compromises (*agential selectivity*) and by framing their request in system-compatible ways (*discursive selectivity*), agents following symbiotic strategies potentially broaden the scope of action for other transformative agents through structural adjustments (*structural selectivity*). If in this process the system as such is not questioned, however, symbiotic strategies carry the risk of upholding the fundamental elements of the resilience of unsustainability.

III Interim conclusion

Guided by our intention to shed some light on the dynamics and mechanisms by which an unsustainable mode of living upholds its resilience against transformative attempts, we have analyzed three different transformation strategies and their interaction with the four modes of selectivities. We found

that each strategy follows a distinct logic for dealing with those selectivities: 1) attack and replace; 2) ignore; 3) adapt and use. As we have shown, the interaction between selectivities and strategies is a dialectical one: aiming at transformation, hegemonic selectivities do not only need to be changed by movement agents in order to make change happen but simultaneously limit/enable the scope of action for these endeavors. This means that due to a specific configuration of selectivities in particular historic conjunctures, only some strategies seem useful for trying to break open the resilience of unsustainability.

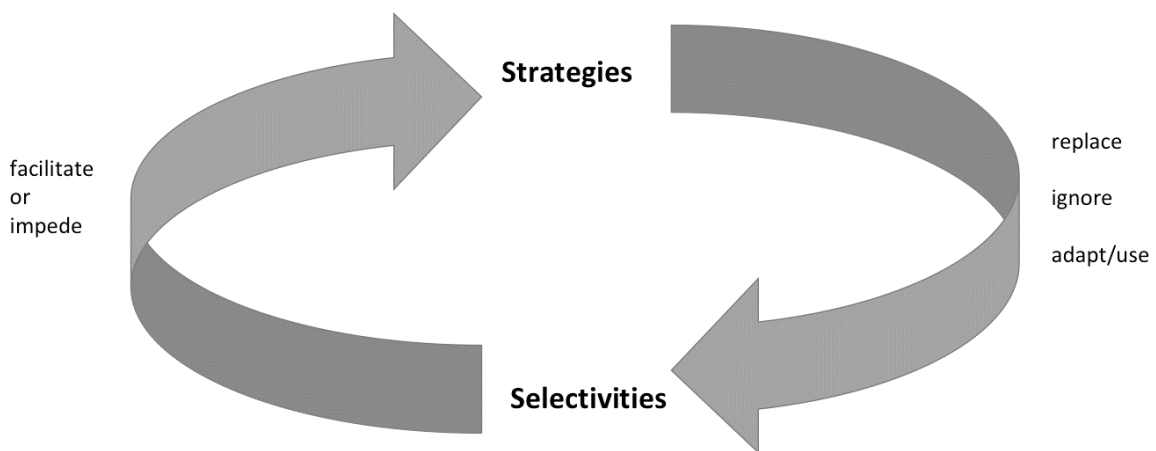


Fig. 1: Transformative dynamics: mutual influence of strategies and selectivities.

Having introduced a model of transformative dynamics in theory, we now want to illustrate our argument by looking at a specific field of conflict: energy and climate policies in Germany.

3) Application of model to the field of energy and climate policies in Germany

I Faltering energy transition in Germany

A survey published by Greenpeace (Rinscheid 2018) demonstrates that a majority of the population favors a quick coal phase out – even in those areas that would be most heavily affected by the accompanying structural change. What we see in practice, however, is that despite alarming climate forecasts, numerous protest events by actors such as Ende Gelände, Fridays for Future and various citizens' initiatives as well as supporting majorities in the population, a speedy coal phase out has not been implemented so far. Instead,

the so-called coal compromise was adopted in 2020, which included high compensation payments for the decommissioning of fossil-fuel power plants and was also oriented towards climate targets that have since been judged inadequate by the Federal Constitutional Court (L w Beer et al. 2021: 17). Burkhart et al. (2017, 81) attribute this delay to the powerful interests backing coal power and a consequent lack of political assertiveness to realize a quick transition. The concept of strategic selectivities, introduced before, revealed four mechanisms that can explain this *resilience of unsustainability*: The hegemonic discourse on climate policies (*discursive selectivity*) is backed by an alliance of powerful actors (*agential selectivity*), it is deeply subjectivized in the form of sedimented knowledge structures and schemata of interpretation (*technological selectivity*), which are also inscribed in institutional settings (*structural selectivity*).

Discursive selectivity in this context affects, on the one hand, *what can be stated*. The hegemonic discourse on national as well as international climate governance can be described as ‘neoliberalization of the climate’ (Bedall 2014, 4; translation by the authors) or ‘ecological modernization’ (Sander 2016a, 71; translation by the authors). It rests on the discursive genres of economic growth, ecological (technical) modernization and market mechanisms, which structure what can be plausibly stated and proposed within this discourse. Aspects that do not fit into this hegemonic order of genres or even question their core assumptions are excluded or marginalized (Bedall 2014, 133). On the other hand, discursive selectivity also affects *who can enunciate* and *who is heard*. Consequently, NGOs adopt their framing to the hegemonic genres in order to have a say in public debates, to prevent a decline of their status and an exclusion from negotiations. In this way, they reproduce the hegemonic discourse by accepting its rules and by adapting to its genres (Bedall 2014, 134f.; Candeias 2003, 327; Krams 2019, 59).

With regard to *agential selectivity* in the field of German energy- and climate policies, two lines of conflict can be distinguished. First, we see a powerful alliance of actors, sometimes described as brown or grey hegemony project³. It is backed by the four large energy corporations, so far large portions of the German industry – however, a change towards ‘green’ capitalism seems to be emerging here - and associated institutions and think tanks, the conservative media, the economic wings of the political parties CDU/CSU, SPD and FDP, as well as the Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology (BMWi) (Haas 2016, 368). Their aim is to optimally exploit the fossil-nuclear generating capacities, keeping the electricity price, especially for industrial consumers, on a low level,

³ We utilize the concept of ‘hegemonic project’ following Kannankulam and Georgi (2014: 64), who define it as an aggregation of ‘the myriad of actions, practices, tactics and strategies that are pursued by an often unaccountable number of actors in any given societal conflict, and that are chosen by actors before the background of their vastly different, specific power resources [...]. In distinguishing different hegemony projects, a claim is made that the practices comprised therein share a distinct, common direction.’

thus slowing down the energy transition and giving it a more centralized character (ibid., 368). This alliance is opposed by a so-called green hegemony project, which shares the common interest to facilitate a rapid transition of the energy system to renewable energies. Actors involved include the so-called green segment of capital, which means companies in the renewable energy sector and their lobby organizations, all relevant environmental NGOs, left-liberal newspapers, multiple think tanks, the Green party, sections of the Left party, the environmental wings of the CDU/CSU and the SPD as well as the Federal Ministry of the Environment (BMU) (ibid., 368f.). Within this green hegemony project, we can see a second line of conflict when it comes to climate policies. Whereas the majority of the project follows a *green capitalist* approach, relying on market mechanisms and green growth to solve the crisis (Brand and Wissen 2021: 161), the radical social ecological climate justice movement demands fundamental societal change to overcome the hegemonic societal nature relation of domination (see section on *structural selectivity* below) and the inequalities which are produced in the course of the neoliberal management of climate change (Sander 2016b, 416). Due to this internal split with regard to more or less radical transformation, it is even plausible to speak of a third social ecological hegemony project.

The realization of this endeavor of the climate justice movement proves to be very difficult, due to a capitalist ‘mental infrastructure’ (Welzer 2011, 14), which functions as *technological selectivity*. It takes the form of deeply sedimented, normalized and day-to-day reproduced ‘norms of production and consumption, societal interests, [as well as] hegemonic and marginal value orientations’ (Brand and Wissen 2013, 694). Besides affecting the schemata of interpretation of the wider public, these patterns also ‘shape perceptions and practices of state personnel and politicians’ (ibid., 700) and similarly of actors in the media field. When reporting on climate issues, journalists and editors tend to privilege those contents and news sources which can be integrated into the neoliberal interpretative framework regarding climate governance and which do not undermine its basic logics (Korte 2011, 204).

Structural selectivity works as a mechanism that privileges certain interests, material strategies of production and consumption and hegemonic knowledge formations as well as interpretations regarding the ecological crisis over others (Brand and Wissen 2011, 92). Particularly relevant in this policy field is, how the material exchange between humans and nature is conceptualized and thus materialized in concrete institutional settings. Under capitalist relations of production, the relation between society and nature takes the form of the domination of nature, its unrestrained exploitation, destruction and subsumption under capitalist value realization (Sander 2016a, 44; Görg 2003, 101; Brand and Görg 2003, 46). The state ‘serves to institutionally secure the multifaceted society nature relationships’ (Brand and Wissen 2013, 694) by managing the access to and the consumption of fossil resources via market mechanisms on the one hand, and by dealing with greenhouse emissions at least symbolically for conflict reduction on the other hand (Bedall 2014, 123; Brunnengräber 2008, 32). Approaches that are based on other modes of

regulating society nature relations than the capitalist one thus have difficulties to prevail in the existing institutional setting.

Only by taking those selectivities into account it is possible to understand, why attempts of fundamental social ecological transformation are, despite the deepening social ecological climate crisis, strongly disadvantaged in contests over shaping our futures. Being aware of these selectivities nevertheless helps to identify possible counter-strategies (Bedall 2014, 128-131).

II Strategies for change in the field of energy and climate politics

After having sketched out how the policy field of German energy and climate policies is structured by the four modes of selectivity, in what follows we want to outline how the three types of strategies interact with this environment in aiming for change.

II.1 Ruptural strategies of the movement for climate justice

Due to societal relationships of power, in the short run a clear break with the capitalist state and a complete replacement of operating strategic selectivities seems currently not to be a feasible option (Wright 2010: 208). Even though the corona crisis has raised new hopes for an end to the hegemony of neoliberalism, despite partial adjustments and a more Keynesian rhetoric, the actual European management of the crisis speaks more for continuity: There was - clearly limited - state interventionism to bail out corporations and huge investment programs like the EU's Covid recovery fund to stimulate growth. Social and environmental concessions that could jeopardize profits, however, have been avoided. Social power relations have therefore been reproduced in the crisis and inequalities have even been exacerbated (Oberndorfer 2021; Oxfam 2021; Arps et al. 2020; Harvey 2019).

Since no systemic crisis has yet emerged in Germany, actors in the climate justice movement who pursue a strategy of rupture aim at temporarily bogging down the running of the hegemonic system and at creating ruptures on the discursive level, as means for initiating larger processes of societal transformation (Sander 2016c, 10). They attempt to bring about ruptures at the discursive level in order to create the conditions for larger-scale social transformation processes (Sander 2016c, 10).

For this, collective actors compensate their lack of power to take and shape systemic decisions (*agential selectivity*) by making use of *disruptive power* (Schmalz and Dörre 2014, 222). They use mass actions of civil disobedience, which include blockades of coal diggers, coal power plants and coal harbors as well as small group actions to sabotage the coal infrastructure to – at least temporarily – disrupt the process of the commodification of nature (*structural selectivity*) (Sander 2016c, 10; Brock and Dunlap 2018, 34). These acts of resistance exacerbate the political conflict over how to deal with climate change: Movement actors use the attention they receive for these actions to introduce a

system critical perspective into the media discourse, addressing the inequalities caused by neoliberal climate governance (*discursive selectivity*) (Görg and Bedall 2013, 97; Sander 2016c, 28). Precondition for these kind of actions and the accompanying press work have been *interstitial strategies*, such as the climate camps, which facilitated processes of skill-sharing and establishing networks (Sander 2016c, 21).

Even though the demands of the movement have not been recognized in state apparatuses so far and hence could not unfold a transformative impact (Thompson 2020: 225), in non-state fields embedded in civil society the consensus on neoliberal climate governance broke up, making it possible to articulate critique and demanding climate justice (Görg and Bedall 2013, 88; 97). For actually transforming deeply sedimented hegemonic selectivities, the power basis of the movement must be further strengthened, however. Brand and Wissen (2021) therefore see a need to form broader societal ‘center-bottom’ alliances along with dissident, progressive elites which promote a solidary mode of living, to make it capable of seriously challenging the *imperial mode of living* (ibid., 204f; Brie and Hildebrandt 2015).

II.2 The Climate Camps as elements of an interstitial strategy

For illustrating how *interstitial strategies* interact with strategic selectivities, we refer to the so-called *climate camps* and camps in the course of forest occupations: temporary niche-spaces created by the social movement for climate justice, in which social relations of domination shall be transformed into a solidary mode of living.

The climate camps in Germany started in 2008, being inspired by similar events in the UK. Since then, they established themselves as the central gathering place for the climate justice movement and grew constantly over the last years, initiating similar camps in neighboring countries such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, Poland, Austria and Czech Republic⁴. The occupation of the Hambach Forest, with interruptions since 2012, represents another form of the construction of counter-hegemonic practices and structures at the immediate site of destruction by clearing for lignite (Kaufer and Lein 2018). Climate camps and forest occupations constitute spaces for sharing knowledge and skills, experimenting with sustainable modes of living and parallel institutions, putting them into practice while simultaneously empowering participants through direct actions (Sander 2016c, 21; Berger 2018; Bosse 2016). Similar to the idea of the *Temporary Autonomous Zone* (Bey 2003), they constitute spaces in which the efficacy of hegemonic selectivities is temporary abrogated. Thus they can be understood as ‘an uprising which does not engage directly with the state’ (ibid., 99f.) but avoids systemic influences in order a) to experiment with parallel institutions and alternative forms of organization (*structural selectivity*); b) to create *subaltern counter publics* (Fraser 1992, 123) in order to

4 cf.: <https://climatejusticeaction.net/en/climate-camps/> [21.06.2021].

formulate and spread radical criticism of the existing conditions, which cannot be disseminated via the mass media (*discursive selectivity*); c) to facilitate the formation of new forms of subjectivity, of relating to each other and of interpretative frameworks, (*technological selectivity*); and d) to empower participants through skill-sharing and establishing networks which make future actions for change possible (*agential selectivity*).

A challenge, however, is to improve the continuity of these counter-hegemonic practices, to transform them into 'sustainable and everyday practices of resistance and transformation at all levels' and to embed them in 'a wider project that gives them some political meaning beyond their highly localized intervention' (Müller 2008, 50; 54). This is a difficult task in view of the effective force of hegemonic strategic selectivities in wider society (Blühdorn 2017, 57).

II.3 Symbiotic strategy:

The Renewable Energy Sources Act (EEG) in Germany

A prime example for a symbiotic approach to social ecological transformation, meaning fighting out concrete improvements in the field of the state, thereby also improving future scope for action, has been the so-called *Energiewende* – the energy transition in Germany.

By pushing through the Renewable Energy Sources Act (EEG) in 2000, the green hegemony project achieved a milestone: it materialized its strategic goals into the state apparatus, thus 'shift[ing] social and political force relations in the energy sector' (*agential selectivity*) and significantly broadening the future scope for action in the field (*structural selectivity*) (Müller 2017, 7f.). The law guaranteed a fixed feed-in payment for 20 years, promoted a decentralization of energy production and was extremely successful in promoting the development of renewable energy sources, changing renewables' share of total electricity consumption from 6,2% in 2000 to 36,2% in 2017 (Umweltbundesamt 2018, 7; Haas 2016, 369). In addition, it also broadened the scope for experimenting with new forms of decentralized and democratically organized energy production (in the form of energy cooperatives), taking these projects – from which the *Energiewende* originated – out of their niche (Haas 2017, 170; Müller 2017, 8).

This success was possible, as the project had been in line with the operating strategic selectivities: It was backed by a powerful alliance in form of the green hegemony project with a concrete material base (*agential selectivity*), it was framed in terms of green growth and ecological modernization (*discursive/technological selectivity*) and – besides limited political interference – it was generally in compliance with market rules (*structural selectivity*) (Müller 2017, 12). The law has subsequently been under heavy attack from the grey hegemony project, as it reduced the power and market share of the large energy enterprises (Haas 2017, 213). It was weakened by several amendments, leading to a greater market integration, a stronger centralization

and a general slowdown of the transition process (ibid., 214). Nevertheless, the EEG has been essential to protect – at least partially – progress achieved against a strong fossil alliance (Müller 2017, 7).

Hence actors struggling for a social ecological transformation need to reflect on how to implement a step-wise transformation by pushing for pragmatic policy successes and inscribing gains into state institutions, while simultaneously being aware that these ‘gains will always be precarious and vulnerable to counterattacks’ and acknowledging the repressive-dominant character of the state (Wright 2010, 337; Sander 2016c, 33).

Another expression of the symbiotic approach in the more recent past was the so-called Coal Commission, which was set up by the German government in 2018 (Löw Beer et al. 2021). Its aim was to develop an exit plan from lignite mining in Germany. It was made up of representatives from politics, science, industry, trade unions and NGOs. At the beginning of 2019 it presented its final report in which a coal phase-out by 2038 was laid down. While the NGOs involved in the negotiations supported the report because of the aforementioned inscription of gains into state institutions, it met with fierce criticism from the rest of the climate justice movement. This was because of the late exit date and a heavily delayed start of the phase-out (Groll 2019). The example therefore shows that symbiotic strategies have the potential to split movements if too great compromises are made in achieving targets on the territory of the state.

4) Conclusion

We started by the observation that there is a large discrepancy between knowledge about the social ecological crisis and corresponding transformative efforts. While we found some very convincing approaches explaining the resilience of unsustainability in the scientific literature as well as research on strategic agency, both strands of literature for itself do not sufficiently explain the fine-grained, concrete mechanisms impeding or furthering movements success in transforming society. So we were interested to investigate how these mechanisms challenge change.

Applying a concept from CPE, i.e. four modes of strategic selectivity, we demonstrated the challenges met by three different transformative strategies that have been conceptualized by Wright. We argued that structural, discursive, technological and agential selectivities serve as both the limitation as well as the target of action of transformative agents. Hereby, the strategies of ruptural, interstitial and symbiotic change apply different logics of interacting with the selectivities in their environment, thus resulting in different transformative dynamics: Ruptural strategies aim at attacking and replacing the selectivities in place; interstitial strategies ignore selectivities as long as possible; symbiotic strategies adapt to and use selectivities in order to stepwise transform them.

As demonstrated by the application to the policy field of energy and climate policies in Germany, all three strategies have their relative strengths and weaknesses. For working towards a fundamental social ecological

transformation, it thus seems most promising, to combine the three approaches, so that one strategy in dealing with the selectivities can alternately compensate for the weakness of the others (Wright 2010, 307).

Strategies aiming at temporal and issue specific ruptures help to make the strategic selectivities in a field visible and challenge the legitimacy of the hegemonic order from which they emanate. As we found, due to their limited scope they mainly affect *discursive and technological selectivity*. This strategy is often dependent on but simultaneously lays the foundation for the extension of interstitial strategies, i.e. experimenting with alternative ways of relating to each other and of organizing everyday life. For criticism and critical consciousness formation (*discursive and technological selectivity*) to develop and prosper under the dominant order, it requires niche-spaces, which avoid the selective impact of the four described mechanisms. For generalizing these alternative approaches, for reaching a broader share of society and creating new opportunities for action, a symbiotic strategy of securing gains that have been achieved on the terrain of the state seems necessary (*structural and agential selectivity*). This, however, requires making compromises and partly adopting to the selectivities of the respective policy field.

While a combination of the different strategies suggests itself, it is open to further empirical research and political experimenting to investigate how exactly it is possible for movement strategies to be mutually reinforcing instead of mutually weakening. Transformative effects are always only tendential and can also turn into opposite dynamics. In both cases, however, looking at the selectivities at play will help to better understand potentials and limits for overcoming the resilience of unsustainability.

Keeping the planet to two degrees of warming, let alone 1.5 degrees, would require transformative action. It will take more than good works and voluntary commitments; it will take a revolution.

(Rich 2018)

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