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From the Environment to Green Democracy: Environmentalism, Social Movements, and the State in the Environmental Policy Debate*

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This article delves into Environmental Politics studies, which has emerged as a burgeoning field within Political Science since the 1990s, aiming to explore the intersection of environmentalism and politics, with a particular focus on examining the roles of the State and environmental movements in shaping this dynamic. In this proposal, we revisit a portion of the existing literature to highlight three crucial dimensions in understanding these studies: Firstly, we explore how environmentalism has shaped environmental policy and certain political practices, with a particular emphasis on the State's influence in this process. Secondly, we analyze the role of environmental social movements, both within and outside the State's structures, examining the mechanisms through which they exert influence in these arenas and drive political and cultural changes. Finally, we discuss how the interactional dynamics among political actors engaged in environmentalism have spurred demands for greater democratization in environmental policies. By addressing these issues, we seek to demonstrate their interconnection and relevance for a comprehensive understanding of environmental politics.

Keywords: Environmentalism; democracy; environmental social movements; State; environmental politics.

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It is widely acknowledged that the State holds a central role in shaping the dynamics between societies and ecosystems, and that this institution will continue to maintain its pivotal position in any restructuring of ecological policy (ECKERSLEY, 2004). However, at the same time, environmental policy interventions can also trigger crises and significantly reshape the State, thereby challenging both governance structures and aspects of political regimes (DRYZEK, 2013; DRYZEK and DUNLEAVY, 2009). From an environmental standpoint, the trajectory of progress or setbacks fundamentally hinges on political responses to crises, such as the contemporary challenge of climate change. In this case, responses must extend beyond the actions of nation-States alone: many environmentalists have voiced the need for actions at the level of local activism (OSTROM et al., 2010; SHIVA, 1994) as well as transnational coordination efforts (GREEN, 2013; YOUNG, 1999) – with proposals ranging from radical decentralization to the conceptualization of a global governing body (DOBSON, 2001).

In contemporary political and democratic theory, John Dryzek (2013, 1990, 1987; DRYZEK et al., 2013, 2003; DRYZEK and PICKERING, 2019; DRYZEK and TANASOCA, 2021) has emerged as a prominent author who has systematically analyzed and critiqued the multifaceted relationship between the State(s), forms of governance, characteristics of political regimes, and environmentalism. This article seeks to reconstruct the fundamental concepts of this critical approach, primarily drawing upon Dryzek’s seminal works while also integrating insights from other scholars who have significantly contributed to the field known as ‘Environmental Politics’¹ (DOBSON, 2010, 2001; DOHERTY, 2005; ECKERSLEY, 2020, 2004, 2003;

¹Studies dedicated to environmentalism within the realm of Political Science have been categorized under various terms such as Green Political Theory, Political Ecology, or Environmental Politics – terms often used interchangeably. As noted by J. Meyer (2006, p. 774), some scholars favor the term ‘green’ due to its potential connections with myriad issues and social movements, while others distance themselves from this label to avoid associations with green political parties. Alternatively, some scholars prefer ‘ecology’ for its connotation of interconnectedness, while others reject it for being a descriptor commonly associated with geography and anthropology. Lastly, ‘environmental politics’ has emerged as a less controversial term for describing this field of study. Additionally, the term has gained prominence through the publications of the eponymous journal, founded in 1992, which serves not only as a specialized outlet for its focus on the intersection of environmentalism and politics but also for its broader impact on the field of Political Science. Ranging between 04 and 07 issues published annually and boasting an impact factor of 4.320 (2019), ‘Environmental Politics’ has ascended to become the third most influential journal in Political Science globally. By featuring contributions from leading experts and fostering debates that shape research agendas in the field, the journal has played a pivotal role in shaping the very contours of the discipline. For further details, refer to M. Hammond (2022).

GOODIN, 1996, 1992; HAMMOND, 2020; SCHLOSBERG, 1999). Our objective is to demonstrate how the intricate nature of environmental challenges has strained political, theoretical, and practical frameworks, ultimately shaping environmental policy itself. Additionally, we aim to underscore that, within this dynamic, environmental social movements have assumed a unique role, particularly from the late 1970s onwards, establishing themselves as indispensable actors in shaping the trajectory of environmental policy. Finally, recognizing that the history of environmentalism, particularly its interaction with the State, poses inherent challenges and necessitates practical and normative solutions, especially as deliberated by environmental social movements, recent studies on environmental policy have underscored the imperative of a green democracy. This paradigm shift advocates for the inclusion of nature and non-human agents in discussions and efforts aimed at safeguarding life on the planet.

From environment to environmental policy: tracing the evolution of environmental criticism

Origins of environmentalism and democratic challenges

Until the late 1960s, the environment was not regarded as a prevailing political concern, even in the global North, often considered the region ‘most sensitive’ to environmental issues². However, earlier records reveal specific policy initiatives related to pollution control and the preservation of natural landscapes. For instance, in the late 18th century, the Romantic movement, which swept across Europe, celebrated nature and wilderness through literature, music, and art, offering a counterbalance to industrialization and urbanization, which occasionally propelled nature preservation onto the political agenda (MOORE, 2008; NASH, 2014). During the same period, similar

²It's certainly true that Indigenous populations in the Global South, particularly those who endured prolonged periods of colonization by foreign powers like in Latin America and Africa, have historically maintained a more respectful and balanced relationship with their environment compared to the extractive colonial powers that ravaged and exterminated both natural resources and native peoples wherever they went. Furthermore, critiques from a decolonial and Indigenous standpoint, especially in Brazil, have long challenged the development(alist) ideas imposed on the region by global northern powers (ESCOBAR, 1995; KOPENAWA and ALBERT, 2019; KRENAK, 2019, 1999, among others). However, delving into this extensive and significant topic in detail would exceed the scope of this article, which aims to preset how the environment and its challenges have become an indispensable ‘disciplinary field’ for contemporary scientific and theoretical practice. For decolonial perspectives on environmental politics, refer to: ESCOBAR, 2020; FERDINAND, 2022; LADUKE, 1999; SANTOS and MENESES, 2010, among others.

policies emerged, albeit aiming to safeguard specific economic interests (PERLIN, 2023).

However, it was in the USA that the environmental issue gained rapid traction. At the turn of the 19th century into the 20th, preservationist John Muir celebrated the natural splendor of the American West and ardently advocated for its protection (MOORE, 2008; WORSTER, 2008). Concurrently, the Conservation Movement, associated with the United States Forest Service and spearheaded by Gifford Pinchot, emerged, emphasizing the conservation of natural resources, albeit with a primary focus on their future utility (MILLER, 2001) – thus lacking the profound respect for nature espoused by Muir. The stark contrast between these two initiatives elucidates a fundamental principle in understanding environmental issues from their inception to the present day: we may argue, with little contention, that Muir’s perspective on the environment can be characterized as ‘ecocentric’, while Pinchot’s approach leans towards ‘anthropocentrism’ (CAMPBELL, 2010; DRYZEK, 2013; ECKERSLEY, 2003; NASH, 2014). To illustrate this contrast, Wilkins (1996) recounts an episode where Muir dissuaded Pinchot from killing a large tarantula at the Grand Canyon, asserting that “it had as much right to be there as we did” (WILKINS, 1996, p. 195).

This distinction, evident in the life stories of Muir and Pinchot, laid the foundation for emergence two types of discourses that reverberated throughout the later history of environmentalism. The term ‘ecocentric’³ implied an acknowledgment that nature possesses intrinsic value, independent of human interests, while discourses encapsulated by the term ‘anthropocentric’⁴ tended to prioritize human needs and interests (DRYZEK, 2000; ECKERSLEY, 2003). These contentions and definitional disputes played a crucial role in shedding light on and popularizing the environment as a significant collective concern. For instance, from the

³According to this viewpoint, environmental analysis should concentrate on valuing and safeguarding the environment itself. This entails recognizing the interconnectedness of terrestrial biomes and, most importantly, acknowledging the intrinsic value and significance of the ecosystem, encompassing both living and non-living elements, including non-human entities – which should be valued regardless of their utilitarian benefits to humans (LEOPOLD, [1949] 1986; SESSIONS and DEVALL, 1985). Some scholars also link this perspective with a biocentric outlook, which underscores that all forms of life possess intrinsic value and thus merit ethical consideration (TAYLOR, 1985).

⁴The anthropocentric perspective prioritizes human interests and well-being in environmental discourse. Nature and its resources are perceived as means available to humans and are thus evaluated based on their utility to humanity. This ethic argues that the exploitation of natural resources can foster economic development, as long as conservation practices and environmental management ensure sustainable resource use (CARSON, [1962] 2002; DALY, 1990; HARDIN, 1968).

1950s onwards, many democracies enacted anti-pollution laws in urban and regional planning, responding to demands stemming from either of these environmental discourses (DRYZEK, 2013; DRYZEK and DUNLEAVY, 2009).

In the global North, where nations were rapidly advancing in industrialization, the period from the 1960s to the 1970s witnessed a profound awakening to environmental degradation issues worldwide⁵ (ECKERSLEY, 2003). Pioneering studies from this era, particularly in Europe and North America (CARSON [1962] 2002; MEADOWS et al., 1972), gained international prominence for their impactful approach to the topic (DUNLAP, 2008). These studies, alongside collective actions by civil society actors – such as protests and awareness campaigns – played a pivotal role in thrusting ecological concerns to the forefront of the international public debate. Within this process, the inception of Earth Day celebrations and the creation, by the United Nations, of the ‘United Nations Conference on Environment and Development’, which held its inaugural session in Stockholm in 1972, represented significant milestones in the global recognition of environmental issues (ECKERSLEY, 2003).

By the 1970s, various environmental threats began to populate a new lexicon, and environmental policy started to garner serious attention (DRYZEK, 2013). The more radical faction of environmentalism, rooted heavily in ecocentrism, often found common cause with the social movements burgeoning in the 1960s and 1970s. Conversely, moderate environmentalists, adopting a more anthropocentric perspective, gradually integrated themselves into conventional pluralist policies. It was during this period that environmental theory, at large, disseminated the understanding that there effectively exists an environment that influences and shapes human activity (DRYZEK, 2013; ECKERSLEY, 2003).

The theoretical underpinnings of the liberal democratic State largely predated the 1970s and thus had limitations in effectively addressing environmental issues:

⁵It's important to reiterate that this reconstruction focuses on the development of environmental policy, primarily in and from the global North. This region was a pioneer in the industrialization of consumer and capital goods, necessitating raw materials and resources on a global scale. In contrast, environmental issues took longer to gain prominence in the global South due to a variety of socio-institutional dynamics and delayed national industrialization processes compared to the North. However, it is crucial to note that in many countries of the global South, some of which were still striving for national independence in the first half of the 20th century, the environmental issue took on a unique form, unrelated to the repertoire of industrial modernity. This often manifested as forced displacement and expulsion of Indigenous populations from their territories, where they typically practiced more balanced cultivation, management, and use of land and other natural resources.

typically, they regarded environmental policy as merely another facet of government activity. The democratic perspectives prevalent in the mid-20th century, whether pluralist, elitist, Marxist, liberal, etc, owing to their deep theoretical roots stemming from the industrial revolution experienced in Europe throughout the 19th century, fundamentally perceived the Earth as an infinite reservoir of resources, concentrating solely on the most heedless forms of exploitation. Taking the environment seriously demands a different approach: it entails abandoning the dogma of national industrialization as the 'telos' and instead understanding society, the economy, and politics as subsystems of regional and global ecosystems (ECKERSLEY, 2003). Therefore, an environmental approach to the State primarily embodies a critical theory, diverging from the traditional concern with justifying how or why the State evolved into its current form or behaves as it does. Instead, it underscores that the modern State, in its various manifestations, emerged from an industrialist era where economic growth and technological advancements were unquestionable priorities (DRYZEK and DUNLEAVY, 2009).

In the 1970s, two distinct environmental visions of the democratic State emerged in the global North, subsequently echoing globally. One evolved 'pari passu' with actual political developments: governments responded to public concerns about environmental issues by instituting agencies to regulate pollution, enacting legislation, establishing administrative bureaucracies, and subjecting both public and private development proposals to environmental impact assessments. The United States was the first to adopt this path with a wave of federal legislation during that decade; however, these measures were implemented through pre-existing governmental mechanisms (DRYZEK, 2013). Environmental policy swiftly garnered significant legal authority within these political entities to challenge governmental decisions, being invoked by both developmentalists and environmentalists. Efforts were also made within the internal management of the US Federal Congress to prevent the co-optation of this agenda by specific interests (ACKERMAN and HASSLER, 1981). Moreover, increased opportunities arose for public contributions to the formulation of these policies. Nevertheless, as noted by Dryzek and Dunleavy (2009), all these incremental changes failed to alter the fundamental structure and functioning of the government itself.

In the 1970s, another strand of environmental theory of the State emerged, primarily championed by Europeans and North Americans who believed that the ecological crisis called for more radical measures. Their warnings were substantiated by studies forecasting disasters arising from the finite nature of resources, coupled with population growth and economic activity (CATTON JR., 1982). During this period, predictions derived from computer models gained traction, with a summary of their findings published in 'The Limits to Growth' (MEADOWS et al., 1972). While the contents of the book, which sold four million copies worldwide, offered minimal political analysis, it correlated the understanding of global limits with certain models of the State and political regimes (DRYZEK, 2013; DRYZEK and DUNLEAVY, 2009).

The emergence of a critical body of scholarly literature, alongside the availability of systematic and reliable data on environmental destruction in the 1970s, led to the questioning of key concepts in political economy developed by traditional theorists of the democratic State. Among these concepts, two are particularly relevant for our discussion: 'externalities' and 'public goods'. Additionally, a third concept emerged from the analysis formulated by biologist Garret Hardin (1968): the notion of a 'common-pool resource'. These three concepts – externalities, public goods, and common-pool resources – highlight that rational-maximizing human behavior, which ideally should result in beneficial outcomes through the 'invisible hand', as formulated by Adam Smith (2007), may now lead to collective harm. In each case, the adverse outcomes find an illustration in the environment: externalities, exemplified by pollution, inadvertently harm third parties as a result of market transactions; public goods, such as environmental quality, are of interest to all but are not easily provided in the market as their production lacks profitability (for example, selective waste collection); common-pool resources, which include the atmosphere, watersheds, and oceans, are accessed freely by companies and individuals who benefit from their exploitation, yet they share the costs of resource degradation with others (ECKERSLEY, 2003).

In all these three problem categories, the State is understood as the collective authority capable of intervening to ensure that externalities are internalized, for example, through anti-pollution legislation that compels polluters to acknowledge and reduce damage. Government actions can also ensure the provision

of public goods and the protection of common resources. If environmental problems are not too severe, all of this can be managed through common policy development, as was the case with initiatives that emerged in the 1970s in the United States and were subsequently adopted by other countries. However, in the event of severe problems where collapse is imminent, this type of incremental political response proves insufficient (DRYZEK and DUNLEAVY, 2009), as evidenced, for instance, by the successive tragedies in Mariana and Brumadinho, Brazil (ROCHA, 2021), among numerous other disastrous events not prevented by ordinary State policies.

Hardin's (1968) understanding, which swiftly became a staple in the toolkit of environmental analysts (DRYZEK, 2013), stems from the acknowledgment of the finite nature of environmental resources and underscores the detrimental consequences of the utilitarian logic focused on the freedom of rational self-interested individuals, who tend to prioritize actions that benefit themselves over measures that mitigate shared costs – a theory which found application across various fields of social studies⁶.

In the case of environmental goods, it's conceivable that different actors may attempt to shift the burden of environmental protection onto others while they continue to pollute and exploit natural resources themselves. Consequently, if all rational actors pursue resources that interest them, the tragedy related to the scarcity of resources will unfold within the democratic State. This dilemma prompted some theorists to advocate for authoritarian solutions. One such instance was Robert Heilbroner (1974), who envisioned a future where the only viable option would be a government combining religious guidance and military discipline to compel people to cease abusing natural resources. Dryzek and Dunleavy (2009, p. 247) label this perspective as 'eco-authoritarian thinking', emphasizing that it cannot be limited to the nation-State level, as numerous ecological issues, such as global water preservation,

⁶Utilitarian theory gained such widespread acceptance and followers in the theoretical formulations of the global North that its impact extended to the annals of democratic theory. According to rational choice theory, for instance, as proposed by A. Downs (2013), when faced with mutually exclusive alternatives, an agent always opts for the one with the 'highest expected utility return'. Rational individuals, as underscored by the Downsian M. Olson (2011), will not act to promote their common or group interests unless the group is exceptionally small, or coercion is present. Olson (2011) details the rationality underlying the decision-making of maximizing agents as follows: "If there is some quantity of a collective good that can be obtained at a cost sufficiently low in relation to its benefit that some one person in the relevant group would gain from providing that good all by himself, then there is some presumption that the collective good will be provided. The total gain would then be so large in relation to the total cost that someone individual's share would exceed the total cost" (OLSON, 2011, p. 35).

necessitate international and global solutions. Therefore, addressing these problems would require extending authoritarian regimes to larger organizations. If the current international system renders this approach unlikely, countries would need to resort to severing ties with the rest of the world and, following Hardin's metaphor (1977), behave like occupants in lifeboats who ignore those drowning in the sea of ecological misery.

Therefore, the recognition of the finite nature of natural resources and the subsequent dissemination of this understanding in the public sphere of various countries – facilitated by diverse channels such as the protest actions of green social movements – were some of the serious challenges presented by environmentalism. Consequently, eco-authoritarianism and the perspective of resource limits posed substantial hurdles to nation-States entrenched in a paradigm prioritizing economic growth, thereby deeming these theories excessively radical. Economists contended that pricing would be perfectly capable of inducing necessary corrections in response to resource scarcity (DRYZEK, 2013; DRYZEK and DUNLEAVY, 2009); concurrently, other scholars accepted the concept of resource finitude but disapproved of the political pathways proposed by this line of thought (OSTROM, 1990). This critique suggested that resource users themselves could forge cooperative agreements for their management without the need for government intervention, let alone an authoritarian State. This line of thought resonated with strands of green political thought dating back to the early environmental era, such as theories promoting cooperation in small-scale social arrangements (SCHUMACHER, 1975), or even those advocating for eco-anarchism (BOOKCHIN, 1982; JENSEN, McBAY, and KEITH, 2011).

Amidst these developments – the potential for regulation through economic logic and proposals for new political arrangements – the notion of global ecological limits, while never refuted, began to receive less prominence with the rise of the notion of sustainable development as a feasible discourse. The turning point towards the prevalence of the concept of sustainable development was the UN Brundtland report, published in 1987 under the title 'Our Common Future', which posited that economic growth and environmental preservation did not need to be in conflict (ECKERSLEY, 2003). A complementary ecological modernization discourse also galvanized environmental policy in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and Germany (DRYZEK, 2013; MOL and SONNENFELD, 2000; WEALE, 1992). According to this

framework, preventing pollution was crucial since, from an economic perspective, pollution indicated inefficient use of raw materials. Additionally, ensuring a clean environment had implications for the health and happiness of workers; furthermore, the potential for profit could serve as motivation for the development of pollution control technologies (DRYZEK and DUNLEAVY, 2009).

While the notion of ecological limits lost momentum in the 1970s due to the rise of ecological modernization and sustainability theses, the recognition of such limits persists (ADAMS, 2009; DRYZEK, 2013). If sustainable development truly represents a departure from 'business as usual', there has to be some degree of acknowledgement of the existence of boundaries to environmental exploitation. Thus, the notion of ecological limits continues to be an unavoidable premise shared by environmentalists across the spectrum, from moderates to radicals, which has gained even more traction in the 2000s with the increased focus on climate change (MENDELSON, 2011; NORGAARD, 2011).

Environmental demands and political action

As the 20th century drew to a close, environmentalists from diverse ideological backgrounds had largely grasped the detrimental impacts of unbridled industrialization on the environment. Moreover, they began to acknowledge the insidious influence of industrialism on the State (DRYZEK and PICKERING, 2019; ECKERSLEY, 2020). However, even though economic growth now needs to be defended, much of the industrialist⁷ ideology persist. Presently, there exists a widespread belief that the primary function of State governments is to manage the economy, with the promotion of economic growth serving as its chief metric of success (DRYZEK, 2013).

Evidently, the rhetoric surrounding this political commitment varies significantly. In the United States, figures like Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush were unapologetic about prioritizing economic growth over environmental concerns. Elsewhere, some governments acknowledged environmental issues but continued to

⁷Dryzek and Pickering (2019) suggest that 'industrialism' usually serves as a generic term to designate a social, economic, and political system characterized by the intensive use of natural resources, mass production, and technology, often at the expense of the environment and social equity.

prioritize economic growth (DRYZEK and PICKERING, 2019)⁸. The crux of the matter, as Dryzek and Dunleavy (2009) noted, lies in the temporal scale: if the State fails to promote economic growth, it faces swift repercussions from global financial markets, investor decisions, and voters in the next election. Conversely, when public policy focuses on ecological causes, its negative impacts are diluted and dispersed beyond national borders, while its positive effects are only felt in the long term.

Embracing sustainable development⁹ and the principles of ecological modernization initially seemed like a promising solution – for many reasons, however, it proved insufficient (DRYZEK and PICKERING, 2019). Only moderate environmental concerns can be readily incorporated into the State through these means, and moderation entails alignment with the fundamental tenets of liberal political economy, particularly its emphasis on economic growth (HAWKEN, LOVINS, and LOVINS, 1999). Within this perspective, more profound transformations in political economy that could enable a more harmonious coexistence with non-human nature, for example, would have to be set aside. This is significant because, despite the congeniality of green discourse, the genuine concern regarding ecological limits persists: ecological modernization¹⁰ simply disregards global constraints, focusing instead on short-term political concerns and localized geographic boundaries (ADAMS, 2009). As time has passed, the focal point of sustainable development has shifted towards being more business-friendly and attentive to the imperatives of economic growth.

Given the uncertainty surrounding the achievement of desirable results, many environmentalists are hesitant to fully embrace sustainability. Dryzek and Dunleavy (2009, pp. 252-253) offer the following example of how moderation can fall short: Richard Nixon, a conservative president who had no sympathies for environmentalism, oversaw the first expansion and institutional development of environmental legislation. This apparent contradiction stemmed from Nixon's recognition of the legitimacy crisis in the late 1960s, prompting his administration to

⁸In Brazil, during the Bolsonaro administration, this type of stance was taken to an extreme: government rhetoric not only prioritized economic growth but also adopted an 'anti-environmental rhetoric'. Refer to Hochstetler (2021); Motta and Hauber (2022).

⁹For more on the history and conceptual developments of the notion of 'sustainable development', refer to Adams, 2009; Dryzek, 2013; Sachs, 2015; Whitehead, 2018, 2014.

¹⁰For more on the history and conceptual developments of the notion of 'ecological modernization', refer to Curran, 2018; Dryzek, 2013; Dryzek et. al., 2003; Eckersley, 2004; Mol, Sonnenfeld and Spaargaren, 2009; Mol and Sonnenfeld, 2000; Young, 2000.

adopt environmental measures as an administrative solution. The crisis was not instigated by environmentalism alone, which at that time lacked the capacity to destabilize economic policy by itself. However, the convergence of the anti-Vietnam War movement with more radical factions of the New Left, Women's Liberation, Black Power, and environmentalism collectively formed a counterculture perceived as a threat to political stability. In response, the Nixon administration strategically embraced environmentalism, perceiving it as the least radical movement among them, which led to the implementation of a series of environmental policies. However, these policies gradually waned in the late 1970s, coinciding with the easing of the legitimacy crisis. The lesson drawn from this, particularly resonant in the global North, was that legitimacy crises present opportunities for environmentalism to exert profound influence on public policy. Furthermore, this dynamic, at least initially, can be driven not by moderation, but by radicalism.

At times, when peaceful marches and other orderly forms of protest failed to yield the desired outcomes, activists resorted to more radical tactics of direct action to draw attention of the press and public opinion to environmental demands. Many of these tactics proved successful (DOHERTY, 2005). Autonomous organizations such as 'Greenpeace', along with its more radical offshoots such as the 'Sea Shepherd Conservation Society' and later 'Earth First!' in the USA, became widely known for their use of direct action in protests. By employing these methods to capture the attention of media outlets and, consequently, a broad segment of the population to their demands (WALL, 1999), activists succeeded in swaying public opinion and driving the enactment of laws in significant cases, such as the international moratorium against whaling in 1982 and the successful boycott of seal-based products in the European community in 1983 (ZELKO, 2013)¹¹.

In the early 21st century, the debate and theses surrounding environmental risks began to ignite a timely legitimacy crisis. These risks encompassed a range of concerns including nuclear technology, food safety, pollution, genetically modified

¹¹Among radical direct actions, notable examples include the famous tree-sitting by 'Earth First' members, as well as blockades, equipment sabotage, and so forth. In the context of the campaign for whale preservation, actions targeting whaling ships gained prominence. In these actions, 'Sea Shepherd' activists, aboard ships or small boats and often in the presence of press cameras, positioned themselves between the animals and the harpooners. They also sometimes threw themselves into the turbulent and freezing sea in an almost suicidal attempt to prevent the hoisting of already slaughtered whales.

organisms, and other biotechnologies. What sparked this crisis of legitimacy was not solely the risks themselves – since it is not about suggesting that risks are now greater than in previous periods – but rather the recognition of a distinct public response, a public perception that encompasses a new dimension to the relationship between politics and environmental issues (JÄNICKE, 1996). In other words, the perception of risk can fluctuate over time, and different agents, such as environmental movements, can play a significant role in shaping this dynamic.

As asserted by Dryzek and Dunleavy (2009), the risks posed by environmental issues have the potential to undermine the legitimacy of the State and its economic policies. This crisis presents opportunities for intensified environmental advocacy and can broaden the spectrum of values shaping public policy. Moreover, environmental policies arising from this crisis may involve direct participation of environmental groups in political initiatives, leading to quasi-governmental outcomes independent of State involvement, such as boycott campaigns targeting companies until desired behavioral changes occur.

Furthermore, the potential for risk-related issues to instigate a legitimacy crisis is heightened when coupled with social movements ready to embrace them. This conjunction of risks and social movements operating in the public sphere has been a defining feature of Germany since the 1970s. In Germany, the concept of ‘sub-politics’ (BECK, 1992) intertwines with radical and moderate representative movements, ecological research institutes, and corporations. The synergy between moderate environmentalism, seeking to place ecological modernization at the center of the State’s agenda, and radical social movements, emphasizing risk issues, has proven to be promising. This does not mean that Germany has achieved something akin to a comprehensive ecological transformation or reflexive modernity as conceptualized by Ulrich Beck (1992)¹². However, Germany appears to be the country closest to this objective at the dawn of the 21st century, partly owing to the enduring memory of

¹²Ulrich Beck (1992) elaborated on the concept of the risk society, suggesting that it would usher in a profound crisis of trust in the authority of scientists, technologists, and the governments that employ them. In this risk society, conscientious citizens reject the inevitability and convenience of economic growth and technological advancement, instead critiquing prevailing social and economic development paradigms. Beck (1992) suggests that this could lead to the emergence of new forms of democratic ‘subpolitics’, which might foreshadow a ‘reflexive modernity’ where core questions about economic policy require rational justification and public scrutiny.

radical social movements (DRYZEK, DOWNES, HUNOLD, SCHLOSBERG, and HERNES, 2003).

What we aim to underscore here is that the strength of environmentalism in the public sphere challenges and confronts certain political propositions, particularly those rooted in utilitarian economic theory. This, in turn, gives rise to distinct legitimacy crises reminiscent of early theories regarding natural resource limits. Subsequent reactions to these crises have delineated political arenas that have been occupied by both moderate responses – such as sustainable development and ecological modernization – and radical approaches, exemplified by the direct actions of social movements. We will delve into these elements further as integral components shaping environmental policy.

Environmentalism and the State

Over the decades, environmental movements have thrived in various organizational formats, spanning from grassroots local groups involved in blockades or lobbying on specific issues to national-level coalitions orchestrating major protests, and even supranational organizations. At the international level, alongside organizations such as ‘Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace’, numerous NGOs tackling climate change have collaborated on joint actions, forming networks such as the ‘Climate Action Network’ (LIPSCHUTZ and MCKENDRY, 2011).

Similar to other endogenous groups, environmental organizations garner attention due to the broad transversality of their themes and concerns, appealing to a wide range of potential members. Unlike a labor union, for instance, there is no single centralized location where potential members are concentrated and easily recruited. Additionally, individuals who express concern for the environment may swiftly redirect their focus towards other social or even personal matters. Consequently, many environmental groups experience high turnover rates and maintain a highly diversified membership base (DRYZEK and DUNLEAVY, 2009).

The organizational structure must also grapple with what Downs (1972) coined as ‘the issue-attention cycle’ in public opinion: the cycle commences with the alarming discovery of a new environmental problem; subsequently, in response to voter pressure, governments devise policies to tackle the situation; finally, discussions

about these political measures become increasingly technical, leading to a decline in public interest. However, the problem does not vanish; it merely becomes routine.

These characteristics typify parties whose central focus centers on environmental commitments and present challenges to more established political parties. In plurality-rule elections, voters often cast ballots for small green parties despite knowing their candidates have minimal chances of winning. These parties, especially in Anglo-American countries where plurality rule applies, strive to secure their political representation. However, established parties may attempt to capitalize on environmental concerns, as it happened from 2006 to 2008 when the English Conservative Party adopted the slogan 'Go green, vote blue' (DRYZEK and DUNLEAVY, 2009). The observation that the environmental approach lacks a specific theory of the State extends to the structure and process of policy-making, as well as to social influences on the government. Environmental principles may not only serve to critique institutions and policies but also facilitate comparative assessments (CHRISTOFF and ECKERSLEY, 2011).

Jänicke and Weidner (1997) assert that the effectiveness of the State to cooperate and engage with environmental issues hinges on its capacity to promote social learning about ecological problems. Effective collaboration in addressing environmental challenges requires well-funded and developed institutions capable of generating and applying knowledge. Furthermore, it must have the capacity to ensure the implementation of the ensuing policies. Integration among actors and different policy areas is equally vital, resulting in an integrated environmental plan spanning the entire government. This perspective underscores the significance of environmental organizations collaborating with the government rather than opposing it. Additionally, it highlights the need for all administrative bodies, not just those directly involved with environmental issues, to embrace environmental values. Ideally, these agencies should operate within a framework that recognizes environmental rights constitutionally and adheres to formalized principles such as the precautionary principle, which mandates action even in the face of scientific uncertainty regarding environmental risks (DRYZEK, NORGAARD, and SCHLOSBERG, 2013; ECKERSLEY, 2004). This capacity has been particularly pronounced in Northern European countries that have embraced ecological modernization. In contrast, the traditional approach to science in the United States and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom, demands a

robust scientific consensus before any action is pursued. As a result, political inaction is often justified by invoking scientific uncertainty, such as that surrounding global warming (DUNLAP and McCRIGHT, 2011). However, it is important to note that even the best-performing States may still fall short of meeting all necessary requirements.

Furthermore, environmentalists also grapple with challenges posed by territorial boundaries (CHRISTOFF and ECKERSLEY, 2013). From an ecological perspective, boundaries are arbitrary: they reflect the legacy of historical events rather than ecosystem boundaries. For example, a drainage basin may span multiple countries, as seen in the case of the Amazon River. Consequently, environmental policies that make sense within the borders of one country may not effectively address issues across the entire river basin. Some countries, for example, may address their toxic waste issues by disposing of it in rivers as it crosses their borders (DRYZEK and DUNLEAVY, 2009).

In recent decades, agreements between sovereign States have shown some success, but they have often relied on self-imposition – and sovereign States are generally unwilling to accept sanctions regarding environmental issues. This challenge is particularly acute in the case of climate change, where economic considerations and State interests often overshadow the ozone problem, especially since most economies heavily rely on fossil fuels (DRYZEK, 2013). Moreover, within sovereign States, subnational boundaries sometimes intersect ecosystems, creating similar challenges to those encountered at international borders and often leading to disputes among different entities within a federation (BULKELEY, 2011). One potential solution is to centralize policymaking authority at the highest level of the State. However, this empowerment of the central government may result in insensitivity, with principles and regulations overlooking local ecological variations and failing to incorporate specific knowledge that could inform policy responses (FARBER, 2011).

In this regard, the environmental critique of the State also incorporates a specific analytical perspective about the prevailing rationality in the modern world. Max Weber (1982) argued that addressing complex issues involves breaking them down into sub-problems, solving these sub-problems, and then integrating these solutions into a larger framework. According to Weber (1982), this analytical principle serves as the foundation upon which rational bureaucracies organize themselves,

resulting in hierarchies and pyramidal organizational structures. However, the challenge arises from the inherent complexity in the numerous elements and interactions within a decision-making system. Environmental problems, by their very nature, are often highly complex as they emerge at the nexus of human systems and ecosystems – and bureaucratic coordination tends to falter in the face of such complexity (STEFFEN, 2011). The solutions derived from the various dissected parts of the problem often fail to merge into a cohesive solution, leading to instances where these subunits may inadvertently work against each other. This can result in a continuous shifting across the boundaries of the original broken-down problem (DRYZEK, 1987).

The singularity of social movements in environmental policy

The rise of environmental social movements

In January 1972, during the first global wave of environmental concerns, particularly in the US and some Western European countries (GRASSO and GIUGNI, 2022), the British journal ‘The Ecologist’, founded by philosopher and environmentalist Edward Goldsmith, published its 19th edition titled ‘A Blueprint for Survival’. This edition would become renowned for its boldness and pioneering approach to environmental issues, foreshadowing objectives and practices adopted by collective actors of the time and influencing myriad green party platforms formed between the 1970s and 1980s (ECKERSLEY, 2003), thus becoming a landmark in the field¹³. Amidst warnings about the impacts of human actions on the planet and criticisms of governmental inaction, the article urged individuals and civil society organizations to unite in a robust social movement to pressure governments to take action against the encroaching environmental degradation threatening their very existence. “We need a Movement for Survival, whose aim would be to influence governments, and in particular that of Britain, into taking those measures most likely to lead to the stabilization and hence the survival of our society” (GOLDSMITH, 1972, p. 23).

¹³In England, this edition had a direct influence on the creation of the country’s first environmental party, PEOPLE, in November of the same year. Subsequently, this party evolved into the Green Party of England and Wales (cf. DOHERTY, 2005, p. 242).

How 'The Ecologist' framed the issue would ultimately define an entire phase within environmentalist perspectives, characterized by the dominance of the 'survival' paradigm in debates and approaches of the period. Anarchic, authoritarian, or selfish solutions to the crisis, as described above, are largely heirs to this zeitgeist, as it was during this period that some of these key ideas were formulated. These proposals were founded on considerations of what sacrifices would be necessary, at the least possible expense, to ensure the continuation of human survival (ECKERSLEY, 2003). Would it be democracy? Individual freedoms? Globalized capitalism? National sovereignty?

Subsequent advancements in environmental debates gradually abandoned the survival paradigm as a central organizing axis of their discourses. However, the interest in and reliance on social movements, viewed as potential tools for political and social transformation, remained prevalent in specialized publications in the years that followed (DOHERTY, 2005; DRYZEK et al., 2003; ECKERSLEY, 2003; HUXSTER, 2022; JOHNSON and AGNONE, 2022; NULMAN, 2015). This focus stemmed from the pivotal role played by these collective actors – interconnected in networks and largely emerging from an active civil society – in shaping different dimensions of democratic regimes and public spheres across nation-States. Their actions, grounded in solidarity and counter-hegemonic identities, consistently challenged societal norms with the unique ability to alter them, thereby mitigating the impacts of power and money on the lifeworld (COHEN and ARATO, 1997). Historically, these collective actors have also played significant roles in implementing democratization processes and expanding civil liberties in many countries, not only in the West (DRYZEK et al., 2003; TILLY, 2007)¹⁴.

The power and influence wielded by social movements is intricately linked to their capability to rally civilian populations around causes perceived as collective interests, as well as their effectiveness in addressing these demands broadly. In other

¹⁴It's also true, however, that in the confrontational dynamics between power holders and challengers – the social movements – the diverse characteristics expressed by regimes in each State tend to influence certain traits of its civil society, such as the types of collective organizations it harbors, its level of radicalism, and its degree of rejection or embrace of institutionalization. A thorough examination of how political opportunity structures shape collective action can be found in analyses rooted in the tradition of contentious politics. For instance, McAdam (2017) examined how the unfavorable political climate in the United States during the period of environmental awakening, among other factors, resulted in relatively sparse environmental activism in the country. In this article, however, our focus is on the agency of the actors, i.e., the processes involved in pursuing their collective goals, such as agenda setting.

words, the performances of social movements – such as different types of protests, campaigns, and petitions – have the potential to resonate with at least two distinct audiences: firstly, they target decision-makers and power-holders, often embodied by the State, employing pressure tactics; secondly, they aim at civil society itself, employing mechanisms for recruitment, persuasion, and raising public awareness.

When successful, campaigns orchestrated by social movements cultivate shared meanings that shape interactions among diverse collective actors. Furthermore, the power exerted by social movements is particularly potent when these performances create ripples that spread rapidly, as observed in large-scale cycles of global protests (TARROW, 1999). In such cases, the capabilities of these actors extend beyond geographical and linguistic barriers, fostering waves of collective actions which, in turn, precipitate governmental transformations and changes in political culture across multiple countries.

The emergence of the first social movements focused on environmental issues during the 1960s and 1970s was not coincidental¹⁵: global student protests, including the notable events of May 1968 in France, coincided with pro-democracy movements in places under military dictatorships, such as Prague and Madrid, as well as the rise of critical Catholicism in parts of South America (DELLA PORTA and DIANI, 2006). Collectively, these movements inspired an entire generation and catalyzed a series of cultural shifts (CASTORIADIS et al., 2018), introducing new values perceived as groundbreaking by the public. Some scholars argue that the so-called ‘new social movements’ (TOURAINÉ, 1969), which include environmentalists (DRYZEK et al., 2003), were characterized by three key aspects: their self-limiting radicalism,

¹⁵Numerous collective actors have contributed to environmental issues and the advancement of this agenda in civil society, such as NGOs, the scientific community, traditional populations, Indigenous peoples and/or ancestral communities. In an expanded conception of civil society, even trade unions and business organizations can be considered relevant components in advancing the environmental agenda (LOSEKANN, 2007). However, our focus here specifically centers on social movements themselves, which we understand as particular types of sociopolitical organizations created for specific purposes and characterized by a set of performances widely recognized by the public as well as systematic efforts to formulate public agendas directed toward the State or even civil society itself (TILLY, CASTAÑEDA and WOOD, 2020). In this context, our approach does not address actors who organize for the defense of the rights and interests of their ‘people’ and/or groups oppressed due to injustices caused by cultural and/or imperialist disrespect, as observed in numerous nations still fighting for decolonization to this day. Instead, our attention is focused on environmental movements that incorporate a broader base of ecological and humanitarian values, advocating for the protection of the environment in general, viewing it from the perspective of the global interconnectedness of environmental issues and considering it a central value to be embraced by Western democratic governments and civil societies.

eschewing the pursuit of State power; their organizational fluidity and dynamism; and their emphasis on collective identity. Consequently, these movements played a pivotal role in shaping a new political culture in the West throughout the 1970s (DELLA PORTA and DIANI, 2006).

The late 1990s brought new perspectives to environmental movements worldwide. While criticisms and warnings about the advancement of capitalism had been voiced by many environmental activists in preceding decades (DOHERTY, 2005), this period witnessed environmental issues seizing a new opportunity to enter collective agendas, propelled by the rise of a new wave of protests for global justice, also known as the 'alter-globalization or alter-mundialization movement' (DELLA PORTA and DIANI, 2006). These international campaigns redirected public attention to a reality that was already widely acknowledged: the phenomenon of globalization. This term, associated with an economic development model that sought to replicate itself worldwide – as advocated by international forums such as the WTO or the World Economic Forum in Davos – became politically charged by those denouncing the risks linked to the perpetuation of this economic order, with implications for climate issues and for human populations excluded from participation in this process, particularly in the global South. A pivotal arena for this activism in the global South, coinciding at that time with the rise of the 'pink tide', was the World Social Forum, which held its first three editions (2001 to 2003) in Brazil, in the city of Porto Alegre.

These campaigns brought together various sectors of civil society, including international agencies, NGOs, and local social movements. While movements related to environmental causes had already demonstrated a tendency towards internationalization and institutionalization during this period (GRASSO and GIUGNI, 2022), many local organizations continued to operate and play crucial roles in environmental advocacy. According to Doherty (2005), radical protests staged by local autonomous groups, such as those witnessed during the 1999 Seattle campaign, rejuvenated destructive forms of protest as potent tools for action, especially since larger, less radical organizations, willing to engage in dialogue, were sometimes invited to join advisory boards of influential groups, only to have their viewpoints consistently ignored.

Risks, limits, and potential of environmental movements' integration into the State

It is widely recognized that social movements and other environmental-focused organizations have become integral components of contemporary societies (GRASSO and GIUGNI, 2022). As previously noted, these collective actors have played a pivotal role in elevating environmental concerns to the forefront of public discourse in numerous countries to varying degrees. Consequently, scholars have increasingly directed their attention towards understanding the specific mechanisms through which these movements influence civil society – by raising public awareness – and exert pressure on political (HUXSTER, 2022, JOHNSON and AGNONE, 2022; NULMAN, 2015) and economic institutions (HESS, 2022), advocating for the implementation of legal measures to address environmental degradation. However, some researchers have also voiced concerns about the risks of these actors being co-opted by prevailing systemic logics and rationalities and have focused on establishing legitimacy criteria for these actors and their actions. In certain instances, as social movements integrate political and economic systems, they risk being ‘domesticated’, ‘neutralized’, or ‘watered down’, thereby losing their transformative or ‘emancipatory’ potential (DRYZEK et al., 2003; ECKERSLEY, 2003). Conversely, while some movements uphold their radical stance and remain faithful to their original values, they may struggle to produce tangible results or effectively influence power structures (DOHERTY, 2005). As a result, understanding the mechanisms of action of these collective actors, along with their associated risks, limitations, and potential, has become a pressing concern among many researchers in the field.

The adjectives ‘environmental’, ‘environmentalist’, or ‘green’, utilized to characterize specific types or groups of social movements, often serve as umbrella terms encompassing highly diverse organizations in terms of size, structure, values, demands, and even specific goals. This polysemy has prompted researchers to develop different frameworks aimed at defining what qualifies as a legitimate environmental social movement and, consequently, which types of organizations fall outside this classification. For many scholars, a crucial aspect of a social movement’s legitimacy lies in the extent to which its stance challenges the political and economic structures that underpin contemporary societies. Consequently, the legitimacy of these collective actors is often contingent upon factors such as the degree to which the movement rejects or confronts dominant power structures (DOHERTY, 2005); the

extent to which it questions certain imperatives of nation-States, such as the imperative of economic growth (DRYZEK et al., 2003); or the depth of its engagement with the moral considerations of the non-human world, expressing genuine emancipatory concerns for the broader biotic community – in other words, the extent to which they demonstrate a dynamic sense of autonomy (ECKERSLEY, 2003).

In the realm of results-oriented literature, we find many studies that have turned their focus to movements linked to environmental causes. These studies typically analyze on one dimension of the outcomes of collective action, among at least three broad categories concerning impacts on political, biographical, and cultural spheres¹⁶ (GIUGNI, 2008). An illustrative example of such a study is Nulman's (2015) examination of a movement advocating for changes in State policies and the mechanisms employed for this purpose. Looking at the climate change movement in the United Kingdom and its attempts to influence national policies regarding greenhouse gas emissions, Nulman (2015) identified five different mechanisms or causal processes employed by the movement across three local campaigns and analyzed them in terms of their levels of effectiveness in achieving the expected political outcomes. In this case, as in many others, mechanisms such as disruption, galvanizing electoral preferences, seeking direct political access, appealing to international policy bodies, or resorting to legal mechanisms were combined in varying proportions by the movement to achieve the desired political results¹⁷.

¹⁶Here, we corroborate the analytical separation between the outcomes and consequences of collective action. In this assessment, outcomes are understood as the returns obtained from deliberate and conscious intentions to influence changes, whether in politics, the economy, or society – a topic discussed in slightly more detail in this article. On the other hand, consequences can be seen as unintended or unexpected returns, making them more challenging to detect and measure. Like outcomes, consequences can also have an impact on institutions beyond the control of movements; however, literature focused on the analysis of consequences often prefers to emphasize the processes of personal transformation among activists resulting from their engagements. For analyses of this kind related to participation in environmental movements, refer to Vestergren and Drury, 2022.

¹⁷The scholarly literature on social movements in Brazil is vast and offers multiple perspectives, ranging from the mobilization of various actors within civil society to the relationship between movements and the State and the political system as a whole. However, akin to foreign literature, until recently, the focus of this national literature has been to prioritize or concentrate on the mobilization efforts of various groups within civil society and their demands, often portraying these groups as actors opposing the language and logic of institutionalized State powers. More recently, another significant interpretative approach to social movements has gained traction in Brazil, aiming to move beyond the mobilization/co-optation framework and demonstrate that the symbolic institutionalization of social movements influences the State's cognitive capacities, thus impacting public policies, governmental legitimacy, and society at large more effectively. For further exploration of this perspective, refer to Szwako and Lavallo, 2019.

According to Nulman (2015), however, the effectiveness of each mechanism, as well as the decision to opt for one over another, depends on a contextual evaluation of the available opportunities for the movement in each case. In other words, factors such as the level of public concern about the issue, the size of the movement's membership base, their readiness to engage, and the existence or lack of related legislation and scientific data, among others, significantly influence these choices and the scope of successful results.

Another compelling example of how environmental movements can instigate change, particularly within civil society itself by influencing public opinion toward a transformation in environmental attitudes, can be found in Huxster (2022). Drawing on a review of various empirical studies conducted in the United States, Huxster explored several potential pathways as well as barriers encountered by movements in achieving this type of result. Huxster (2022) emphasizes the importance of key elements capable of steering public opinion in a desired direction – what the author refers to as “drivers of public opinion” (HUXSTER, 2022, p. 476). According to the proposed argument, the perception of imminent risk, generated by harmful behaviors on a global scale, has served as one of such drivers employed by certain environmental movements. By leveraging this resource, these movements have played a crucial role in raising awareness of the risk within society, albeit often failing to generate significant long-term changes in attitudes, as concerns of global magnitude such as these tend to be diluted in individuals' everyday perceptions. Media coverage also plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion on environmental causes. The level of activity within civil society directly impacts the extent of media coverage, which, in turn, can further solidify public opinion on these matters.

Still according to Huxster (2022), movements also utilize their diverse channels and methods to translate issues and jargon – technical, scientific, and political – into simple terms. This translation can help engage the wider public in environmental causes. By creatively naming issues relevant to their cause, movements foster new discourses that offer a vocabulary for comprehending problems and devising solutions. However, public involvement in pro-environmental values and behaviors does not necessarily lead to active participation in environmental movements. Huxster (2022) underscores the disparity between environmentally oriented attitudes and behaviors. Approaches such as ‘if everyone just does their part,

we can save the world!' may lead to individually comforting behaviors – such as transportation choices, consumption habits, and forms of clicktivism – which are questionable in terms of effectiveness, even if universally adopted. In the long run, the author adds, campaigns emphasizing these approaches tend to be counterproductive in their goals to raise awareness of actual problems and, more importantly, to foster genuine activism among the public.

Perspectives advocating for a radical transformation of modern liberal democracies toward a more ecocentric model of public governance – such as the Green State (DRYZEK et al., 2003) – depict social movements as potential drivers for this transformative process. Concurrently, the presence of increasingly institutionalized and internationalized environmental movements has emerged as a global trend among modern democracies (GRASSO and GIUGNI, 2022), permeating even political institutions, such as the evolution of green parties. However, contrary to participation theories that posit the inclusion of actors as inherently positive, Dryzek et al. (2003) argue that the circumstances for the benign inclusion of environmental movements are not only rare but also demanding for these actors. From this perspective, such circumstances exist only when the defining interests of the movement align with one of the imperatives of the State¹⁸. Otherwise, the outcome of this inclusion process tends to be co-optive, resulting in minimal practical results and, even worse, bureaucratic effects that dissipate the movement's energies. This type of outcome, the authors add, also tends to elicit feelings of doubt and regret among activists, as well as alienation from their support bases.

From the standpoint of many environmental movements and their action strategies, full integration into the State is rarely, if ever, seen as inherently desirable. For this reason, Dryzek et al. (2003) argue that such a decision demands careful consideration, weighing whether the movement's substantive goals are better served by incorporating their demands into State policies or by maintaining a focus on civil society and a confrontational stance against power structures. According to the

¹⁸Dryzek et al. (2003) define State imperatives as the unavoidable tasks from the standpoint of State management and its long-term maintenance, “notably, to keep order internally, compete internationally, raise revenues, secure economic growth by preventing disinvestment and capital flight, and legitimating the political economy.” (DRYZEK et al., 2003, p. 56). For instance, the pioneering efforts to address environmental issues in the United States occurred only when this agenda could align with the imperative of legitimacy, which was then undergoing a crisis.

authors, in appropriate historical contexts, the response to these challenges should involve adopting a dual strategy (cf. DRYZEK et al., 2003, p. 155), combining actions on both fronts to increase the movement's chances of success.

The debates outlined above suggest some pathways as well as challenges for environmental social movements. The dynamic nature of these collective actors leads many to view them as bastions of ecological causes and promoters of alternative future projects. However, caution is needed in such assessments, as systemic logics associated with corporate interests always seem to find new ways to co-opt the movements' struggles and demands. Consequently, environmental movements may face what Jasper (2016, p. 21) termed the 'Janus dilemma'. They must decide whether to focus on maintaining and strengthening their internal informal bases, expanding solidarity networks, preserving alternative lifestyles, etc, or turning to socio-institutional structures – State, market, and civil society – to pursue broader objectives centered around a propositional agenda. Dryzek's proposal (2013, 2000) for a green democracy – not only characterized by green values but also by institutions more attuned to environmental demands– touches on this second issue of socio-institutional structures, as we will explore further below.

The democratic imperatives of environmentalism

From aggregation to deliberation

The environmental critique underscored by social movements is deepened by their advocacy for specific interests that the State, despite its responsiveness to ordinary voters, is incapable of representing. Environmental issues entail long-term implications, meaning decisions made today have repercussions for many decades or even centuries. However, the problem lies in the fact that future generations cannot vote (DRYZEK and TANASOCA, 2021; HOWARTH, 2011). Moreover, non-human entities cannot vote either, despite human actions being significant drivers of ecological destruction in the non-human world, including biodiversity loss, habitat destruction, and species facing extinction. Nature itself lacks a direct say in policymaking beyond the advocacy of its defenders and can only express itself when framed in terms of human interests – the intrinsic value of forests or their right to exist is often deemed insufficient (GOODIN, 1996; SHIVA, 2005; SMITH, 2003).

Beyond the inherent rights and intrinsic value of nature, which should be acknowledged and protected regardless of their utility to humans (NAESS, 1988), as recognized by numerous Indigenous cultures and non-Western spiritual traditions (LADUKE, 1999; SHIVA, 1994), advocates of ecocentrism and/or anthropocentrism¹⁹ argue that recognizing such rights is paramount for preserving healthy ecosystems and, consequently, humanity itself, including future generations, insofar as nature plays a central role in ensuring life on the planet (CARSON, 2002). Additionally, recognizing these rights can serve as a deterrent against environmental degradation and exploitation by holding individuals and institutions accountable for harm to the environment (BOYD, 2017; CULLINAN, 2011; DOBSON, 2004). In a parallel perspective challenging Western anthropocentrism, post-human world theorists advocate for the urgent recognition and protection of non-human entities, such as animals and ecosystems. They argue that these entities possess their own experiences and interests (MORTON, 2017), deserving ethical and moral consideration similar to humans. Consequently, justice should extend to the environment, as humans are not the sole life forms worthy of consideration (LATOURE, 2004).

In short, the environmental critique of the State is rooted in several factors: the State's limited territorial scope, its limited capacity to address global and transnational issues effectively, its priorities, and its failure to represent the interests of future generations and non-human entities. These criticisms have sparked discussions on conceptions of justice (DRYZEK and TANASOCA, 2021) and spurred a diverse agenda of proposals for democratic reform (ECKERSLEY, 2020; 2004). Apart from the aforementioned aspects, environmental politics also raises significant criticisms against 'aggregative' democratic models, which perceive democracy as a process for reaching collective political decisions – typically within the context and historical framework of nation-States – by aggregating preferences expressed through citizens' votes (ELSTER, 2007). Essentially, environmentalism questions the idea of democracy being solely about electoral politics, where parties

¹⁹It is worth noting that theorists of the Anthropocene have never reached a consensus regarding granting rights to nature. Their positions mainly focus on highlighting human responsibility for the damage and environmental destruction of the planet. In other words, while some advocate for eco-rights, others emphasize the 'Capitalocene' and its focus on the finite nature of resources and the planet's sustainability. For a more detailed exploration of the issues and problems related to the Anthropocene, refer to Biset and Noreña, 2022; Santos and Santos Jr., 2022.

compete for votes by catering to specific demands from political actors. This perspective presents several challenges, including the recruitment and retention of members in environmental movements, public reluctance towards environmental issues, and the struggle to implement policies that effectively tackle transnational concerns or are hindered by bureaucratic divisions within the State (DOBSON, 2004).

In 'Environmental Politics', Robert Goodin (1992) appears to remain stuck in a similar problem when advocating for a participatory model of democracy. He argues (GOODIN, 1992, p. 128) that participation is not an end in itself and does not inherently carry normative value. Instead, it serves as a means to promote better decisions by incorporating a larger portion of those concerned with political issues. Goodin (1992, p. 168) further distinguishes between procedure (democratic) and substance (environmentalist), emphasizing that democracy, as a procedure, cannot produce outcomes before the democratic process itself, thus offering no guarantees of encompassing substantial proposals like those of environmentalism. The author contends that green political theory represents certain values, which differ from political agency, understood merely as a means to promote those values.

Thus, Goodin's proposal (1992) of participatory democracy does not deviate significantly from the existing liberal aggregative democracies. His political theory seeks to introduce an additional element into electoral political participation by advocating for the partial and incremental adoption of the political agenda proposed by his green political theory by national governments through political parties. This perspective assimilates environmental issues into political theories of justice – however, even collective actions mobilized by various agents do not encompass the prospect of changes in the democratic regime itself, but rather focus solely on its contents. Furthermore, the author fails to address the issue of political agency — as if it were simple to persuade individuals in positions of political authority to prioritize environmentalist solutions over the values of the capitalist market system, and consequently face the short-term political-electoral costs associated with such decisions.

In contrast to the proposals championed by Goodin (1992), Dryzek (2000) emphasizes the necessity not only for environmental values but also for green political structures. He argues that achieving this goal is feasible through a more effective

integration of political and ecological communication. These structures comprise political-institutional mechanisms capable of integrating various elements: feedbacks to rectify disturbances in ecosystem balance, coordination of problem-solving across different dimensions to prevent issues in one area from creating problems elsewhere, coordination among different actors to ensure the provision of public goods without encountering the problems posed by Hardin's theory (1968), robust capacity to operate effectively in diverse contexts, flexibility to make internal adjustments to the political structure itself in response to changing conditions, and resilience to address environmental imbalances or crises (DRYZEK, 2000, p. 143).

Implementing these criteria, however, requires what Dryzek (1987) termed 'rational ecology' — the development of a rationality that can underpin political decisions and recommendations. This aspect, often lacking in liberal, elitist, or pluralist models of democracy, according to Dryzek (2000; DRYZEK and STEVENSON, 2011), can be connected to an expanded discursive model that encompasses non-human actors (DRYZEK, 2013; DRYZEK and PICKERING, 2017). Therefore, green democracy places a strong emphasis on deliberation, infused with a communicative rationality that extends to the non-human world. Dryzek's proposal (2000) represents a significant departure from other deliberative theory authors, who typically consider only humans as agents in a process of rational communication.²⁰

Dryzek's proposal (2000) centers on the notion that green values alone are insufficient without a corresponding green political framework: the author advocates for a fusion of ecocentric ethical principles with appropriate political mechanisms to tackle environmental challenges. Thus, the focus is not on prioritizing anthropocentrism or ecocentrism, but on enabling interactions between the human world and non-human nature through various levels and forms of communication, requiring humans to adapt accordingly.

Dryzek (2000) aligns with the Habermasian perspective that deliberative democracy should be rooted in the concept of communicative rationality. However, he extends this argument by advocating for the inclusion of non-human nature within the realm of communication. Habermas' theory applies communicative

²⁰For a compilation of deliberative positions from different ideological backgrounds that share this perspective, refer to Melo and Werle (2007).

rationality to entities capable of dialogue and communicative action, who assert, challenge, and justify claims of validity — in other words, it applies to human beings. Dryzek (2000) even suggests that, in this regard, “Habermas is as anthropocentric as orthodox liberals” (DRYZEK, 2000, p. 148). In turn, Dryzek’s proposal (2000) seeks to emancipate communicative rationality from the confines imposed by Habermas and broaden its scope to encompass non-human agents of nature.

Dryzek (2000) proposes a distinction between agency and subjectivity, contending that entities in the non-human world, although not subjects in the same sense as humans, should be regarded as living agents infused with significance rather than mere inert matter. In a deliberative model, these agents should not be silenced; instead, diverse forms of communication should be embraced. Nature speaks, and the essence of a green democracy should involve actively listening to and acknowledging agency within — and of — nature, which emits signals that require interpretation in a process of communicative interaction.

In this regard, Dryzek’s proposal (2000), while grounded in central tenets of communicative rationality theory, deviates from the notion that it applies only to interventions that instrumentalize or exploit the natural world for self-interest. Such a narrow view would be feasible if communicative rationality were solely applied to humans, who primarily raise issues concerning their own interests. Dryzek (1990) advocates for the expansion of communicative interaction with the natural world, emphasizing the need for it to be rational rather than purely instrumental, labelling this specific approach to communicative ethics as “green reason” (DRYZEK, 1990, p. 195).

For Dryzek (2000, pp. 153-154), green democracy, derived and expanded from deliberative democracy, implies a more egalitarian political relationship between the human world and nature. Within the deliberative framework, this equality does not imply sharing the literal same capacity for speech, but rather entails equal political representation and the expectation that human actors possess the capacity to listen — an essential dimension of discursive democracy. This capacity can be cultivated through institutional mechanisms such as mandatory reports and assessments of cumulative regional environmental impact. Moreover, the institutional design of green democracy, as proposed by Dryzek (2000), entails dismantling institutional barriers that impede communication emanating from natural systems.

In this sense, green democracy functions as a regulatory and normative ideal, providing a framework for critiquing current political structures and proposing methods to establish a democracy aligned with ecological cues. The implications of this regulative ideal extend to various institutions, spanning from local political bodies, as endorsed in bioregionalism, to global coordination initiatives facilitated by organic networks associated with civil society organizations. These groups can inform local authorities about global issues, as demonstrated by international environmental movements such as 'Greenpeace' and 'Friends of the Earth International'.

The many shapes of Green democracy

Debates initiated by scholars like Goodin (1992) and Dryzek (2000) sparked a decisive shift in environmental State theory and a reevaluation of its relationship with democracy starting from the 1990s (DRYZEK, 2013; ECKERSLEY, 2004; LAFFERTY and MEADOWCROFT, 1996; MATHEWS, 1996; MINTEER and TAYLOR, 2002). Naturally, there is no consensus regarding the type of democracy best suited to an environmentalist vision: while some uphold the principles of liberal democracy, others promote a more discursive, participatory, and radical approach (ECKERSLEY, 2020). For the latter, the discussion begins with questioning the overburdened capacity of State bureaucracy and the compartmentalized problem-solving approach of liberal democracies. This proposal for renewal suggests that through dialogue, even with the division of complex problems, there can be interaction among people dedicated to addressing both larger sets and subsets of problems, in a less centralized and more effective form of dialogue, engaging not only public officials but also concerned citizens more closely connected to these issues (FISCHER, 2017).

This approach, which seeks decentralization to tackle problems, closely aligns with notions of network governance (STEVENSON and DRYZEK, 2014), often involving activism from social movements such as the environmental justice movement in the United States (SCHLOSBERG, 1999). These environmental social movements reject traditional centralized organizational structures, opting instead for a bottom-up organizational approach without a central authority. Effective problem-solving within these decentralized networks relies on authentic and competent participation and communication that encompasses diverse perspectives, constituting their discursive-democratic dimension, and accomplished in institutionalized deliberative spaces

(DRYZEK and PICKERING, 2017). While this process may be discursive, it does not always adhere to democratic ideals (DRYZEK and PICKERING, 2019). In fact, it diverges from the discursive ideals seen in the renewal of democratic theory infused with environmental critique, as some participants, such as polluters and developers, engage in the debate not to contribute positively but precisely due to their poor environmental conduct and underlying profit-driven motives (BÄCKSTRAND; KHAN; KRONSELL and LOVBRAND, 2010).

While these approaches may not fully align with democratic discursive ideals, they nonetheless indicate a democratic opening within the State, particularly in its administrative dimension (HAMMOND, 2020). However, the constraints on authentic deliberation, stemming from alignment with State priorities or even some form of co-optation, compel environmental democrats to explore alternative arenas. Deliberation need not be confined to governmental institutions; it can occur in the public sphere and involve actors somewhat removed from the State (DRYZEK, 2013; ECKERSLEY, 2004; GOODIN, 1996; TORGERSON, 1999). The lingering question is how this activity in the public sphere can genuinely influence outcomes. Connections in this regard are not always obvious and direct; some may entail straightforward adjustments to public discourse, which subsequently shape policymakers' understanding (DRYZEK et al., 2003).

Since the 1970s, one of the most significant accomplishments of environmentalism has been the development of a new lexicon. In tandem, environmentalism has pioneered another trend: social governance, where governmental involvement primarily serves to validate existing practices (MEIDINGER, 2003; SZASZ, 2011). Since the 1970s, more radical propositions within green ideology have advocated for self-regulation of this kind. These agendas have concentrated on small-scale human communities and called for a drastic decentralization of issues, to be managed communally and cooperatively, with reduced reliance on markets and hierarchies (BOOKCHIN, 1982). A practical application of this restructuring, rooted in radical communitarianism, is bioregionalism (MCGINNIS, 1999), which criticizes the arbitrary ecological nature of political borders and advocates for redefining State and other political borders to align with ecosystem boundaries. Consequently, there have been notable shifts in the potency of the novel discourses advanced by environmentalism regarding

understandings of certain dimensions of the democratic regime and the functioning of democracy.

Eco-authoritarianism, eco-anarchism, and bioregionalism directly challenge the fundamental organizational principles of the democratic State and its corresponding economic policies. Nevertheless, the premise of the State as the primary locus for environmental action remains unavoidable: in modern democracies, the State shapes the preconditions for green activism across all levels, including within civil society, and can act as the primary barrier against market imperatives (ECKERSLEY, 2020). In this sense, as argued by Eckersley (2004), a green State should operate within a normativity that incorporates rights to information about disaster risks, rights to litigation for third parties and those affected by risks, as well as rights to 'temporary citizenship' for individuals impacted by effects that cross their borders. Additionally, it should uphold principles such as the precautionary principle, the polluter-pays principle, and recognize the inherent rights of nature. Eckersley (2004) envisions this green State as cosmopolitan, acting as a responsible international citizen in environmental affairs. Thus, throughout its history, as outlined in this article, the scrutiny of ecological theory and environmentalism has profoundly influenced discussions on normative politics, both regarding theories of democracy (DOBSON, 2004; DRYZEK and DUNLEAVY, 2009) and issues of justice (DRYZEK and TANASOCA, 2021; ECKERSLEY, 2003).

Concluding remarks

The correlation between environmental movements and democracy, although fundamental (DOHERTY, 2005), is neither simple nor direct. The intricate history of environmentalism and the democratic State, with their varied models and propositions that either impede the creation of environmental solutions or actively oppose them, underscores the significant role of environmental social movements in environmental debate and practices, especially in democratic societies, where they play an undeniable role as challengers (MACHIN, 2018; SAWARD, 1996). At times, environmental movements assert that the State and certain democratic procedures, designed to safeguard interests they deem questionable, are actually part of the problem. Therefore, when we look at these collective actors in terms of their risk dynamics and possibilities, it becomes clear that addressing ecological issues requires a fundamental

critique of classical models of liberal democracy. Furthermore, it is essential to view contestation as a goal to strive for if we are to navigate and overcome these complex problems. Understanding democracy as a concept in constant flux, subject to ongoing dispute, is crucial for political theory aimed at addressing the environmental realities of the modern world.

According to John Meyer (2018), this kind of political theory, an 'environmental political theory', is rooted in the tradition of a political theory that critically examines concepts such as democracy, justice, freedom, and representation, and extends this critique to include sustainability, environment, and nature. This entails recognizing the unceasing significance of these concepts in public discourse; it also requires acknowledging that disagreements about these concepts often reflect underlying differences in meanings and values, rather than mere incorrect definitions that can be rectified with more information or technical inputs. As such, these concepts are often referred to as 'essentially contested' (WALDRON, 2002). Secondly, as Meyer (2018) further argues, this political theory is committed to the critical analysis of power structures, which entails addressing both the risks and potentials these structures pose for environmental social movements in their relationship with the State and challenging anthropocentric views – a perspective increasingly contested in political theory adopting a post-human perspective (BRAIDOTTI and BIGNALL, 2018; CONOLLY, 2017). Thirdly, it extends beyond mere critique to propose normative arguments for alternative arrangements of social and political institutions, as emphasized by the democratic demands posed by environmentalism in the more contemporary literature. By exploring these dimensions, we sought to demonstrate their interconnectedness and relevance for a comprehensive understanding of environmental politics, a field which has experienced profound transformations in both depth and quality insofar as it becomes increasingly subject to criticism and dispute.

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