

# Social-ecological transformation and COVID-19: the need to revisit working-class environmentalism

*The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic points to unequally distributed vulnerabilities in society. Unevenly distributed disadvantages are also found in processes of a social-ecological transformation. The concept of working-class environmentalism arguably presents a way out of this deficiency through incorporating and focusing on working class and precarious people in processes of social change. We develop four theses for our argumentation to revisit working-class environmentalism and conclude that this would build social resilience for coping with future crises of the whole of society.*

Jonathan Friedrich, Jana Zscheischler, Heiko Faust

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The tremendous challenges of our time, specified in, among others, the so-called climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and issues of social and environmental justice, require a transformation of the current mode of living (Brand and Wissen 2018). Although the scientific debate acknowledges that these topics are inextricably linked, public (sub)discourses show that they are still often thought of as independent, not only in Germany but also worldwide, as part of the dichotomization of nature and humans (Brand and Wissen 2018, see Nightingale et al. 2020 for an exemplary elaboration of this phenomenon for the case of climate change). This dichotomy has also been argued to present an inherent characteristic of capitalist societies (cf. Fraser and Jaeggi 2020). Thinking of these topics separately can lead to present and future (goal) conflicts surrounding transformation processes, such as those associated with the “job versus environment dilemma” (Räthzel and Uzzell 2011), which is based on the question of saving either jobs (and linked livelihoods) or the environment. A specific example of this dilemma is the conflicts surrounding energy transitions, more specifically coal mines, in Germany and the question of further employing people in a sector that is considered responsible for a vast amount of carbon dioxide emissions or saving the

environment through a transformation towards renewable energy alongside shutting down coal mines. Among others, these conflicts and uncertain future livelihoods are pushing people towards joining populist and even authoritarian right-wing movements and parties that deny environmental issues such as climate change and thus function as countermovements of social-ecological transformation (SET) (Dörre et al. 2018)<sup>1</sup>.

## An elitist and exclusivist discourse

However, the public linkage and integration of these topics are affected not only by the “job versus environment dilemma” but also by elitist and exclusivist discourses<sup>2</sup> and opposing living realities or job worlds in terms of different classes (for an analysis of classes in late modernity see Reckwitz 2019). This means discourses that focus on environmental sustainability transitions without specifically considering the social consequences of such transition processes and often connected discourses that include a limited share of actors. Examples of such limitedness are found in political movements and parties in Germany (e.g., *Fridays for Future* or the Green Party) that do not represent the heterogeneity of society (see, e.g., Sommer et al. 2019 for more information on the socioeconomic background of *Fridays for Future* protesters). In accordance with Kotkin (2020) and his theory of a new age of neo-feudalism, these and other public discourses are shaped predominantly by cognitive elites made up of representatives of

Jonathan Friedrich, MSc | +49 33432 82425 | jonathan.friedrich@zalf.de  
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2340-6719>

Dr. Jana Zscheischler | jana.zscheischler@zalf.de  
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9062-820X>

both: Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF) e.V. | Land Use and Governance | Eberswalder Str. 84 | 15374 Müncheberg | Germany

Prof. Dr. Heiko Faust | Georg-August-Universität Göttingen | Institute of Geography | Göttingen | Germany | hfaust@gwdg.de  
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0307-6943>

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- 1 Similar tendencies are also attributed to other states in the global North such as the USA in terms of the rise of “Trumpism” and voters originating from the former coal and steel industry (see for example Purdy 2020).
- 2 For a comprehensive discussion of conflicts between liberal cosmopolitan elites (also framed as “anywheres”) and the oppressed class (also framed as “somewheres”) that rest in their values, realities, and the expression of the superiority of the former over the latter, see, for example, Strenger (2019).

science, journalism and an academic knowledge class. These actors often have good intentions in expressing opinions that – not necessarily intentionally – argue against the reality of many people (see also Strenger 2019). Ironically, even discourses on “just transitions” that can originally be attributed to workers communities and trade unions are partially being hijacked and instrumentalised by cognitive elites (for further elaboration see Stevis et al. 2020). Opposing living realities are reflected in discourses on organic or fair food production that may neglect to raise the question of affordability for low-income groups (see figure 1). Disparate living realities and job worlds are furthermore visible in terms of the rural-urban divide, which leads to highly contested perceptions of, for example, the resettlement of wolves in Europe and its value for humans and nature (König et al. 2020).

### Integration of precarious groups into transformation processes

In the course of the current COVID-19 pandemic, opposing job worlds and living realities gained increased visibility. Job worlds determine the ability to work from home, in contrast to being considered “system relevant” and required to go to work. Distinct job worlds influence the likelihood of infection, as outbreaks have occurred in the agro-food system, more specifically, the meat pro-

cessing industry and horticulture farms (Middleton et al. 2020). Nonetheless, these issues are not novel, as the precarious working conditions and accommodations that determine the chance of infection have been the aim of previous research (Wagner and Hassel 2016).

However, the higher visibility of these conflicts due to the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates that the issues associated with these conflicts are still not solved and are grounded in the nonintegration of precarious groups into transformation processes against the background of the design mission of a SET of the whole of society (see also Jahn et al. 2020). We argue that this nonintegration even leads people to follow populist, right-wing movements and parties that deny the existence of environmental crises such as climate change (Dörre et al. 2018). This results in the follow-up question on how we can reintegrate these different perspectives into the strategic milestones of a SET. In this way, we stumbled over the concept of working-class environmentalism being related to the concept of environmentalism of the poor and work on just transitions<sup>3</sup>, although it has previously been a matter of scientific debate (e.g., Anguelovski and Martínez Alier 2014, Barca 2012, 2020, Bell 2020, Stevis et al. 2020, Wissen and Brand 2019).

<sup>3</sup> For further elaboration on just transitions see the recent collection by Morena et al. (2020).

**FIGURE 1:** Protesters calling for an agricultural transformation in Berlin 2019. Protests for environmental issues like organic or fair food products are often dominated by cognitive elites and may neglect to raise the question of affordability for low-income groups.



Although the term working-class environmentalism linguistically is based on the Marxist term working class, it does not follow the classical Marxist definition but rather defines working class, building on Bourdieu, “as those people who make a living out of physical work performed in agriculture, industry or service, typically occupying the bottoms of the labor hierarchy, i. e. the lowest paying, highest risk jobs” (Barca 2012, p. 62). In accordance, working-class environmentalism is defined by Barca and Leonardi (2018, p. 491) “as those forms of environmental activism that aim to radically transform ‘the economy’, based on principles of mutual interdependency between production, reproduction, and ecology.” This definition attempts to solidarise different movements and actors and thus to overcome the “job versus environment dilemma” (Räthzel and Uzzell 2011), which is based on job blackmail. Working-class environmentalism is grounded in a working-class ecology<sup>4</sup> and aims to create a SET from below (Barca and Leonardi 2018). Barca (2012) sees environmental justice movements as the most promising example of working-class environmentalism in terms of a mutual integration of social, cultural, and environmental concerns alongside challenging existing power relations. This also means that working-class environmentalism is an intersectional concept and thus “is not the equivalent of a blue-green alliance, a perspective which is impaired by differential class/gender/racial positionalities among labour and environmental constituencies (Gould et al. 2004) and that can only have a limited impact on working-class ecology” (Barca and Leonardi 2018, p. 491).

## A concept and practice for a social-ecological transformation

Against this background, we formulate four theses that argue for the importance of revisiting working-class environmentalism. Our aim is to reopen the discourse on this concept and to discuss opportunities for social resilience building. We argue that this could support joining forces for a SET and finally also avoid the emergence of populist, right-wing countermovements (for further elaboration on the topic of social-ecological transformation and right-wing populism and parties in Germany, see Sommer et al. 2021, in this issue). We use the agro-food system, more specifically, the livestock production and processing industry, as an example to illustrate our arguments. Our reflections are spatially and empirically limited to the global North and, more specifically, Germany but can well be transferred to other regions in consideration of the concept of intersectionality (e. g., Kaijser and Kronsell 2014).

4 Definition of “working-class ecology as the web of systemic relations between working-class people and their living and working habitats” by Barca and Leonardi (2018, p. 489).

5 See also Reckwitz’s (2019) diagnosis of the contemporary precarious class (defined through material and cultural poverty) as the continuation of the historical working class (defined through physical work).

6 Social resilience can be defined as “abilities or capacities to tolerate, absorb, cope with and adjust to environmental and social threats of various kinds” (Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013, p. 8).

As outlined above, the COVID-19 pandemic has offered new insights into the systemic connections and consequences of contemporary modes of production and reproduction. In our view, this shows the urgent need to widen the discourse on sustainability transformations based on the integration of multiple knowledge and perspectives that build on working-class environmentalism. The following four theses briefly explain our arguments.

**Working-class environmentalism as a way to make academia acknowledge that different classes (reflected in, i. e., working environments) exist in Germany, which leads to different and unequal current and future vulnerabilities.** There is a need to acknowledge the existence of different classes and of people who are employed under precarious conditions and may be regarded as socially excluded from the scientific and public discourse surrounding sustainability transformations. The current pandemic has again shown that people with different intersectionalities are exposed to crises in different ways. Examples are found in the meat processing industry or on vegetable farms, where the working environment increases the likelihood of infection. This argument accounts for the contemporary working class in general – a working class respectively precarious class that is framed not by the Marxist definition but rather by the precarious working conditions in terms of, for example, contracts, payments, migration, and accommodation. Arguably, care work, jobs in the so-called sharing economy, and jobs in the construction sector are included in this definition<sup>5</sup>. Using the concept of intersectionality, this diagnosis can well be extended with regard to knowledge and power issues constructed through, for example, different gender and racial realities and even move beyond humans (see Kaijser and Kronsell 2014, see also Kuran et al. 2020 for tackling the concept of vulnerability from an intersectional perspective). The meat-processing industry functions as an example of how these realities often intersect, being characterized through a large share of migrant workers, involving subcontracting and inadequate accommodation (Wagner and Hassel 2016). Thus, society in Germany has multiple vulnerabilities and injustices exemplarily determined by job realities, which need to be taken into account when debating transformations. The working class respectively precarious class embodies these vulnerabilities. To build social resilience<sup>6</sup> to cope with and explicitly strengthen transformative capacities (Keck and Sakdapolrak 2013) for coping with future crises (e. g., climate change-induced phenomena, economic crises, or other pandemics), it is therefore important to discuss the origins of the different vulnerabilities and integrate them for future development. The COVID-19 pandemic can function as an opportunity to build future social resilience by using working-class environmentalism as a concept to foster transformative capacities.

**Working-class environmentalism as a way to overcome the dichotomization of nature and humans.** This argument builds on the observation of current discourses on ecological and social problems and coupled solutions. In livestock production, much of the literature has focused on emissions, issues of land-use change,

and animal ethics. However, the working conditions of people in this sector are less researched and integrated into ideas of how to transform the whole sector. We admit that multiple knowledge and selective knowledge exist in society and academia. Nevertheless, we argue that the current divide of social and ecological realities and knowledge builds on the existing dichotomization of nature and society in public discourse (for further elaboration on this dichotomization, see, e.g., Brand and Wissen 2018, Fraser and Jaeggi 2020). The high number of COVID-19 cases shows that the current livestock system (including production and consumption) produces not only ecological but also social issues. This means that solutions need to integrate these two aspects by taking a SET literally, which implies systemically analysing problems and solutions. In this regard, we argue that the concept of working-class environmentalism offers a way out of the dilemma and could finally help in creating a new paradigm in social-ecological discourses and especially practice in Germany.

**Working-class environmentalism as an approach to widen the discourse on SETs in such a way that it integrates and focuses on marginalised voices.** In the process of revisiting working-class environmentalism a question is what role science must play. In our view, working-class environmentalism specifically follows the ideas of inclusion and emancipation and integrates marginalised voices into the discourse surrounding social-ecological futures. Bell (2020) even goes beyond integration in arguing that subaltern voices stand at the core of a transformation. In practice, this could also mean not solely aiming for consensus-based decisions, as this “could lead to marginalization of minority voices and perspectives”, as outlined by Cockburn et al. (2020, p. 5), in the sustainable management of socio-ecological systems. In general, this empowerment builds on the argument of situated knowledge, as those with privileged perspectives do not have knowledge about the working conditions in, for example, the meat processing industry. The integration of subaltern voices should occur not only in public decision-making but also in scientific knowledge production and, in particular, empirical research. In this respect, a focus on equitable and fair access to knowledge and material sources, language, participation, and workshops in environmental decision-making processes is important (Bell 2020).

**Working-class environmentalism as a conceptual framework to develop methodological approaches for a SET of the whole of society.** Without the integration of precarious voices into the public and scientific discourse, a SET of the whole of society is impossible. Therefore, we argue that the conceptual foundations of working-class environmentalism present ways of developing methodologies that focus on subaltern people. We highlight the following points in this regard: the definition of these methodologies requires the critical reflection of scientists to overcome contemporary knowledge hurdles (epistemic and ontological), as scientists qua socialisation belong to the liberal elites<sup>7</sup> (Strenger 2019) and could at first face refusal by the working class. Furthermore, scientists need to find ways to centre their research on subaltern groups

in terms of obtaining access to specific milieus, for example, via key actors or personal relations. This requires flexibility in time, space, language, and finances to meet the needs of the research objects (Bell 2020). We make a plea that we, as academics, need empirical case studies that critically and adaptively perform and reflect this methodological idea – with possibly unknown ends. This does not mean debating and theorizing about the working class without critically and deeply empirically engaging with the realities, values and beliefs of this social space. In terms of the livestock system, this would mean finding ways to get in touch with workers in the meat processing industry to, for example, ethnographically experience and analyse their living and working realities and ideally find solutions to contemporary crises.

## Conclusions

We have outlined how revisiting the concept of working-class environmentalism can be used in 1. social resilience building, 2. contributing to overcoming the dichotomization of nature and society, 3. integrating the plurality of voices and perspectives in public and scientific discourse, and 4. functioning as a conceptual foundation to define and carry out new and adaptive methodologies. In the face of the current pandemic, this allows us to sharpen our view on the interlinked struggles associated with social and ecological issues, to empower working-class people for a fair and just sustainable future by integrating them into transformative processes and to build social resilience for future crises. We thereby refer to a working class respectively precarious class, which is described in terms of precarious working conditions and the embodiment of both social declassification and cultural devaluation (Reckwitz 2019).

In general, radical transformations emerge in niches, arguably deeply rooted in counterperspectives (Temper et al. 2018). Focusing on the working class may thus allow for new knowledge that could even leverage so-called radical transformations. The “green mainstream”, which mainly shapes the discourse on SETs, lacks experience and knowledge in this regard due to its privileged position in society (associated with higher social resilience to current and future crises). Therefore, the ideas of the “green mainstream” are limited in addressing the complexity of much-needed transformations. Thus, the inclusion of counterperspectives in public discourse and transformative processes and an explicit research focus on these subjects can function as starting points for so-called radical transformations following the design mission of a SET of the whole of society (see Jahn et al. 2020). In addition, using working-class environmentalism as a methodological framing would also contribute to returning the focus of the currently partially being hijacked concept of just transitions to its historical origins in the working environment and trade unions (Stevis et al. 2020). >

<sup>7</sup> Exceptions exist such as the *International Working Class Studies Association*, or the German *initiative Arbeiterkind* which are characterized by a high share of scholars that originate from the working class.

We have outlined how empirical work can use working-class environmentalism as conceptual framing for research in the global North and, more specifically, Germany. We want to highlight one additional aspect here: examples of general conceptual applicability exist. These examples from the so-called global South show the success of using this conceptual framing in developing methodologies, as research on environmental justice movements or on environmentalism of the poor has shown (Temper et al. 2018, for an overview, see Scheidel et al. 2020).

Finally, working-class environmentalism brings together discourses and struggles from which separation capitalism has benefited in the past. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the potential that lies in revisiting working-class environmentalism is to use the crisis as an opportunity to uncover the empirical and applied potential that rests in counterperspectives for transformative capacity building and radical change to cope with future crises.

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### Jonathan Friedrich

Studies in geography and natural area and regional management. Doctoral researcher at Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF), Müncheberg, Germany. Research interests: social-ecological transformation, bioeconomy, environmental justice, sustainable tourism development and climate change.



### Jana Zscheischler

Studies in environmental sciences and in communication sciences. PhD in agricultural sciences. Research associate at Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF), Müncheberg, Germany. Research interests: sustainable regional development, bioeconomy and societal transformation, and environmental justice.



### Heiko Faust

Studies in geography and international technical and economic cooperation. PhD in geography. Extraordinary professor in social geography and sustainable resource use at the University of Göttingen, Germany. Research interests: societal transformation, sustainable resource use, land use change, environmental governance.