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The new socio-ecological class conflict

Conflicting mentalities and interests in
the dispute over transformation

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and Matthias Schmelzer

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The BMBF junior research group Mentalities in flux (flumen) combines sociological and historical research to explore how people’s mentalities change in post-fossil transformations and how this change is reflected in the employment structure of society.

Today, there is broad agreement that fossil fuels, due to their limited availability and damaging effects for the climate, will need to be phased out within the coming decades. One proposed alternative is the idea of a bioeconomy, in which raw materials and energy are gained from renewable sources of plant and animal origin.

But this implies more than just a shift to renewable resources. In fact, the whole way modern economies are organized will have to change: Fossil-fueled economies rely on a constantly accelerating linear throughput of materials, from extraction through production and distribution to consumption and waste disposal. In contrast, bio-based economies draw on materials and energy sources that regenerate cyclically. Their production cannot be increased at will, but is subject to the natural limitations of these circular flows of matter and energy.

The historical emergence of economies based on linear flows of fossil resources radically transformed human work and was closely linked to basic mindsets, attitudes and shared imaginations compatible with the logic of constant growth. These mentalities differ between social groups, and they will undergo far-reaching change once again in the transformation toward bio-based economies. In short, mentalities evolve in parallel with the transformations of societies’ material and energetic basis – they are: Mentalities in flux.

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There is also a book in German based on this report containing more background information on the study, theoretical discussions and detailed descriptions of all mentalities. Open access and download:
https://www.campus.de/e-books/wissenschaft/soziologie/der_neue_sozial_oekologische_klassenkonflikt-18313.html



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1 The crisis and the dispute over transformation

European societies, and Germany in particular due to its vulnerable export-dependent economic model, are currently faced with a complex web of interlinked crises that call their systemic foundations into question. In addition to the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, there are the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the threat of energy shortages, inflationary pressure, budget crises, difficulties in providing for people seeking protection, growing support for authoritarian nationalist political forces, and increasing geopolitical tensions, all of which call into question what is generally taken for granted and expose the familiar political and economic conditions as highly fragile. This culmination is exacerbated by the ecological crises of climate change, species loss and the destruction of human livelihoods, the increasingly tangible effects of which are making it clear that economic growth is no longer a panacea for crises, but has itself become a driver of these interconnected crises.

One important dimension of this polycrisis is the intensification of social conflicts, which, alongside distribution conflicts over

scarcer (or politically scarified) resources, are at the same time always conflicts over how to deal with this situation and the possible ways out of it. In recent times, however, the willingness to deal with the overarching ecological crisis seems to get lost amidst the multitude of acute and hard-fought flare-ups and emergencies. This can be observed despite the fact that,

Part of the multi-dimensional crisis situation is also the intensification of social conflicts, which always revolve around how to deal with this situation and possible ways out.

on one hand, large sections of the scientific community are calling increasingly loudly for a comprehensive socio-ecological transformation of modern societies (IPCC 2023), and on the other, the Paris Climate Agreement and the *Sustainable Development Goals* of the United Nations represent globally agreed political commitments between

governments to far-reaching transformative goals. The socio-ecological transformation has thus become a kind of magnifying glass on a panorama of conflicts that is increasingly confusing but is nevertheless aligned through the common causal reference to the unsustainability of social (growth) dynamics and lifestyles that were previously taken for granted.

This constellation of a *socio-ecological transformation conflict* (Dörre 2020; Eversberg 2023; Fritz/Eversberg 2024) being played out at different levels and along different lines of conflict is the focus of this research report¹. Based on analyses of our representative population survey *BioMentalities 2022* conducted at the end of 2021, we interpret it as a multidimensional socio-ecological *class* conflict. We would like to emphasise that not only do conflicts over the energy transition, mobility, agriculture, the Heating Act, as well as seemingly less pressing issues such as economic redistribution or gender-neutral language, all refer back to the question of renegotiating self-evident societal truths addressed in the concept of transformation; nor is the contrary positioning of different sections of the population toward these conflicts simply an expression of „coincidentally“ different orientations or values; but, most importantly, that *class* effects can also be read from the conflicts – i.e. effects of systemically opposing positions within the social fabric that are rooted in the structure and logic of social processes. However, these are not to be understood exclusively in the sense of antagonism between the „top“ and the „bottom“ (as is suggested by the traditional understanding of the con-

cept of class), but as having several dimensions, according to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of class, to which we are orientating ourselves here (Bourdieu 1982). In line with this, it will be shown in the following that the transformation

The transformation conflict can be interpreted, meaningfully and in an analytically beneficial manner, as a class conflict not only in the vertical dimension of power, but also in the horizontal dimension of the contrast between education-based and property-based social positions.

conflict can be interpreted, meaningfully and in an analytically beneficial manner, as a class conflict not only in the vertical dimension of power, but also in the horizontal dimension of the contrast between education-based and property-based social positions.

The controversial nature of transformation as such can hardly be overlooked at present. Transformative initiatives are increasingly met with rejection and resistance from politicians and the general public, even in the pragmatic, small-scale forms in which they find their way into the political process. This is all the more true the more directly they affect the immediate living conditions and habits of the population. If we first take a superficial look at the distribution of responses to the individual questions that we asked around socio-eco-

¹ A book based on this report has been published by Campus in summer 2024 (Eversberg et al. 2024). For open access and download see QR code above.

logical goals and reform measures, our survey data confirms what a wide variety of studies on this topic have repeatedly found in recent years: While a clear majority supports environmentally-friendly and climate-friendly restructuring of the German economy in general, there is less willingness to take concrete action and less openness to tangible changes in their own lives. The majority of respondents tend to view social change with anxiety about social cohesion, a desire for protection against upheaval and hopes for technological solutions. Despite these limitations, many previous studies emphasise, with reference to the high level of fundamental support, that there is great potential for more climate protection with strong backing from the general population, provided that measures are implemented in a more socially acceptable manner and provided that targeted political management is implemented as well (BMUV/UBA 2023; Gagné/Krause 2021). We do not uncritically subscribe to this optimistic view, but would like to point out in the following the difficulties of realising these presumed potentials. These difficulties become obvious when we take a more differentiated approach and focus our attention on the differences and polarities between the socio-ecological mentalities typical of different social positions that can be distinguished among the respondents of our study. It then becomes clear that, to date, the prevailing interpretations of the conflict do not cap-

ture this constellation in its entirety. One such prevalent reading of the situation is that of an increasingly *polarised* debate between pro- and anti-transformative currents (Ottenei/Weisskircher 2022; Roose/

We describe the conflict constellation as a ‚triangular relationship‘ between three spectrums of socio-ecological mentalities, each of which has a distinctly different class position.

Steinhilper 2022), which supposedly feed into a deepening social divide similar to that in the USA. More recently, a contrasting interpretation has argued strongly that there is no such division in Germany, but rather a broad consensus on the fundamental need for change, from which only small minorities fundamentally deviate, and which can be obscured by sometimes emotionally charged differences over certain individual issues („trigger points“) (Mau et al. 2023). Contrary to both of these views, our study reveals a more complicated conflict constellation, which we describe as a triangular relationship of three spectra of socio-ecological mentalities, each of which is clearly differentiated in terms of class: an *eco-social* spectrum, a *conservative growth-oriented* spectrum and a *defensive-reactive* spectrum.

2 Socio-ecological Mentalities

Mentalities and interests

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the societal situation and the internal logic of the conflicts surrounding socio-ecological transformation, we rely on the approach of *socio-ecological mentality research* (Eversberg et al. 2021), which is rooted in the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu's relational sociology (Bourdieu 1982) and the social structure research (Vester et al. 2001) that builds on it. What we mean by socio-ecological mentalities are the basic attitudes and dispositions towards other people, non-human nature, society and oneself, which people have internalised from their life experiences derived from different social circumstances and which, as „embodied social structures“, shape their view of the world and their approach to the question of socio-ecological transformation.

The concept of mentalities therefore does not focus on isolated single attitudes, but on comprehensive „bundles“ or patterns of dispositions. Viewing them in the context of their typical biographies and everyday environments allows us to form a vivid

living picture of the conflict situations and a better understanding of the opposing world views „from their own logic“. Furthermore, the mentalities shaped by different social experiences can be placed in relation to each

By socio-ecological mentalities, we mean the basic attitudes towards other people, non-human nature, society and oneself, which, as „embodied social structures“, guide the way we deal with the question of socio-ecological transformation.

other within the space of social tensions and oppositions, by superimposing the analytical levels of mentalities and social (class) positions, thus obtaining a „map“ that enables us to see the overall socio-structural context of the conflict situation.

Central to the perspective in this report are the interactions between mentalities and the

typical experiences and interests associated with the socio-economic positions. The focus on the interplay and interaction of these two factors prevents differences in mentality from being reduced to a mere reflection of different social positions or, conversely, social grievances from being attributed to morally inadequate mentalities. By looking at the overall logic in which the individual attitudes are embedded, subtle differences can be discerned beyond a superficial consensus; deviations and opposing positions become recognisable within supposedly uniform majorities. This is because the analysis of socio-ecological mentalities focuses less on the absolute content of agreed or rejected statements and more on the relative

differences in their evaluation in relation to other mentalities and in relation to the average of all respondents. This focus on relative

The concept of mentalities does not focus on isolated single attitudes, but on comprehensive ,bundles‘ or patterns that can be described as ,overall attitudes‘.

differences and demarcations emphasises dimensions of conflict and contrasts that are either not taken into account in other research approaches or tend to be downplayed (as with Mau et al. 2023).

Ten types and three spectra of socio-ecological mentalities

The analyses in this report are based on the representative population survey *BioMentalities 2022*, which was conducted between September 2021 and January 2022. To this end, 4,000 people representative of the *German* population were asked about their attitudes to various socio-ecological issues, their everyday practices, their social background and their socio-economic circumstances. In a multi-stage statistical analysis process², ten different types of socio-ecological mentalities were identified from the large number of responses to socio-ecological questions.

Three overarching spectra emerged, comprising three types each, grouped according to their basic attitudes on *whether* and *how* a socio-ecological transformation should take place:

1. The **eco-social spectrum** encompasses those mentalities that are fundamentally in favour of and support a socio-ecological transformation, albeit with different emphases, their own contradictions and against different social backgrounds. The similarities that allow them to be summarised as a common spectrum consist of above-average

² First, a principal component analysis was carried out to identify six mentality dimensions or dispositions underlying the individual responses (documented in: von Faber/Fritz 2023), followed by several cluster analyses using different combined hierarchical-agglomerating procedures, the results of which were consolidated in a comparison and supplemented by a further ‘plug-in’ cluster analysis to clarify initially ‘fuzzy’ sub-areas in order to arrive at the most workable segmentation possible. The cluster procedure and its results will be presented in more detail in a future publication (flumen 2025).

pro-ecological and growth-critical attitudes, openness to changes in lifestyle and more

Ten different types of socio-ecological mentalities were identified in a statistical analysis process. These types could be grouped into overarching spectrums with regard to their basic attitudes on *whether* and *how* a socio-ecological transformation should take place: The *eco-social* spectrum, the *conservative growth-oriented* spectrum and the *defensive-reactive* spectrum.

egalitarian and integrative dispositions. Around a quarter of those surveyed are categorised as belonging to the *eco-social* spectrum.

- The *progressive self-actualising* mentalities (11% of respondents) identify primarily with a transformation perceived as social progress towards more equality and inclusion, for example with regard to gender and migration. Ecological and growth-critical attitudes are slightly above average, insofar as climate protection and ecological restructuring are seen as part of the same process of social progress, but are at odds with the desire for fun and adventure that is widespread in this mentality. This corresponds to the typical attitude to life of younger, more highly educated or still in training/studying, predominantly female and urban social groups.
- The *engaged eco-social* mentality type (7%) is characterised by strong growth-critical and ecological convictions as well as a

high level of active commitment to social and political change and the conviction that they can make a difference themselves. The respondents assigned to this mentality support the targeted regulation and reduction of material and energy consumption in the interests of socio-ecological goals. They are also prepared to accept restrictions and can be considered the most convinced advocates of a rapid and comprehensive socio-ecological transformation. This mentality type shows clear similarities to the *progressive self-actualising* mentality, not only in terms of attitudes but also in terms of social structure – the level of education is similarly high and incomes are above average. The urban-rural distribution, age structure and gender ratio correspond roughly to the average of all respondents. These mentalities are particularly widespread among highly qualified knowledge workers, in the education, research and cultural sectors and in the professional occupations.

- Finally, around nine per cent of respondents can be assigned to a mentality of *eco-social reduction*, which is primarily characterised by the intuition that restrictions on prosperity and lifestyle are necessary and unavoidable if ecological problems are to be tackled seriously. However, this reduction and sufficiency thinking is not framed in a conservative and pessimistic way, but in a way that is open to change, integrative and justice-orientated. Unlike the other two *eco-social* mentalities, this pattern does not have a clear social focus in educated and well-off circles, but is very broadly distributed socio-economically, with only certain focal points standing out among men and older respondents. However, this is not a „milieu“ that is present in everyday consciousness as a shared identity with people

in one's own environment. Rather, this mentality seems to be an expression of an awareness of the problem that is developing independently among many individuals and has not yet found unifying expression.

2. A relative majority of respondents (approx. 36%) can be classified as belonging to the **conservative growth-oriented spectrum**. Their central characteristics are conservative, conformist orientations focused on maintaining the prosperity they have achieved and, guided by this, a selective attitude towards social change that only accepts it if it does not call into question their own current lifestyle.

- This includes the mentality of *liberal growth-optimism* (11%), which affirms progress and liberalisation primarily in an economic sense, clearly and actively rejects criticism of growth and hopes to achieve an ecological restructuring of the economy solely through technological solutions and innovations. This is accompanied by a high level of confidence in the efficacy of one's own actions, combined with the will to assert oneself in competition and assume positions of power. This is the ideal-type mentality of the social elite: The eleven per cent of respondents assigned to this type have the highest income and a very high level of education, are predominantly men (two thirds) and are slightly older than the average. Typical professions are in highly qualified services and management positions with technical or organisational work logic in the private sector and public authorities.

- *Eco-conservatism* (12%) combines an ostensibly strongly „environmentally conscious“ and sometimes growth-critical self-image with a strong fixation on resisting change in one's own living conditions, which is seen as a threat to the prosperi-

ty earned through one's own hard work. This type of mentality also tends to make a sharp distinction between public and private life and to withdraw into the latter, shows clear defensive reflexes against globalisation and „too fast“ social change and exhibits distrust in the media and science. The unifying element is an anxious outlook on societal developments and their effects on the environment and on one's own life. The respondents assigned to this type are on average significantly older than the other respondents and have an average level of education for their generation (many with secondary school qualifications). *Eco-conservatism* is evenly distributed between men and women and is typically associated with average incomes and significantly more home ownership; it is more common in rural areas. It is common among retirees and employees in skilled trades, non-technical specialist professions and the construction industry.

- Finally, *harmonistic conformism* (13%) is characterised by the combination of conformist attitudes oriented towards fashions and (consumer) trends and harmonistic attitudes aimed at avoiding conflict and competition. The frame of reference for these orientations is predominantly the immediate living environment and their own opportunities for fun and experiences. Ecological problems only play a vague role in the background at best. Because they appear to be conflict-prone and a potential threat to one's own spheres of influence, climate policy and other ecological measures tend to be rejected. The private space of consumption is experienced as freedom and protection from a threatening society, and any questioning of this triggers fears. This type of mentality is most common among

women (60%) and somewhat more common among respondents aged 50-69 and tends to be associated with roughly average incomes and average school qualifications. It is more common among people who live in small towns and those who work in office jobs, in health and social services and in public administration.

3. Around a quarter of respondents belong to the third, **defensive-reactive spectrum**. What these mentalities have in common is a negative, sometimes even hostile attitude towards socio-ecological and transformative issues, and a perception of social change as threatening.

- *Instrumental growth-individualism* (7%) combines very strong support for growth, even at the price of ecological damage, with a tendency to rebel against social norms, a relatively strong focus on performance and dominance and a self-perception of being powerless in society. The resulting picture is a desire for advancement and self-assertion that disregards social and ecological issues, invokes libertarian notions of freedom, rejects ecological considerations and views nature merely as a means to an end of economic expansion from which one hopes to profit. This syndrome, which in many ways seems to correspond to the recently diagnosed „libertarian authoritarianism“ (Amlinger/Nachtwey 2022; Groß et al. 2024), is more common among young and predominantly male respondents, is associated with below-average income and education levels, and is also more common among employees in low-skilled business-oriented services, transport and logistics

- The *regressive change aversion* mentality type (7%) represents a particularly radicalised variant of the rejection of transformative policy. It is characterised by a massive

rejection of social and technological change, a deep mistrust of the public and science, and fierce opposition to government guidelines and rules. This is associated with a marked dissociation from abstract, scientifically based ecological ideas and a tendency to take refuge in harmonious consumer spaces and communal contexts in the face of perceived excessive demands from society. This mentality occurs across all age groups, is slightly more common among women than men and is linked to lower incomes and educational qualifications. It is more common among respondents in small and mid-sized towns and employees in office jobs, trades, crafts and the construction industry, as well as people who are unable to work and those who work in the household; it is especially rare among highly qualified people.

- The *reclusive necessity* mentality (12%) is characterised by experiences of social disadvantage and severely limited personal opportunities, and being restricted to what is absolutely necessary for one's own life, and dissociation from aspirations of active participation and self-actualisation. This goes hand in hand with a fundamentally defensive attitude towards change as well as a tendency to distance oneself from pro-ecological and growth-critical ideas, which are feared as something that could further worsen one's own situation. This mentality is widespread among older respondents, people with a medium to low level of education and relatively low incomes on average. It is less common in large cities and more common in small towns. Only 40 per cent of the respondents assigned to this category are employed; low-skilled jobs in industry, trades, services, low-wage sectors such as the catering and hotel industry, and temporary

work are particularly common; many are also unemployed or unable to work.

The tenth and final mentality type, which we call *acquiescence* (7%), is difficult to assign to a spectrum, not least because the corresponding response pattern is strongly characterised by a tendency towards well above-average affirmation of all statements. A statistical adjustment of this yea-sayer tendency, which often occurs among a section of the respondents in representative surveys and is called „acquiescence bias“ in science, reveals a similar picture to that of *instrumental growth-individualism*, but in a less inconsiderate and more adaptation-oriented variant. This is more common than average among the youngest and oldest respondents, among women, and especially among respondents with personal or parental experience of migration, and is associated with low educational qualifications and the

lowest incomes of all mentalities. Moreover, the acquiescence pattern is more common among people who are still in training, but also among people who are unable to work, and is otherwise spread across all occupations and economic sectors, with the exception of public administration and the education sector, where it occurs less frequently. The interpretation of the overall pattern of responses, taking into account the available information on the social backgrounds of the respondents, suggests that the tendency to agree could be part of a self-affirmation or survival strategy in which one's own insecurity and difficulty coping with institutions and authorities, while at the same time being aware of the pervasive requirement to be active and proactive, are covered up by an „escape forward“ (in this case the display of self-confidence by answering all questions in the affirmative).

Mentalities in social space – a map

In order to analyse the connections between opposing mentalities and conflicts of interest in society, we constructed the German *social space* from the data collected on the social and economic circumstances of respondents in accordance with Pierre Bourdieu's methodology (1982: 211–219; for Germany see also: Atkinson/Schmitz 2022). This was done using a statistical procedure (multiple correspondence analysis), in which the following characteristics were included: Occupation and education of respondents and their parents, income, home ownership and place of residence, living space, car ownership, shareholdings,

land ownership, assessment of own economic situation, gender, migration experience and employment in the public, private or non-profit sectors. The result positioned the individual respondents in the social space based on their individual characteristics. The concept of social space makes it possible to visually capture the relationships between social groups or classes along two axes. The first is the vertical **“top-bottom” axis** – the contrast between the rich, powerful and influential on the one hand and the poor, disadvantaged and powerless on the other, which most people automatically think of when they hear the term class.

Higher positions on this axis indicate a higher **social status**, i.e. a more recognised and influential position with greater privileges and opportunities to participate in society. Then there is the **horizontal axis** that shows differences in the **foundations and forms of social inclusion** on which the

The concept of social space makes it possible to visually capture the relationships between social groups or classes along two axes. The vertical axis shows the contrast between the rich, powerful and influential on the one hand and the poor, disadvantaged and powerless on the other. The horizontal axis shows differences in the foundations and forms of social inclusion.

respective social position is based – moving to the right along this axis, private material property is decisive, while education and participation in public infrastructures play a decisive role on the left. Typical of positions on the right-hand side of the space are, for example, home ownership in the countryside, farming family origins, manual and technical professions. On the left, typical characteristics are high educational qualifications and academic professions, but also rented accommodation, living in the city, migration experience and no or few cars in the household. At the top right of the space, in the so-called *economic faction of the upper classes*, there are, for example, entrepreneurs, managers in the private sector and state administration, wealthy and very wealthy

households, whereas higher-status positions on the left, in the *cultural faction of the upper classes*, correspond to highly qualified scientific, cultural and certain technical professions in education and parts of the public service. The disadvantaged positions at the bottom of the space are characterised by a lack of educational and/or property resources and subordinated social inclusion: low levels of education and dependent positions in the private sector at the bottom right; material deprivation and devalued social, relationship or care-giving activities or dependence on public benefits at the bottom left. In between, in the *bottom middle*, are those positions that are characterised by a lack of education *and* material means in equal measure. These include employees in highly precarious and compulsorily flexible business and personal service sectors (retail, repairs, logistics, catering and hotels, “other services” such as temporary work), where low-skilled jobs, persistent material scarcity and poor future prospects are combined. With regard to the realisation of a socio-ecological transformation, the various class factions have different, even diver-

With regard to the realisation of a socio-ecological transformation, the various class factions have different, even divergent interests according to their respective integration into the social fabric.

gent interests according to their respective integration into the social fabric. Well-off, materially secure groups with high status are generally more relaxed and open to change

and are also more likely to recognise potential benefits for themselves than sections of the population in already insecure situations that are potentially threatened by any change. But positions that are primarily based on property also entail an interest in defending it against possible redistribution or taxation measures in the course of transformative policies, while on the other side education opens up opportunities to actively participate in shaping change, and one's own fields of activity in publicly financed

areas also entail an interest in the general public and in redistribution from private pockets to public coffers. These conflicting interests overlap and interact with the differences in mentality described above. In order to view and analyse both in more detail as part of a coherent picture, the mentalities were projected into the social space by plotting the average position of the respondents assigned to each mentality – as coordinates – on the two axes (Figure 1).

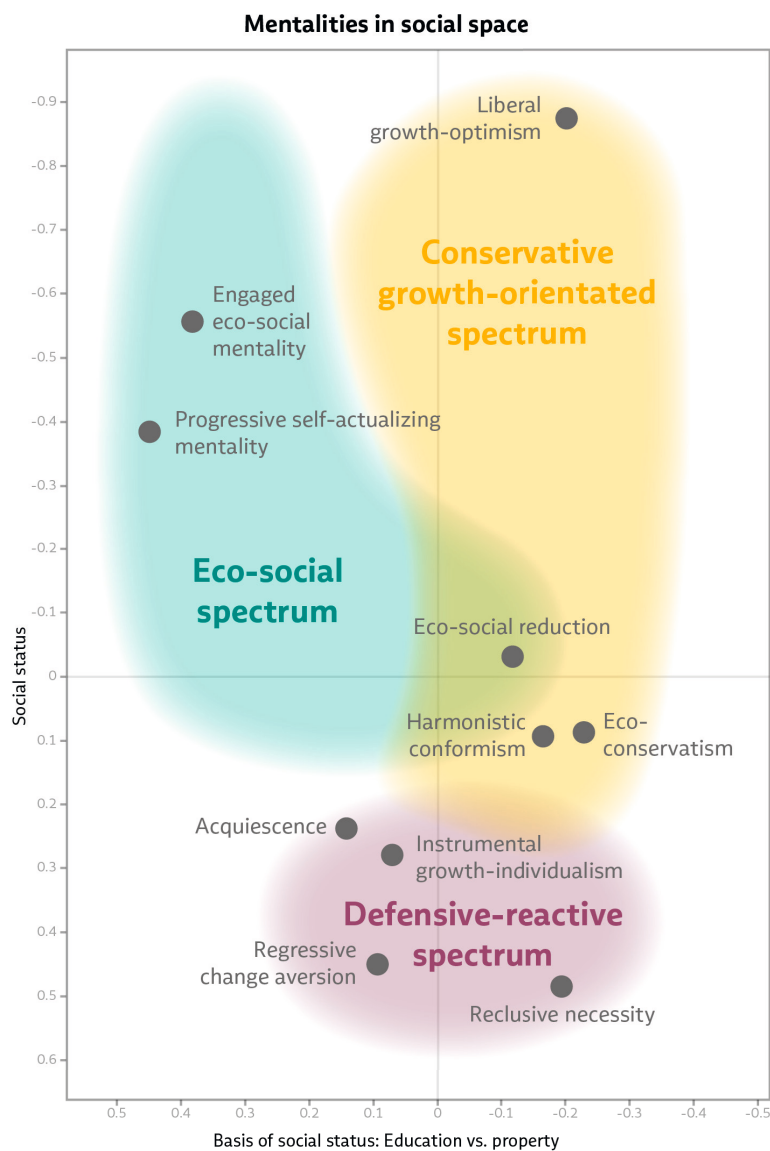


Fig. 1: spectra in social space

This illustration makes clear the connection between mentalities on the one hand and social positions and the associated class interests on the other. Looking at the vertical oppositions, it is immediately apparent how far removed the *liberal growth-optimistic* mentality is from all other mentalities, at the top, but that the *engaged eco-social* and *progressive self-actualisation-oriented* mentalities also tend to occur in higher social positions. The horizontal axis shows a demarcation between the belief in growth and technology of primarily materially better-off sections of the population on the one hand and the eco-social or eco-liberal attitudes of the generally higher educated sections of the upper middle on the other hand.

It also becomes clear that the mental proximity of the types assigned to each spectrum also correspond to social proximity: The types in each spectrum are neighbours in social space, so each spectrum has clear concentrations of distribution in certain areas of the social space that can be delineated according to typical social characteristics. This is an expression of the fact that shared mentalities are formed from socially shared experiences.

It can also be seen that, *firstly*, although the mentalities of the eco-social spectrum are particularly strongly anchored in the upper left third of the area, which is characterised by higher education, urban living environments and activities in the education, culture and highly qualified service sectors, they also spread far into other social positions in the case of the *eco-social-reduc-*

tive mentality type. *Secondly*, conservative growth-oriented mentalities are particularly prevalent in the upper and middle right,

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which are associated with material prosperity, technical or administrative and organisational professions and life in rural areas. And *thirdly*, the defensive-reactive spectrum bundles mentalities that are more common among the insecure and disadvantaged positions that characterise the lower social space.

It is also informative to look at the proximity and distance between the respective socio-structural focal points of mentality types on the one hand and the supporters of different political parties and members of associations on the other (Figure 2). Although the positions of two variables projected into the space (mentality and party preference) cannot be used to draw direct conclusions about overlaps between mentality types and party preferences (but only about similar socio-structural profiles), these proximities point to parallels between the space of mentalities and the political space, some of which are to be expected, but some

of which are surprising. At the time of the survey, the Left and the Greens in particular were clearly shown to be parties of the eco-social spectrum, which is also reflected in the very high proportion of Green voters, particularly in the *progressive self-actualising* and *engaged eco-social* categories (over 40% in each). Whereas the Liberal Democrats (FDP) and the Christian Democrats (conservative parties of CDU/CSU) were clearly linked to the *conservative growth-oriented*

camp, with the former finding particularly strong support among *liberal growth-optimists*. The Social Democrats (SPD) – a rather surprising finding – also had their socio-economic centre in the vicinity of the conservative growth-oriented mentality types, but were also significantly represented in both of the other spectra (at least at the time of the survey). Finally, with its radicalised anti-system rhetoric, the right-wing party AfD bundled dissatisfaction, aliena-

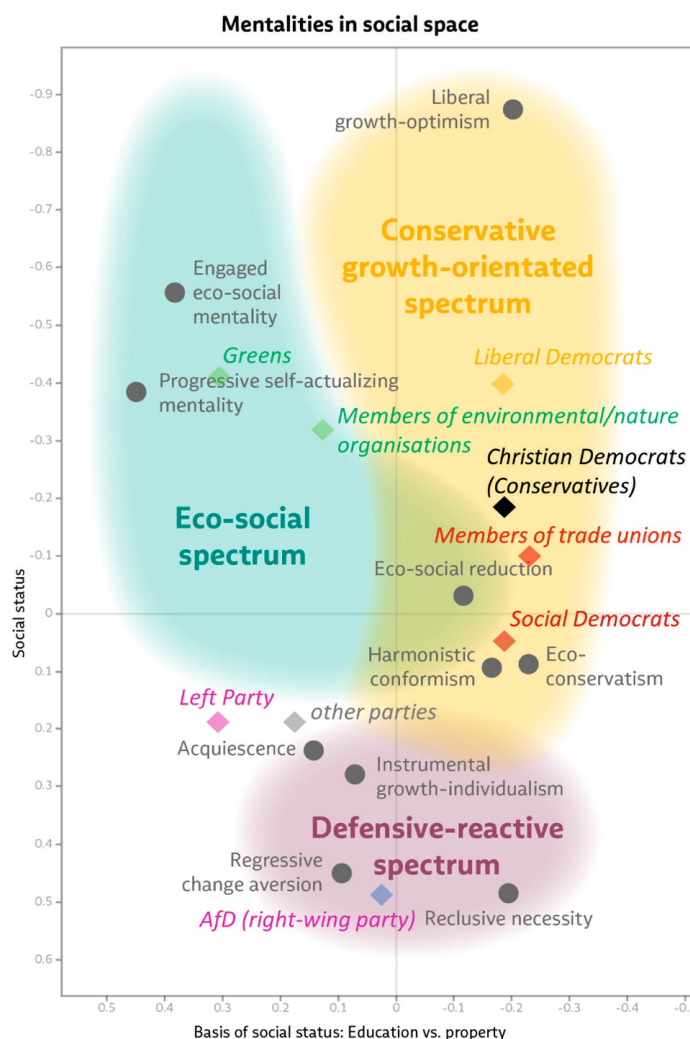


Fig. 2: Mentality types and voting intentions in the social space

tion and anger, especially in the lower social sphere, and thus demonstrated a connection to the defensive-reactive spectrum that was as close as that of the Greens to the eco-social spectrum. However, the defensive-reactive spectrum should not be automatically regarded as the “AfD spectrum”. Particularly in sections of the *reclusive necessity* type, there are other long-term ties, to the SPD in particular, which enjoyed even greater sup-

port here than the AfD at the time of the survey. Members of environmental and nature conservation organisations are slightly further to the right on average than Green party supporters, while trade union members are more common in the upper half of the space than in the lower half and, on average, their members’ status is based just as strongly on material property as Union, SPD and FDP voters.

3 Lines of conflict in the dispute over transformation

On the “map of mentalities” just described, the various tensions and conflicts surrounding the topic of socio-ecological transformation can now be understood as antagonisms between these three spectra, and interpreted in their social context. They can be arranged

On the “map of mentalities”, the various tensions and conflicts surrounding the topic of socio-ecological transformation can now be understood as antagonisms between these three spectra.

along four conflict lines, two of which run along the two main axes of the space and two others diagonally (Figure 3). There is a vertical conflict around *abstract societalization* as well as a horizontal conflict between *public/common* and *private/personal interests*. Both are an expression of structural socio-ecological class conflicts and interest

conflicts. However, this fact rarely resonates in social and political discourse. Instead, public thematization and politicisation of social conflict lines has been primarily preoccupied in recent years with linking the two structural conflict dimensions along the diagonals of social space: The line of conflict that determines current perception and discourse around the necessity, scope and distribution of costs of socio-ecological transformation (*change conflict*) runs from the top left to the bottom right, and intersecting this, from the bottom left to the top right, is the line of conflict around the *externalisation* of the social and ecological burdens of the current mode of living, i.e. the distribution of the costs of non-transformation.

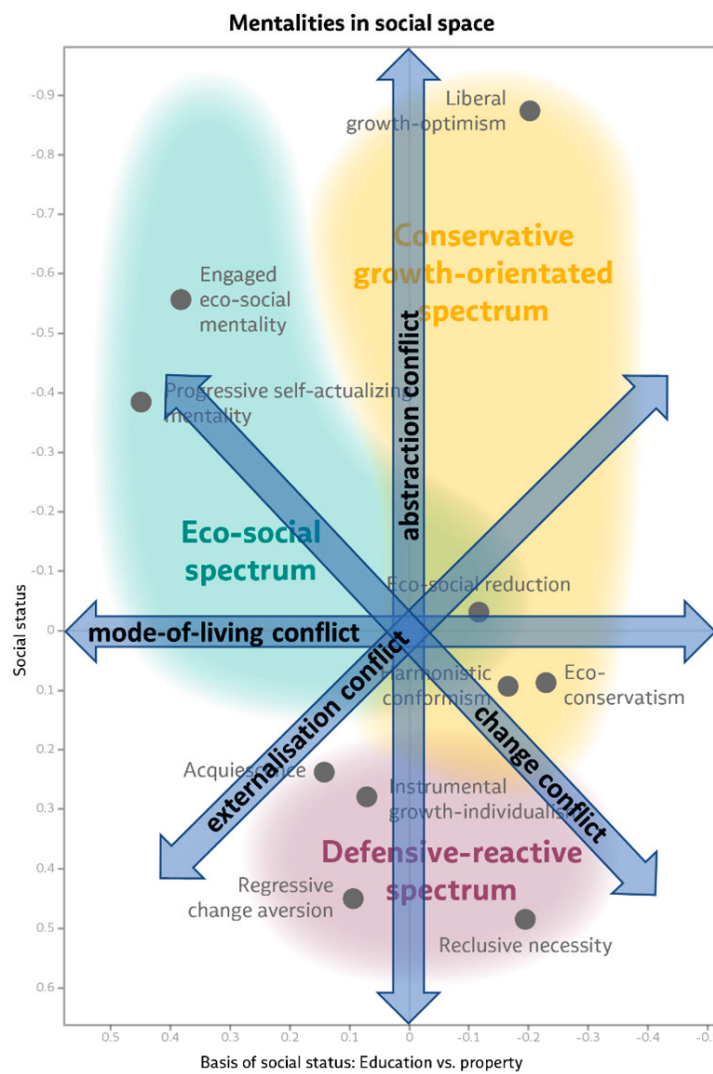


Figure 3: Lines of conflict in social space

Conflict line 1 – vertical: the abstraction conflict. Or: the conflict over abstract societalization

The fact *that* the socio-ecological class conflict surrounding the transformation is also, or especially, one between a social “top” and “bottom” can hardly be seriously questioned in view of the frequently lamented social imbalances and the perennial loud accusations against “those at the top”. However, the precise *ways* in which this contrast – be-

tween autonomy and powerlessness, control and dependence, between those shaping the course of social affairs and those suffering under them – is reflected in mentalities, and the ways in which it is *not*, requires closer sociological attention.

Firstly, it is indisputable that there are tangible inequalities in the **distribution** not only

of a) responsibility for ecological damage, but also b) being affected by it and c) the burdens of climate policy measures: The higher the social status and, in particular, the greater the material wealth, the more emissions and environmental damage are caused, right up to the obscene consumption of nature by a global “polluting elite”, while the socially disadvantaged live on a much smaller ecological footprint on average, due to their limited means and opportunities. Climate policy measures, which are perceived as requiring the relatively disadvantaged to make increasing sacrifices and adaptations, while the rich and powerful continue to buy superyachts and use private jets, arouse a sense of injustice and trigger anger in many people. But: This anger is, at present, almost never directed against the scandal of inequality and towards demands for fairer distribution, but rather – fuelled in no small part by the media – against climate policy itself and those who advocate it and (allegedly) benefit from it (see conflict line 3). The actual class antagonism, expressed in increasing inequality of distribution and the unbroken power of capitalist interests, is generally recognised, but accepted with a shrug of the shoulders as “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2013); it is not dealt with as the subject of conflicts (Mau et al. 2023).

Secondly, not least as a result of this non-thematization, something else comes to the fore at the level of mentality and overshadows the question of inequality and distribution – namely the tendency of pervasive and currently rapidly spreading **alienation** from social institutions, politics and also “society” as a whole. Society itself appears as an abstract, cognitively opaque context completely disconnected from one’s own life, completely indifferent to one’s

own views and concerns, which is increasingly met with scepticism, mistrust or even anger and hatred. Thus, as we move down the vertical axis, the subjective assessment of self-efficacy and trust in the media decreases more and more, while scepticism towards science, globalisation and technological developments increases more and more. Inversely, optimistically favourable opinions towards social “progress” and the self-perception of being empowered to act and shape things increase as we move up.

The increasing inequality of distribution and the unbroken power of capitalist interests is not dealt with as the subject of conflicts. Not least as a result of this, something else comes to the fore at the level of mentality – namely the tendency of pervasive alienation from social institutions, politics and also “society” as a whole.

This is an expression of a *class conflict* – due to the dramatic differences in the extent to which different sections of the population are involved and feel involved in the processes (which are shown here to be contested) of abstract societalization and increasing complexity. Those who are actively involved in the various interlinked processes (in business, politics, science, media, technology development, etc.), who personally benefit materially or symbolically from this involvement and therefore have an interest in its continuation, stand in opposition to those who are dependent on these processes, who cannot escape them and, above all, who are

burdened by the primary and secondary consequences of these processes. At the level of mentality, this means a rift that separates the progress-optimistic mentalities of the eco-social spectrum (*engaged eco-social, progressive self-actualising*) together with the conservative growth-oriented spectrum (*liberal growth-optimism*), which are concentrated in the upper middle and upper classes, from the types that dominate the lower social space. And this applies not only to the mentalities of the defensive-reactive spectrum with their feelings of powerlessness and their aversion to change, but in many respects it is also becoming apparent in the *harmonistic-conformist* mentalities more typical of the social centre, and especially

The findings of climate research are symptomatic of abstract knowledge that can only be gained by means of complex social institutions and processes. It is not without reason, then, that “transformation” appears as a continuation of, rather than a break with, the challenging processes of abstraction.

the *eco-conservative* mentalities in the conservative growth-oriented spectrum. All of these types seem to feel overwhelmed in one way or another by the need to keep up with the ever-increasing complexity of society, to adapt to continuous technological innovations, to withstand increasing pressure to perform, and to recognise the rationality of behavioural requirements derived from abstract scientific knowledge, which contra-

dict their practical knowledge gained from concrete experience and are experienced as arbitrary rules.

This abstraction conflict is socio-ecologically relevant precisely because the findings of climate research are symptomatic of abstract knowledge that can only be gained by means of complex social institutions and processes. It is not without reason, then, that “transformation” appears as a continuation of, rather than a break with, the challenging processes of abstraction. And the more the social whole appears to relevant sections of the population in the abstraction conflict as suspect per se – as a weapon of others against their own interests, and more as a threatening context of coercion than as an enabling context of support and protection – the more this context as such becomes the object of rejection, and the more its transformation is perceived primarily as a threat.

Conflict line 2 – horizontal: the mode-of-living conflict. Or: the distribution conflict between public/common and private/personal interests

The structural conflict on the horizontal spatial axis, between public/common and the private/personal interests, is essentially a conflict over the distribution of wealth between private households and the public sector. However, it hardly ever manifests itself in serious debates about income and wealth taxation or investment in infrastructure, but is usually shifted to the everyday level and negotiated in terms of the practices and modes of living of social actors. Positions on the left in the social space are characterised by a high relative emphasis on education, interpersonal activities in predominantly publicly funded areas, or marginalised positions in unskilled work and non-employment. These social situations tend to promote an orientation towards *equality* and equal treatment, an awareness of mutual *dependence*, an interest in creating *opportunities for experience* for oneself and others and an interest in *shaping social conditions* in line with these goals. Opposing this on the right are the positions based more on material wealth, including many working in managerial, technical and organisational professions in the private sector, the self-employed, and many retirees. These social positions tend to correspond to *hierarchical* attitudes, a relationship to the world based on *sovereignty*, ownership and *appropriation* of the products of labour and nature, as well as the *conservative* desire to preserve conditions that safeguard private property. These differences also inform attitudes towards socio-ecological transformation:

While some strive to preserve private property and oppose state intervention in the way it is used, others are interested in maintaining and expanding generally accessible public infrastructure, which requires greater regulation and redistribution from private to public on the part of the state. In this sense, the conflict over the Building Energy Act in 2022/23 was an example not only of the consequences of unwise political prioritisation, but also of the successful mobilisation of property interests to prevent binding emission reductions and to channel state subsidies into the construction and expansion of private property. In a similar way, climate measures such as speed limits and a ban on combustion engines are opposed, in the interests of car drivers and at the expense of the overarching interest in survival

The clashes of interests between public/common and private/personal interests are often interpreted as „cultural“ differences, especially in the middle of the social space, and turned into disputes between, for example, urban and rural, young and old, and different lifestyles.

and the interests of people without cars in having liveable cities and clean air. What is striking about this line of conflict is that this horizontal clash of interests as a question of distribution receives relatively

little attention in public debate and almost none in the conscious minds of the respondents. Instead, these contrasts are often interpreted as “cultural” differences, especially in the middle of the social space, and turned into disputes between, for example, urban and rural, young and old, and different lifestyles (Eversberg 2023). Instead of arguing about distribution and political priorities, the debate becomes about the moral value or lack of value of meat or vegetables, cars versus cargo bikes – orientations and habits in which the education-oriented eco-social mentality types of *progressive self-actualising* and *engaged eco-social*, on one side, and the *eco-conservative* and *harmonic-conformist* types of the conservative growth-oriented spectrum, on the other, contrast and differentiate themselves from each other. This fixation of perception on modes of living or lifestyles is currently an effective distraction from the material distribution issue and the associated interests. Politically, this shift appears risky, as it emphasises the commonalities between conservative growth-oriented and defensive-reactive mentalities and is therefore likely to

of interests and mentalities on both sides of the horizontal conflict that the attitudes and practices prevalent on both sides are equally legitimate. From a social science perspective, there are good reasons to assume that an orientation towards the public sphere is structurally more compatible with the common interest in survival than private property interests (see, for example, Görg et al. 2023).

The fixation of perception on modes of living or lifestyles is currently an effective distraction from the material distribution issue between private and public and the associated interests.

undermine the demarcation between the conservative spectrum and the radical political right. It would also be a mistake to conclude from the approximate correspondence

Conflict line 3 – top left to bottom right: the change conflict. Or: the dispute over the necessity, scope and costs of transformation

In recent years, whenever the socially conflicted nature of the socio-ecological transformation has been discussed or debated, attention has largely been focussed on the question of the costs and burdens of change. If our economy and mode of living are to change quickly and in all areas, who will bear the unavoidable burdens of this change, who will benefit from it and how can the costs be distributed fairly?

In this highly politicised line of conflict, a contrast emerges between the mentalities of the *eco-social spectrum* at the top left – which strongly support transformation goals and see price increases and job losses, for example, as fundamentally necessary side effects – and the mentality types of the *defensive-reactive spectrum* at the bottom right and middle, which reject economic burdens outright, argue for a slower pace of transformation and more superficial intervention, or fundamentally reject “transformation”. This contrast has clear equivalents at the level of the sectors in which the respondents work. For the most part, this tension exists between knowledge work and interpersonal services on the one hand, and low-wage sectors in which employees are under severe pressure due to structural change processes (e.g. logistics, trade, automotive industry) on the other. In the first group, greater approval of price increases and job losses is related to the fact that these occupational groups are less affected by the transformative processes and have greater resources to cope with change, but also correlates with their more direct access to the abstract

scientific knowledge from which such demands are derived. However, this should not automatically lead to the conclusion that enforcement of ecological policy goals at all costs is being called for here without social compensation for the disadvantaged. On the contrary: the egalitarian attitudes that are part of the “DNA” of the eco-social spectrum also include advocacy for redistribution in favour of less well-off sections of the population. The rejection of additional burdens and requirements in the lower right of the social space, however, is not surprising given the already disadvantaged circumstances and limited adaptation resources of these groups.

Representations of the socio-ecological transformation conflict that narrow it down to a conflict over the distribution of transformation burdens are based on clichéd distortions that ignore the real differences in mentalities on both sides.

Representations of the socio-ecological transformation conflict that narrow it down to a conflict over the distribution of transformation burdens (Huber 2022) are based on clichéd distortions that ignore the real differences in mentalities on both sides. Such representations mainly serve to distract – by means of exaggerated counterposing of “green urban educated elites” and “ordinary

people” – from the real, much more significant obstacles to serious transformative initiatives: the interests that dominate the top and right of the social space, namely, in

As long as the anger over anticipated social hardship is directed against the alleged social indifference of an urban educated middle class, the propertied classes’ far more influential interests are spared close critical scrutiny.

defending private property and its current distribution and in growth and technology-centred strategies. As long as the anger over anticipated social hardship is directed

against the alleged social indifference or “ecological signalling” of an urban educated middle class, the propertied classes’ far more influential interests in avoiding redistribution and compensation by invoking the “debt brake” and renouncing tax increases are spared close critical scrutiny.

This central role of property interests in structuring social perception and discussion of the conflict also narrows the view of possible transformation paths by unilaterally focussing on their costs and burdens, i.e. their socially loss-making aspects. In doing so, it obscures the view of the possible improvements in quality of life that these could also bring for significant sections of the population. This question draws attention to the fourth, presently somewhat latent line of conflict.

Conflict line 4 – top right to bottom left: the externalisation conflict. Or: the conflict over the costs and burdens of „business as usual“

Ecological and social factors are mutually intertwined. Not only does the handling of the ecological crisis present itself as a social class conflict, but conversely the *social* conflict – as a distribution struggle for a share of social wealth – can also be thematised as an *ecological* problem and a question of justice. From this reversed perspective, the intersection of the vertical abstraction theme with the horizontal mode of living and distribution themes can be viewed differently: Along this diagonal of the space, the debate about the costs and burdens of *non-change* becomes apparent, i.e. the social and ecological losses of doing business as usual. The focus of the dispute here is the relationship between the externalisation and internalisation of these non-transformation burdens along a social internal-external axis. The underlying idea is that the practices and modes of living that are considered normal in this country and perceived as legitimate by the majority cause social burdens and ecological damage. But those whose standard of living is made possible by these burdens and damage do not have to deal with them because they can be shifted and outsourced (“externalized”) to devalued labour and non-human nature (Biesecker/Winterfeld 2014; Lessenich 2016). This takes place on a global scale, for example, when German companies outsource their environmentally harmful production abroad and also benefit from lower wages there, or when larger agricultural areas are used abroad than at home to supply the domestic population, livestock and economy (Bring-

ezu et al. 2020). However, externalisation and internalisation do not only exist across national borders, but are also reproduced within Germany: in the form of appropriation of low-paid work, unequal consumption of nature, and the shifting of burdens from the productive and consumptive centres (top right in the social space) to the “internal peripheries” (bottom left) largely populated by women and migrants. The latter position is dominated by insecure, underpaid and socially devalued “reproductive” services, unpaid care-giving, agricultural support work, messenger and delivery services and other activities that are committed to fulfilling the wishes and needs of others. This relationship is one of domination

Externalisation takes place on a global scale, for example, when German companies outsource their environmentally harmful production abroad. But it is also reproduced within Germany: in the form of appropriation of low-paid work or unequal consumption of nature.

which, through the reciprocal causality of prosperity and freedoms here, versus poverty, exclusion and dispossession there, also clearly identifies itself as a relationship of exploitation and thus, even in a narrow sense, as a class relationship (Dörre et al. 2024; Wright 2009). This comes with considerable

conflicts of interest. Those who profit from this relationship are interested in its continuation and also have the means to preserve the relationship, even if they are in open opposition to the common interest of humanity's survival. In contrast, on the internalising

The relationship of externalization is one of domination which, through the reciprocal causality of prosperity and freedoms here, versus poverty, exclusion and dispossession there, also clearly identifies itself as a relationship of exploitation and thus, even in a narrow sense, as a *class* relationship.

interior peripheries, one's own employment and property interests are largely compatible with the general interest in survival; here, there is more of an interest in redistribution along the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the social space (Eversberg 2023). However, the reality is that this redistribution interest remains ineffective in the current situation. It can only be deducted analytically from the structural, socio-economic positions of the groups mentioned and their relationships. At the level of mentality, however, it is not apparent how an effective counterforce to the clearly articulated power and property interests of the productive-consumptive centres (especially in the form of *liberal growth-optimism*) could emerge at the internal peripheries of the lower left social space. Although social movements and critical intellectuals have repeatedly attempted in recent years to link

the issue of socio-ecological transformation with the relationships along this axis in the sense of global climate and environmental justice, greater recognition of care-giving work, etc., it should be noted that these efforts have recently taken a back seat to the conflict of change centred on the social "interior", especially in the face of escalating cumulative crises – not least because this has generally been pursued by social actors who are themselves located much higher up in the social space and who, as "urban educated elites", have also been confronted with delegitimising accusations along that other line of conflict.

4 Interpretation of the findings and political conclusions

The tensions and disputes surrounding the question of socio-ecological transformation highlighted in the analyses summarised here are an expression of a socio-ecological class conflict. In our interpretation, however, this is not to be understood either as a polarisation or confrontation between two opposing blocs or camps, nor as a situation of broad consensus with smaller dissenting minorities. Instead, we view it as a multidimensional constellation that can be broken down and simplified as a triangular relationship between a *conservative growth-oriented* spectrum, an *eco-social* spectrum and a *defensive-reactive* spectrum. The term *class* conflict points to the fact that the dispute over socio-ecological transformation is not merely a clash of different attitudes and perspectives, but also a negotiation of material conflicts of interest, the origins of which lie in the internal structure of capitalist growth societies.

In the reconstruction of this conflict-prone triangular relationship between socio-ecological mentality spectra in the social space, using our survey data from the end of 2021, the political shifts that have meanwhile be-

come tangible in the intensified multi-crisis situation are already surprisingly clear. This is particularly evident in the shifts in men-

In our interpretation, the socio-ecological conflict is not to be understood either as a polarisation or confrontation between two opposing blocs or camps, nor as a situation of broad consensus with smaller dissenting minorities. Instead, we view it as a multidimensional constellation that can be broken down and simplified as a triangular relationship between three spectra.

tality types compared to our earlier analysis of data from the „Environmental Awareness in Germany 2018“ survey (Eversberg 2020a).

Compared to the „eco-social camp“ identified in 2018, the eco-social spectrum in 2021 has shrunk significantly from around

a third to just over a quarter of respondents and appears to be on the way to disintegrating into a kind of „hard core“ of groups or milieus committed to transformation (engaged eco-social mentality, progressive self-actualising mentality) on the one hand, and on the other an atomised „haze“ of vaguely eco-social reduction-oriented people without recognisable unifying background experiences or social references. On a socio-political level, this corresponds with the fact that the very broad mobilisation (in 2018) of the climate movement around *Fridays for Future* had already come to an end due to the effects of the coronavirus pandemic (Blühdorn 2020) and was unable to revitalise itself decisively in Germany

The eco-social spectrum has shrunk significantly and appears to be on the way to disintegrating into a kind of „hard core“ of groups or milieus on the one hand, and on the other an atomised „haze“ of vaguely eco-social reduction-oriented people without recognisable unifying similarities.

despite the flood disaster in the Ahr valley and increasing weather extremes. The movement is now even more on the defensive as a result of the energy crisis, increasing headwinds from forces critical of transformation, and widespread anger, fuelled by media and politicians, at the actions of the Last Generation.

Add to this the strengthening of conservative social forces that cling to the export-oriented German growth model and unsustainable lifestyles based on the

externalisation of burdens. The „liberal growth-oriented camp“ observed in 2018, which attempted to balance the fundamental recognition of the need for change with the desire to continue living as before, has three years later, as shown in our 2021 data, already transformed into a conservative growth-oriented spectrum that increasingly clearly resolves this tension in favour of resistance to any serious change in one's own life. In the political arena, this has since been reflected in the reorientation of the opposition CDU/CSU parties as an emphatically conservative force that sees the Greens as their „main opponent“ (Merz), and in the blocking of climate policy decisions at EU level by the governing FDP party.

The strong tendencies towards alienation and overburdening, which we can demonstrate not only in the AfD-leaning defensive-reactive spectrum, but also among the typical mentalities of the (lower) middle-class centre in the conservative growth-oriented spectrum, also indicate a fracture within the latter. This amounts to a convergence of the *eco-conservative* and parts of the *harmonist-conformist* types with the defensive-reactive spectrum and has probably contributed significantly to the recent sharp rise in the AfD's poll ratings (as well as to the success of the Free Voters in Bavaria) (see also SINUS 2023). In addition, resentment towards ecologically-oriented policy measures that are perceived as too far-reaching and detrimental to people's own lives and material prosperity, such as the Building Energy Act or the cuts to agricultural subsidies, is increasingly being articulated in alliances between conservative and defensive-reactive forces and in the form of open „transformation-critical“ street protests.

The confluence of all these processes gives rise to the dominance of the *change conflict* in public and media perception, as noted in the previous section, where eco-social orientations and the goals of educated urban sections of the population are pitted against the desire for continuity and fears of loss in groups whose plans are centred around home ownership and automobility.

Resentment towards ecologically-oriented policy measures that are perceived as too far-reaching and detrimental to people's own lives and material prosperity is increasingly being articulated in alliances between conservative and defensive-reactive forces.

In contrast, the questions of externalisation, the outsourcing of the burdens of normal social operations to subjugated internal and external peripheries and non-human nature – which the climate movement, among others, had previously sought to problematise under the banner of the transformation debate – have largely been dethematised and disappeared from the discussion. This means that the *externalisation conflict* between the productive-consumptive centres of the growth society and its internal peripheries, which a few years ago still looked like it could potentially lead to stronger politicisation and the formation of new socio-political coalitions (Eversberg 2020b), is presently only a latent structural conflict, and no longer an actively fought one. On one hand, this is because of a lack of unifying

spaces of experience for the development of potentially community creating „precarious eco-social“ mentalities directed at changing the existing externalisation conditions: The internal peripheries are heterogeneous, frag-

The change conflict dominates public and media perception. In contrast, the outsourcing of the burdens of normal social operations to subjugated internal and external peripheries and non-human nature have largely disappeared from the discussion.

mented, precarized and stratified by diverse occupational, sectoral, gender, linguistic, etc., segmentations. In view of the weakness of the Left Party after its recent split, the very limited capacity for trade union organisation in these sectors, and the limited ability of the climate movement to connect with them on an everyday cultural level (having its base higher up in the social space), there is also a current lack of effective forms and practices of organisation organically linked to these positions.

Taken together, the developments described above amount to a rapid withdrawal of support for any socio-ecological transformation steps that are associated with costs for the economy and private households. In addition, there are signs of a reconfiguration of the political coordinate system in which the „centre“ of the spectrum represented in parliament is shifting to the right, and those parties that at least rhetorically hold with the need for far-reaching change now only represent a minority of the population. In this respect, also from an empirical point

of view, there is something to be said for Ingolfur Blühdorn's gloomy assessment that „liberalism, democracy and open society are at stake with the sustainability crisis“ (Blühdorn 2023: 174) and that there is currently much more evidence of an „autocratic-authoritarian turn“ (ibid.) than of new majorities in favour of transformative politics. First of all, our findings confirm his

The developments amount to a rapid withdrawal of support for any socio-ecological transformation steps that are associated with costs for the economy and private households. In addition, there are signs of a reconfiguration of the political coordinate system in which the „centre“ of the spectrum represented in parliament is shifting to the right.

assessment that at present there are „hardly democratic majorities“ that can be won over for a project of comprehensive socio-ecological transformation. However, Blühdorn's conclusion, based on systems theory, that therefore „such a transformation is not to be expected, for structural reasons“ (ibid.) must be argued against: A lack of majority agency may be caused by systemic constraints, but it is not itself one. If we hold with the fundamental necessity and desirability of those transformative social changes that are not only called for by scientific bodies such as the IPCC, but also appear to be required by the politically agreed objectives of the Paris Agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, then the aim must

be, operating from the starting position described above, to identify leverage points

A lack of majority agency for the project of socio-ecological transformation may be caused by systemic constraints, but it is not itself one.

for policies that can contribute at different levels to majorities of the population seeing their interest in such a transformation as greater than their interest in blocking it. From this perspective, our empirical findings at least allow for a more informed reflection on the question of where majorities with largely transformative interests could come from. However, this reflection should not regard the mentality types and spectra distinguished above as fixed conditions, but rather as a constellation that has emerged in this form from everyday experiences and political developments in recent years – which can and will continue to change through political action. It is therefore not simply a matter of viewing the types as „target groups“ and their mentalities as expectations and demands that need to be catered for or „met halfway“ because that is where they are at; it is also necessary to ask how the established landscape can be actively transformed. The finding, for example, that there is apparently no such thing as a „precarious eco-social“ mentality among people on the internal peripheries of the growth society should not lead to the conclusion that transformation would not find support here in principle, but rather should lead to the question of whether and how it is possible to improve the conditions

for processes of understanding and awareness-raising here, from which corresponding interpretations of the self and the world could gain traction. We are not talking about educational awareness campaigns, but about political initiatives to make concrete changes and improve the living conditions of people in these areas.

This is not least the aim of the following proposals for transformative policy approaches, which we would like to summarise based on our findings:

1. Infrastructure policy: Public, participatory forms of organisation oriented towards the common good and aimed at meeting needs are generally more sustainable and inclusive than private ones, which is why the *expansion of broadly accessible public infrastructures* is central to a socio-ecological transformation. Targeted and long-term

Targeted and long-term investment in social infrastructure, can not only safeguard and make more liveable the lives of marginalised groups forced to internalise, but can also provide opportunities and alternatives for a resource-saving mode of living for all.

investment in social infrastructure, e.g. in local public transport, schools, day care centres, social housing and the healthcare system, as well as the reorganisation of areas such as energy supply in ways that are oriented towards the common good and strengthen local self-management, can not only safeguard and make more liveable the

lives of marginalised groups forced to internalise, but can also provide opportunities and alternatives for a resource-saving mode of living for all – prerequisites for the legitimacy of necessary restrictions on ecologically and socially harmful practices (Görg et al. 2023; Foundational Economy Collective 2019). Increased provision of needs via infrastructure instead of private property will initially be hard-fought due to the opposing property interests along the horizontal line of the mode-of-living conflict, but in the longer term it can contribute to easing this line of conflict by creating necessary alternatives to previous unsustainable practices (e.g. with transport links in rural areas).

2. Redistribution: Closely linked to this is the question of *redistribution*, not only in the traditional sense from top to bottom, but also from private to public disposal for the common good. Redistribution is not an optional extra or a sideshow to socio-ecological transformation, but rather its linchpin. Crises must be dealt with where they were caused and where people benefit from them, for example through wealth and higher inheritance taxes, very high taxes on luxury

Redistribution, not only in the traditional sense from top to bottom, but also from private to public disposal for the common good, is not an optional extra or a sideshow to socio-ecological transformation, but rather its linchpin.

consumption, or upper limits on income, wealth and resource consumption as a counterpart to basic and minimum social

security. However, the primary goal should not be higher or additional social benefits, but first and foremost the expansion of the aforementioned enabling structures for a climate-friendly life for all, which not only offer employment opportunities for the disadvantaged, but can also have a socially integrating and destigmatising effect by establishing the shared use of public, communal spaces and infrastructures as a new normality. However, in the interests of a fair distribution of socio-ecologically consequential opportunities for action, redistribution policy should also include *universally binding regulations* on the general non-permissibility of particularly harmful practices (driving without an upper speed limit) and products (private jets, superyachts) as well as absolute consumption limits. Clear rules that apply to everyone prevent feelings of injustice and frustration („We’re supposed to go without, but the rich just carry on“) and avoid moralisations around personal

Instead of calling on everyone to behave more morally, it is simply a matter of changing the scope of action for everyone (through generally binding regulations) so that those options that are compatible with sustainability and justice criteria become the standard.

behaviour, which continuously compromise the effectiveness of sustainability policy initiatives. Instead of calling on everyone to behave more morally, it is simply a matter of changing the scope of action for everyone so that those options that are compatible with

sustainability and justice criteria become the standard. Redistribution thus aims to reduce inequalities in both the vertical and horizontal dimensions. There is no doubt that such policy approaches will continue to attract fierce resistance, particularly from the upper right of the social space, but it is foreseeable that their failure to materialise will further fuel political alienation and the vertical abstraction conflict.

3. Sufficiency: The principle of *sufficiency*, i.e. the idea of a tolerable and desirable *enough*, also seems crucial in terms of

The break with the logic of abstract expansion as well as with one’s own internalised orientation towards growth and progress – which the principle of sufficiency demands – must make crucial demands on wealthy and educated sections of the population in particular.

bridging the divide of alienation and for a broadly supportable understanding of transformation. This concept counters the logic of abstract growth with a different logic, one that must determine in concrete terms what is necessary and appropriate. However, the break with our own internalised orientation towards growth and progress – which the principle of sufficiency demands – must not be implemented in such a way that it primarily serves the needs of wealthy and educated sections of the population for a symbolic representation of ecological virtue, but must also make clear demands, especially on them. In fact, it would be most beneficial to build on the concrete experiences and

orientations in large sections of the lower social space, where practices of sufficiency are already widespread as a strategy for coping with situations of scarcity and shortage. The question then is not what *isn't* needed for a good life (which we can then do without in a grand gesture), but what *really* is needed. However, the political framing is very important here, as these basic orientations can be enlisted by conservative appeals for moderation and for regressive resistance against a society perceived as „morally corrupt“. But they can also be the guiding principle for a life that is light on resources, frugal, less challenging, equally accessible to all, and not at the expense of others. This can promise relief and improvement especially in the lives of those working in care-giving, nursing or child-raising roles or in precarious service sectors, who internalise the costs and burdens of the lives of others. They share an interest in overall as well as horizontal and vertical redistribution – not based on abstract insights and convictions, but on the everyday experience of forced internalisation.

4. Internalisation: This experience also gives rise to an interest for society as a whole in the *politics of internalisation*, understood as a comprehensive restructuring of the prevailing mode of living, societal division of labour, and hierarchical power and domination relations, towards reducing and restricting the possibilities for shifting burdens onto others. From both societal and global perspectives, such politics would be about balancing the peripheries and the seemingly disembedded centres of technological, economic and political-administrative power, and about recognizing the value of the work of caring for people and nature, which to date have been systematically devalued. At

this point sufficiency would have to prove itself seriously as a *social* principle, as a principle of a society that is no longer dependent on growth, because it can no longer be a question of distributing materially *more*,

Conceived as part of a policy of internalisation in society as a whole, sufficiency would have to prove itself as a social principle, as a principle of a society that is no longer dependent on growth. Concrete policy proposals in this area are almost non-existent at present.

but must be about a fair reorganisation of social life that results in lower requirements for materials, energy and the exploitation of human labour. Concrete policy proposals in this area are almost non-existent at present. Although the recent controversy over supply chain laws in Germany and at the EU level point in this direction, there is no broader politicisation of this issue to speak of. In order for much-needed negotiations around the unequal social internal-external relations to be conceivable, new alliances would first have to form in the left and lower social space, which could repoliticise the externalisation conflict.

5. Democratic participation: Finally, a key conclusion is that transformative endeavours must above all avoid the trap of technocracy. Technocratic concepts of socio-ecological transformation based on „more of the same“ technological solutions, market-based regulatory instruments or scientific pedagogical „enlightenment“

only serve to promote precisely the abstract growth dynamics that have caused the crises of overburdening, alienation and ecological destruction. In doing so, they deepen the

Transformative endeavours must avoid the trap of technocratic concepts, as these are based on „more of the same“ technological solutions, market-based regulatory instruments or scientific pedagogical „enlightenment“ and thus deepen the rift of alienation that separates those at the top of society from those at the bottom.

rift of alienation that separates those at the top of society (including the proponents of transformation) from those at the bottom, and intensify the abstraction conflict. If transformative concerns are to gain majority support, this is only conceivable with the support of many of those who feel overburdened and alienated, who view the „elites“ with scepticism, but who distance themselves from the fervour of angry resistance and resentment as well as from authoritarian politics. It must become tangible for them that socio-ecological transformation can also be their concern and that they would benefit from it. However, this requires socio-ecological change to be perceived not as a continuation of top-down management, control and efficiency improvement programmes (Tullius/Wolf 2022), but as a break with them, as an opportunity to open up alternative pathways. To this end, change processes must be organised in ways

that are comprehensively participatory and malleable and adaptable to local needs, and there must be opportunities at all levels to contribute alternative perspectives, criticism and counter-proposals and also to be heard. Enabling participation is something fundamentally different from soliciting „acceptance“: Those who talk about acceptance actually already know what is right, and participation processes are then perceived, not wrongly, as a mere façade. In fact, that

That which politicians and administrators all too often see as desirable or even as lacking any alternative must be seriously up for negotiation.

which politicians and administrators all too often see as desirable or even as lacking any alternative must be seriously up for negotiation. Experience with citizens' councils is a good example of how this does not have to lead to paralysis and blockage of political processes if it is well organised, and how it can in fact increase pressure on politicians to take transformation seriously.

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