

# DEPOLITICISED AND TECHNOCRATIC?

*Normativity and the politics of transformative  
adaptation*

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## ABSTRACT

Dominant notions of adaptation to climate change are coming under increased scrutiny for their technocratic implications and depoliticising tendencies. Considering the loss of legitimacy that goes hand in hand with the characterisation of adaptation as a contested, depoliticised and technocratic top-down agenda, it has been repeatedly pointed out that ‘transformative’ adaptation may be a promising approach to reconcile the need to tackle the socio-economic root causes of vulnerability with pertinent calls for systemic change and repoliticisation. The paper responds to these controversial discussions about the political goals of adaptation in a twofold fashion. On the one hand, it draws on the cross-cutting ESG research themes of norms, knowledge and power to discuss the different ways in which the need for ‘transformative’ adaptation is being articulated in the interdisciplinary literature on climate change adaptation and resilience. On the other hand, it focuses on the argument that a transformative approach to adaptation is a necessary response to countervail the depoliticising effects that are commonly associated with the ‘post-political’ condition of climate politics. In sum, our analysis suggests that a deeper engagement with politicisation in the context of transformative adaptation requires a shift from a merely prescriptive reading of normativity to a more nuanced and descriptive account of normative framings and behaviour. Moreover, we propose to conceptualise dynamics of depoliticisation and repoliticisation as a single, generative process of politicisation, characterised by the simultaneous creation of discursive and material ‘enclosures’ and ‘exlosures’. We conclude that a framework which draws together structural and post-structural accounts of power and politics is required to avoid the externalisation, individualisation and naturalisation of socially produced risk.

*Keywords:* climate change adaptation; transformation; politicisation; normativity; post-politics; sustainability.

## SERIES FOREWORD

This working paper was written as part of the Earth System Governance Global Research Alliance – [www.earthsystemgovernance.org](http://www.earthsystemgovernance.org).

Earth system governance is defined in this Project as the system of formal and informal rules, rule-making mechanisms and actor-networks at all levels of human society (from local to global) that are set up to prevent, mitigate and adapt to environmental change and earth system transformation. The science plan of the Project focusses on five analytical problems: the problems of the overall *architecture* of earth system governance, of *agency* of and beyond the state, of the *adaptiveness* of governance mechanisms and processes, of their *accountability* and legitimacy, and of modes of *allocation and access* in earth system governance. In addition, the Project emphasizes four crosscutting research themes that are crucial for the study of each analytical problem: the role of power, of knowledge, of norms, and of scale. Finally, the Earth System Governance Project advances the integrated analysis of case study domains in which researchers combine analysis of the analytical problems and crosscutting themes. The main case study domains are at present the global water system, global food systems, the global climate system, and the global economic system.

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Comments on this working paper, as well as on the other activities of the Earth System Governance Project, are highly welcome. We believe that understanding earth system governance is only feasible through joint effort of colleagues from various backgrounds and from all regions of the world. We look forward to your response.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Notions of ‘transformations to sustainability’, ‘transition’, and ‘transformative pathways’ are becoming increasingly popular among scientists and organisations with an interest in climate change and sustainable development (WBGU 2011, Hackmann and St. Clair 2012, Future Earth 2013, IPCC 2014). Moreover, there is an emerging discussion in the climate change adaptation research community about the applicability of a ‘transformative’ approach to adaptation (Pelling 2011, Kates et al. 2012, Park et al. 2012, Bassett and Fogelman 2013, Wise et al. 2014). The core argument for a transformative approach to climate change adaptation holds that adjusting incrementally to anthropogenic changes in the Earth system will remain ineffective unless the systemic aspects of vulnerability and unsustainability are sufficiently addressed (Ribot 2011, O'Brien 2012). From a political perspective, this means that transformative adaptation embodies a rallying cry to alter fundamental systemic structures and paradigms that produce vulnerability in the social sphere – that is, the very structures and paradigms in which adaptive trajectories and transformative pathways unfold. In other words, what is suggested when the term ‘transformative adaptation’ is invoked is to rethink dominant normative framings of climate change adaptation in light of the overarching political debate about sustainability transformations. The Fifth IPCC Assessment Report confirms this overall push for an integrated policy and research perspective by suggesting that the term transformation may be understood as ‘a change in the fundamental attributes of natural and human systems’ and that ‘transformation could reflect strengthened, altered, or aligned paradigms, goals, or values towards promoting *adaptation for sustainable development*, including poverty reduction’ (IPCC 2014: 5, emphasis added).

In this paper, we aim to respond to these discursive developments by investigating the normative and political underpinnings of the ‘transformative’ adaptation agenda. On the one hand, we discuss the different ways in which the need for transformative adaptation is being articulated in the interdisciplinary literature on climate adaptation and resilience. On the other hand, we engage with the pervasive argument that a turn to transformative adaptation is a necessary political step to countervail depoliticised and technocratic interpretations of adaptive processes. The basic rationale behind the depoliticisation thesis is that dominant adaptation approaches tend to define human-environment relations under climate change in such a way that ‘the sense of causality or the direction of explanation still runs from the physical environment to its social impacts’ (Hewitt 1983; emphasis in original, as cited in Bassett and Fogelman 2013: 46). Put differently, predominant adaptation approaches, theoretical as well as practical still underestimate the discursive-generative role of power imbalances in shaping human vulnerability.

Hence the argument in favour of ‘transformative’ adaptation is twofold. Not only does it emphasise the need for systemic transformations as an adaptive response to dangerous anthropogenic changes in the Earth system. It also stresses the need to remove political gridlocks that presently inhibit these transformations. Accordingly, our discussion of transformative adaptation is broken down into the following questions. First we ask what predominant normative framings of adaptation are

currently promoted in the interdisciplinary literature on climate change adaptation and resilience. Second, how does ‘transformative’ adaptation fit into this debate? Third, we investigate how the cross-cutting ESG research themes of norms, knowledge and power could be utilised to further a conceptual discussion on the political and normative dimensions of climate change adaptation in general, and ‘transformative’ adaptation in particular.

Lastly, in acknowledging the pertinent criticisms that have been levelled against dominant political interpretations of adaptation, we engage more thoroughly with broader discussions about the ‘post-political’ condition of climate politics. Given the loss of legitimacy that goes hand in hand with the characterisation of climate change adaptation as a contested, depoliticised and technocratic top-down agenda, our goal is to engage more thoroughly with theories of *depoliticisation* and *repoliticisation* to investigate the dynamics that may inhibit social innovation and transformative change.

## 2. CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION AS ADJUSTMENT, REFORM AND TRANSFORMATION

We begin our analysis by situating the notion of transformative adaptation in the wider context of the adaptation debate. In doing so, we distinguish between three established categories of adaptation: (1) ‘adjustment’ adaptation (also referred to as ‘incremental’, ‘coping’, ‘resilience’ or ‘restoration’); (2) ‘reformist’ adaptation (also called ‘systemic’, ‘transition’, ‘transitional’ and ‘more substantial’ adaptation); and (3) ‘transformative’ or ‘transformational’ adaptation. Applying this three-part typology is deemed analytically useful, because it combines a historical perspective with recent developments in the literature on resilience and adaptation under climate change (see Nelson et al. 2007, Craig 2010, Moser and Ekstrom 2010, Levine et al. 2011, Park et al. 2012, Pelling 2012, Bassett and Fogelman 2013, Palutikof et al. 2013, Vermeulen et al. 2013).

It needs to be stressed, however, that these ideal or ‘purist’ categories of adaptation simply serve as heuristic devices, and that they are by no means mutually exclusive. The wider literature in the fields of hazards research, social resilience, and community-based adaptation, for instance, is often embedded in concepts and narratives that may crosscut these classificatory boundaries. In the end, traces of all three heuristic categories may be found in a single policy or intervention. Nevertheless, we argue that the value of the heuristic method is the way in which it can be used iteratively to map and contrast normative ‘poles’ (or extremes) around which policy debates on incremental and transformative adaptation emerge. Moreover, we claim that a heuristic approach is conducive in understanding how discourses about adaptation influence risk perceptions and policy interventions. Lastly, and more broadly, a heuristic approach may also serve as an analytical tool to compare various normative interpretations of adaptation to other more locally embedded norms and values. As a start, the three heuristic categories are explained in greater detail below.

*Adjustment adaptation:* The first category, defined as ‘adjustment adaptation’, identifies climate change and biogeochemical hazards as the main source of vulnerability and suggests different forms of iterative adjustment as an adaptive response (Bassett and Fogelman 2013: 49). The overall goal of adjustment adaptation is to return socioecological systems (SES) to a normatively desirable state of equilibrium to ‘maintain business-as-usual development paths’ under conditions of deep uncertainty (Pelling 2011: 140, see also Davoudi 2012: 301, Palutikof et al. 2013: 9). In a conservative adjustment approach, knowledge and resources are channelled downwards through policy ‘mainstreaming’ and by means of ‘climate-proofing’ socioeconomic development across a wide range of possible scenarios (Craig 2010: 58-59, Moore 2012: 39, IPCC 2014: 86). Adjustment is therefore characterised by the top-down implementation of managerial, technological and governance solutions guided by state administration, experts and social or economic elites (Ayers 2011: 85, Bassett and Fogelman 2013: 50). Current uses of the resilience concept in international development policy also tend to endorse the idea of adaptation as adjustment. In this context, Brown (2012: 47) points out that the notion of resilience is often used in defence of the modernist developmentalist paradigm, particularly to promote systemic stability for business-as-usual economic growth models, ‘quite contrary to the emphasis on change’ that is commonly attributed to resilience thinking.

*Transformative adaptation:* Broadly defined, transformation can be either a deliberate process, or the uncoordinated, unintended or unexpected outcome of a process or event, often a crisis or regime shift (Nelson et al. 2007: 402, O’Brien 2012). As a deliberate process, ‘transformative’ or ‘transformational’ adaptation can be either anticipatory or responsive. In the context of deliberate social transformations under climate change, transformative adaptation seeks to instigate fundamental changes at a systemic or structural level of complex SES (Nelson et al. 2007: 400, Levine et al. 2011: 2). Such fundamental changes may be related to interactions between humans and the environment, for instance with regard to shifts in agricultural or commodity production (Kates et al. 2012, Park et al. 2012, Vermeulen et al. 2013). Alternatively, they may also concern deeper changes in human relations, and focus on paradigms, norms, values, and power relations that are likely to reproduce vulnerability in the social, technological, political, and economic spheres (Driessen et al. 2012). To initiate social action for change, transformative adaptation strongly accentuates human agency and ‘intrinsic’ forms of motivation. Intrinsic motivations may for instance be cognitive, emotional or value-based (see O’Brien and Wolf 2010, University of Oslo 2013: 18). In this regard, the transformative approach emphasises values such as justice, equity, fairness and collective action to advance new rights claims, for instance, with respect to civil participation and gender equality (Bee et al. 2013, Schlosberg 2013, Tanner et al. 2015). Concerning the social production of knowledge(s), the focus of transformative adaptation mainly rests on experimentation, social entrepreneurship and innovation, as well as reflexive learning (Biggs et al. 2010, Westley et al. 2011, Wise et al. 2014).

*Reformist adaptation:* The middle ground between adjustment and transformative adaptation can be defined as the ‘reformist’ approach. Reformist adaptation, also referred to as ‘transition’, neither advocates for the political status quo nor endorses fundamental, paradigmatic, or systemic change (Pelling 2011: 68). Instead, it focuses

on incremental reforms inside of existing social, political or economic systems through the iterative modification of technologies, rules, and decision-making processes (Bassett and Fogelman 2013: 50). To be even more precise, reformist adaptation questions rules and decision-making processes, but not the normative-cognitive principles and power relations that govern the rules (Pelling 2011: 70). The dominant normative and behavioural paradigms under which the reformist approach operates, and which are arguably not fundamentally questioned in current managerial discourses about climate change, are ‘ecological modernisation’ and ‘sustainable development’ interventions (Blühdorn 2011: 38, Bassett and Fogelman 2013: 49). Knowledge production still functions within the normative confines of managerial governance and technical systems thinking, although it is sought to be more ‘participatory’, ‘inclusive’, and geared toward adaptive learning, transition, and the ‘co-production’ of knowledge (see Pahl-Wostl 2009, Loorbach 2010). Nevertheless, depending on its interpretation, the reformist approach also has the potential to open up new spaces for transformative action due to its emphasis on structural change and institutional reforms in existing governance regimes.

### 3. LINKING CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION TO THE ESG FRAMEWORK

The goal of this section is to explore possible points of convergence between the categories of adjustment, reformist and transformative adaptation and the ESG (Earth System Governance) Science and Implementation Plan (see Biermann et al. 2009). We initially concentrate on normative change perspectives (the norms dimension of the ESG framework), modes of knowledge production (the knowledge dimension of the ESG framework), and modes of social intervention (the power dimension of the ESG framework). Arguably, these preliminary considerations are not entirely comprehensive with regard to the interrelated and cross-cutting analytical themes of the ESG framework. Instead, they shall serve as a first point of reference for comparing transformative adaptation to other adaptation approaches and encouraging scholarly exchange on the normative, political and discursive dimensions of climate change adaptation.

The table below summarises the three adaptation categories that have been outlined in the previous section with respect to the dominant normative, knowledge and power paradigms under which they operate, and according to which meaning is produced in the social sphere. As mentioned earlier, these heuristic categories shall serve as an analytical tool to map and contrast normative ‘poles’ (or extremes) around which policy debates on incremental and transformative adaptation emerge.

Table 1. Heuristic categories of climate change adaptation

<i>Adaptation category</i> <i>ESG dimension</i>	<b>Adjustment</b>	<b>Reformist</b>	<b>Transformative</b>
<b>Normative Change</b>	Equilibrium	Incremental	Systemic
<b>Knowledge Production</b>	Expert-led	Co-production	Experimentation
<b>Social Intervention</b>	Top-down	Participatory	Intrinsic

As shown in **Table 1**, the overall normative goal of *adjustment adaptation* is to return SES to a normatively desirable state of ‘equilibrium’, whereas knowledge production is mostly guided by state administration, ‘experts’ and social or economic elites. The primary mode of social intervention, or the exercise of power, is characterised by the ‘top-down’ implementation of managerial, technological and governance solutions. The guiding normative paradigm of *reformist adaptation*, by contrast, is to instigate ‘incremental’ reforms inside of existing social, political or economic systems through the iterative modification of technologies, rules, and decision-making processes. Knowledge production still functions within managerial, economic and scientific paradigms guided by systems thinking, although the ‘co-production’ of expert knowledge and ‘participatory’ modes of intervention are emphasised. Lastly, the guiding normative paradigm for *transformative adaptation* is to instigate fundamental changes at a ‘systemic’ or structural level of complex SES. The social production of knowledge(s) is based on ‘experimentation’ and reflexive learning, while social interventions are mostly driven by ‘intrinsic’ motivations.

#### 4. WHY ‘TRANSFORMATIVE’ ADAPTATION? REVISITING THE POLITICAL ARGUMENT

As outlined in the previous sections, the need for transformative adaptation is supported by two main arguments. The first argument refers to the need for systemic transformations as an adaptive response to dangerous anthropogenic changes in the Earth system. The second argument concerns the transformation of political and economic arrangements that systematically produce vulnerability. Overall, the latter argument is now becoming more pertinent, as research on climate change adaptation and resilience is heavily criticised for its largely apolitical outlook and depoliticising tendencies (see Davoudi 2012, Stirling 2014, Tanner et al. 2015).

A review of 558 articles in the social science-oriented adaptation literature undertaken by Bassett and Fogelman (2013: 48) reveals an observable tendency in four major climate change journals and the IPCC reports to conceptualise adaptation as ‘adjustment to climate stimuli’ and to identify biogeochemical hazards as the main source of risk and vulnerability. This normative bias toward adjustment is indeed problematic for adaptation research and practice, as it is said to perpetuate an apolitical and environmentally deterministic view of adaptive processes, which is likely to naturalise causality instead of focusing on the social root causes of vulnerability (Ribot 2011: 1161).

Debates about the local implementation of adaptation are also increasingly marked by criticisms about the negative impacts of top-down interventionism and depoliticisation (Marino and Ribot 2012, Eguavoen et al. 2013). Eriksen and Lind (2009), for example, demonstrate how adaptation interventions in Kenya have in fact exacerbated human vulnerability to climatic phenomena, since existing imbalances in the distribution of powers and resources were not sufficiently considered. Similar findings have also been reported in a variety of recent case studies investigating adaptation interventions Brazil, Ghana, Mozambique, Nepal, and the United States (Nelson and Finan 2009, Venot et al. 2011, Artur and Hilhorst 2012, McEvoy and Wilder 2012, Coirola and Rahman 2014). Moreover, Cameron (2012: 111) demonstrates how research on the human dimensions of climate change in the Canadian Arctic has repeatedly failed to address colonial legacies and uneven power relations by

perpetuating a longstanding delimitation of Indigeneity to the local and the traditional, by rendering climatic change a field of technical intervention, and by excluding from its frame of reference the broader colonial and political–economic context within which northern Indigenous peoples struggle to respond to climatic change.

Among other things, current notions of adaptation and resilience have been referred to as ‘technocratic and managerialist’ (Brown 2012: 47), ‘contested’ (Tanner et al. 2015: 23), ‘depoliticised’ (Cannon and Müller-Mahn 2010: 626) and insufficient in their current form to address the complex challenges of deliberate transformations under climate change (Ribot 2011, O’Brien 2012). However, considering the strong political implications of current socio-ecological challenges, it is indeed quite striking that political scientists have thus far been ‘largely absent’ from the interdisciplinary adaptation debate (Javeline 2014: 421). Given the loss of legitimacy that goes hand in hand with the characterisation of climate change adaptation as a contested, depoliticised and technocratic top-down agenda, there is certainly a need for more conceptually embedded research on the political, institutional and normative dimensions of adaptive processes. This also means that research which seeks to reintegrate ‘the political’ into adaptation policy and practice has to engage more thoroughly with theories of *depoliticisation* and *repoliticisation* to investigate the dynamics that may inhibit social innovation and transformative social change.

## 5. THE ‘POST-POLITICAL’ CONFIGURATION OF CLIMATE POLITICS: CONCEPTUALISING DYNAMICS OF DEPOLITICISATION AND REPOLITICISATION

Depoliticisation has been a topic of interest in sociology, political science, and development studies for many decades (see, for instance, Haines 1979, Ferguson 1990, Blühdorn 2007). Views on the normative connotations and root causes of depoliticisation differ profoundly, although depoliticisation is occasionally portrayed in a rather positive way in public policy debates (Flinders and Wood 2014). It is then understood as a suitable tool for reaching consensus in exceedingly politicised public arenas, or as a shield against radical populism and short-term political interference motivated by vested interests (Fawcett and Marsh 2014). Nevertheless, to avoid engaging in a lengthy discussion about whether or not this view is defensible from a theoretical or ethical perspective, and if so, under which circumstances, we readily acknowledge that the notion of depoliticisation is cast in an overwhelmingly negative light in recent debates on eco-politics. What interests us, therefore, is: how exactly does depoliticisation function in the context of climate politics and what are its potentially negative implications for transformative adaptation?

In the context of climate politics, we situate our understanding of *depoliticisation* as deliberate tactics that are deployed by political actors to maintain the status quo of existing power relations and to deflect attention from specific aspects of risk and vulnerability that stand in conflict with their desires, values and interests. Tactics of depoliticisation thus ‘seek to conceal the contingency of reality, sew the gaps in hegemonic discourses and channel dislocations in such a way that fundamental social structures remain untouched’ (Stephan et al. 2014: 70). In other words, the invocation of non-negotiable imperatives such as the ‘global fight’ against climate change – which are then constituted as a struggle against an intractable or ‘antagonistic’ *Other* – may lead to consensus-oriented and technocratic modes of governance that give rise to ‘deceptively peaceful settings in which consent has been manufactured and dissent vaporised’ (Biermann et al. 2009: 67; also see Swyngedouw 2011). However, depoliticisation through consensus-oriented governance does not imply that there are no conflicts in climate policy making (Kenis and Lievens 2014). What the post-political condition of climate politics connotes, instead, is a fundamental crisis of political representation and *legitimacy*. The post-political character of climate politics thus points to a gradual depoliticisation of the public sphere in general, and to an exhaustion of the critical ecological paradigm in particular, defined as the ‘post-ecologist turn’ (Blühdorn 2007: 260). In post-political times, the inherent politicality of environmental issues is obscured precisely in accordance with the principle that James Ferguson (1990: 66) identifies in his seminal volume *The Anti-Politics Machine*, in which he states: ‘The state machinery has policies, but no politics.’

For example, notions such as the global fight against climate change may be appropriated by powerful actors, and serve as ‘trojan horses’ to legitimise a wide variety of top-down *policy* interventions without meaningfully engaging with the

contested grassroots dynamics of politics proper (i.e. *the political*)<sup>1</sup>. In hegemony theory, these ‘trojan horses’ are referred to as *empty signifiers*<sup>2</sup>. Empty signifiers, in the disciplinary framing of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1950] 1987: 55), ‘represent an indeterminate value of signification’. This means that empty signifiers are precisely ‘empty’ because they are either normatively ambiguous or completely devoid of any political meaning. Notions such as nature, sustainability, the fight against climate change or transformation have presently acquired the discursive status of an empty signifier, as even the biggest polluters may claim to act in accordance with vague sustainability principles, and a wide variety of social interventions may be recast as being supportive of larger-scale transformations under climate change. As concrete depoliticisation tactics, empty signifiers may thus be used by powerful actors to legitimise social interventions and render particular processes governable ‘at a distance’. *Governing at a distance* involves control over the environment, commodity processes, discourses, human bodies, and the ‘shadow of hierarchy’ (i.e. legislative and executive decisions). However, assuming that hegemonic domination ‘is never complete, never total, never fully saturating of the social order’ processes of governing also imply a continuous hegemonic struggle for power, social emancipation, and repoliticisation (Brown 2006: 71).

In their discussion of environmental politics and politicisation, Kenis and Lievens (2014) as well as Swyngedouw (2011) therefore suggest to refocus our attention on the ontological and epistemological implications of ‘Nature’ as an empty signifier to repoliticise environmental politics. While we find ourselves in agreement with this approach and acknowledge its potential, there is nonetheless a crucial point where we differ in our analysis. Kenis and Lievens (2014: 541) postulate that tactics to repoliticise environmental politics need to avoid turning environmental issues ‘into mere social or normative issues’. The core argument they advance against a normative reading of repoliticisation is that a normative approach may unduly ‘narrow the scope of what “the political” can mean in the environmental domain’ (Kenis and Lievens 2014: 534). Ironically, this claim stands in stark contrast to the fundamentally normative emphasis on ‘democracy’ and ‘real and effective change’ that Kenis and Lievens otherwise wish to advance in their account of the political – even if they insist that democracy as such does not have ‘an ultimate foundation’ (Kenis and Livens 2014: 537; 545). Obviously, however, democracy is a complex normative concept as well, because it connotes a particular way of organising the public sphere, and since it has to be interpreted and translated into political practice. Furthermore, it is clear that repoliticising environmental politics with reference to ‘Nature’ means to imbue particular normative meanings to the environment.

We are nevertheless well aware that this theoretical disagreement might arise as the result of two fundamentally different interpretations of normativity. Therefore, we call attention to the fact that normativity may be conceptualised in both a prescriptive and descriptive sense. A *prescriptive* reading of normativity seeks to formulate, for instance, what climate politics *ought to be* (e.g. just, democratic). A *descriptive* account

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<sup>1</sup> As we have outlined in the introduction, a variety of recent case studies on adaptation show that such top-down policy approaches are likely to result in negative effects at the level of implementation (see, for instance, Marino and Ribot 2012).

<sup>2</sup> The notion of ‘floating’ signifiers is often used interchangeably.

of normativity, by contrast, does not compare empirical findings to normative benchmarks such as ‘just’ or ‘democratic’. It rather seeks to study the multiple ways in which normativity is expressed, for example in climate policy and the global polity, while exploring the concrete power effects that are related to these expressions. In other words, a descriptive account tries to study what norms *are* like (and *why*) – and not what they *should be* like. Moreover, while bearing these differences in mind, we must ask whether a non-normative/non-prescriptive form of scientific inquiry and repoliticisation is even thinkable? Without reproducing the debates of the *science wars* in the 1990s, we contend that the very essence of repoliticisation is to maintain a strong focus on normativity, since social theory needs to ‘provide a normative framework able to distinguish between the emancipatory and the repressive potentials of human reality’ (Susen 2009: 105).

Seen in this light, the problem of hegemonic and inflexible, top-down agenda setting cannot be solved by maintaining the illusion of a value-free, non-normative, or ‘rather “sober” descriptive-analytical’ form of social science inquiry (Kenis and Lievens 2014: 533). In other words, an argument that rejects a normative *a priori* for repoliticisation by pandering to the slippery slope of anti-foundationalist rhetoric ‘is itself merely a naïve form of foundationalism insofar as it will always posit a privileged determiner without being able to justify that privilege’ (Kisner 2008: 9). To put it quite simply, even if we assume that that integrating facts and values in the same work ‘does not entail their conflation’ (Gerring and Yesnowitz 2006: 121), the ‘brute’ facts of climate change still require normative interpretation, especially if scientists are to engage in a transformative social process of envisioning possible alternative futures that are not clearly reducible to quantifiable variables and experimental settings. Assuming a fundamental difference between the inherent normativity of ‘the political’ and its (allegedly neutral, sober and descriptive) representation in sociological accounts may thus lead to an even more profound exhaustion of the critical ecological paradigm and may result in a more severe limitation of what ‘the political’ could mean in different contexts.

Yet, based on the assumption that the subject is fundamentally divided against itself by contradictory desires and identifications, Slavoj Žižek propounds a synthesised theoretical account of the political that allows for a repoliticisation of the post-political public sphere – at least under certain conditions – while at the same time acknowledging the exhaustion of authenticity that is constitutive of the post-ecologist turn. Žižek (2008: 237) points out that *authentic* politics is ‘the art of the *impossible* – it changes the very parameters of what is considered “possible” in the existing constellation.’ The critical theoretical question then is: how do we arrive at an authentic view of the political – and more importantly, how do we maintain the authentic character of transformative political processes and utopian ideas before empty signifiers become a new form of hegemonic domination? Put differently, how do we bring power back into the equation? How can we repoliticise dialogue and practice without ‘corralling Nature into legitimising service’ (Swyngedouw 2011: 273)?

To summarize, what needs to be reiterated while engaging with diverse accounts of depoliticisation and repoliticisation as well as their different ontological and epistemological interpretations of ‘normativity’ is the common idea of a fundamental

difference between *politics* – defined as the state-centered interpretation and representation of political affairs – and the *political*, defined as the sphere of ‘authentic’ political/democratic engagement between individuals. The ways in which this authentic political engagement is thwarted or distorted by power imbalances, hegemonic discourses, empty signifiers and consensus-oriented modes of governance are core elements in the politicisation debate.

## 6. UNDERSTANDING POLITICISATION AS DYNAMICS OF ENCLOSURE AND EXCLOSURE

To advance a deeper theoretical engagement with the fundamental crisis of political representation and legitimacy that is arguably central to the depoliticisation/repoliticisation conundrum, we propose to consider politicisation per se in terms of a metaphoric *enclosure*. Originating from ecology, enclosures literally refer to enclosed areas: ‘areas surrounded by walls, objects or other structures’ (Aerts et al. 2009: 762). The notion of political ‘enclosure’ as first introduced by Herbert H. Haines (1979: 123) suggests that politicisation can be perceived as a dynamic process in which social problems can either be relatively ‘open’ or ‘closed’ by degree.<sup>3</sup>

Open social problems are those in which interest groups with differing, and often controversial, viewpoints are actively seeking to affect the societal definition of the problematic condition. Closed social problems, in contrast, are those in which political debate is absent, or has been ‘enclosed’ or reduced to a superficial level. Enclosure might be thought of as a dynamic pattern of social problem activity which ‘involves a limitation of the range of persons and groups who are defined as entitled or qualified to involve themselves with the formulation and administration of solutions to the alleged social problem’ (for example ‘experts’ or ‘practitioners’), and simultaneously, ‘the limitation of perspectives which stand a reasonable chance of being taken seriously in a given social climate’ (Haines 1979: 124).

A theory of politicisation as a form of metaphorical enclosure therefore remains potent in the sense that it goes beyond notions of mere concealment, antagonism, or the conscious silencing of dissent. While enclosures presuppose a sense of boundedness, this boundary making is in itself a generative rather than a reductive process. Enclosure – or a sense of bounding off – *always already* implies a simultaneous process of generating an *exclosure* (see Figure 1). In the biological sciences, an exclosure describes ‘any area or activity that involves excluding unwanted species or practices from (degraded) sites’ (Aerts et al. 2009: 763).

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<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, this dynamic understanding of politicisation would imply that de-politicisation is practically an impossibility, because depoliticisation it is not only an inherently *political* process (and, therefore, precisely a process which politicises a particular issue or agenda), but also a political process which always already implies re-politicisation (which is, likewise, simply a process of politicisation).

Politically, enclosures can therefore be seen as inevitable niches of innovation, resistance, self-emancipation, and counter-conduct. As history teaches us, even the most violent and repressive political regimes have not been successful in completely silencing dissent; and vice versa, authoritarian, radical populist or violent political ideologies might still gain a foothold in liberal democratic societies. Thus, when taken together, both notions – enclosures and exclosures – help enliven politicisation as a productive form, even as an unconscious expression that is enabled through its embeddedness in a particular milieu or social territory.

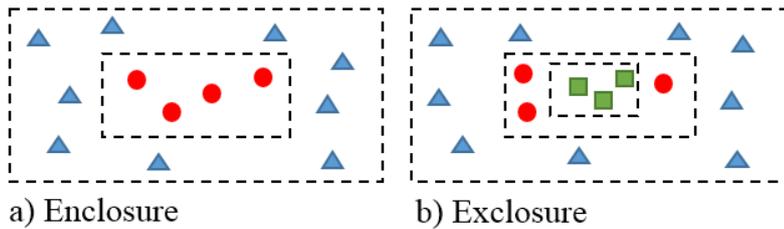


Figure 1. Politicisation as dynamics of enclosure and exclosure

While the politicisation of social issues may not always remain a calculated or instrumentalised process, it elicits not only a set of cognitive meanings and discourses that defines the very construction of a particular reality or social milieu, but also a gamut of strategies, actors and institutional entities that are legitimated to speak and engage in the issue at hand, together with an administrative-normative and material setting that is actively produced and enlisted. The productive momentum of politicisation, expressed through simultaneous enclosures and exclosures, may hence be explained through the extent to which the politicality of social issues is *recognised* as ‘open’ or ‘closed’ (Haines 1979: 119). In other words, given the potential politicality of all things social, the simultaneous creation of enclosures and exclosures crucially depends on how the *appearance* of social problems is influenced (Haines 1979: 123). Appearance, in turn, is determined by strategic relations of power, for example through processes of discursive framing, the allocation of material resources, or the normalisation of concrete social practices or *conducts* (in a Foucauldian sense). This nuanced understanding of politicisation as a simultaneous process of creating enclosures and exclosures may also assist in avoiding an unproductive overemphasis on an antagonistic ‘Other’ by maintaining a strong focus on discursive articulations, speaker positions, and structural factors that may enable or constrain social innovation and political engagement relative to a particular social setting and normative agenda.

Lastly, these suggestions are certainly commensurate to recent calls for more ‘radical’ transformative change (Stirling 2014, Kenis and Lievens 2014), while they encourage – at the same time – a more self-conscious and open engagement with the normative foundations and contingencies that are implicit in such ambiguous and complex political articulations. Simplistic narratives of hegemony and resistance may in fact even obscure the (potentially) productive effects of working *with* power, as long as they remain ‘largely silent about the catalysts and frameworks that will make

resistance practicable’, and as long as ‘the philosophy of perpetual deconstruction is ignorant of its own privileged [normative] situatedness’ (Kesby 2005: 2044; 2049). As Bruno Latour (2004: 246) remarks:

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution.

## 7. EXPLORING THE NORMATIVE DIMENSION OF TRANSFORMATIVE ADAPTATION: RADICAL CHANGE OR RADICAL AMBIGUITY?

*‘Everyone wants to transform, but nobody wants to change.’* – Frederica Mathewes-Green

There is now widespread agreement that a greater involvement of the social sciences in research on ‘transformations towards sustainability’ is urgently needed (Hackmann and St. Clair 2012, Future Earth 2013). While transformation has been an important focus in the field of ecology and sustainability science for more than a decade (see, for instance, Gunderson and Holling 2002, Walker et al. 2004, Folke et al. 2010) there are still significant empirical gaps with regard to the normative and political implications of deliberate societal transformations under climate change. Given that the notion of ‘transformations to sustainability’ is on the verge of becoming a new paradigm in environmental change and adaptation research, it needs to be further explored ‘how such transformations can be developed, designed and achieved’ (Future Earth 2013: 36; also see Patterson et al. 2015). With regard to this question, Westley et al. (2011: 775) conclude that sustainability transformations require us to transform ‘the institutions that shape our cultural, political, and economic transactions—in short, shift our governance processes from those that do not privilege systemic innovation to those that do.’ However, questions remain surrounding the extent to which innovation can be realised politically. Politicisation still has the potential to inhibit systemic innovation and block possible pathways for transformative change by creating discursive and material enclosures. A question that naturally follows is whether the concept of transformative adaptation can help address some of these converging challenges, especially in the context of unveiling normative assumptions and power asymmetries in complex, multisectorial, and multiscale adaptation trajectories in order to open up new spaces for authentic political engagement.

Recent studies on the historical dimension of transformative change testify to the fact that social transformations are in essence related to the complex co-evolutionary development of institutional arrangements, technologies, and normative as well as

cultural-cognitive patterns of meaning-making (Jacob et al. 2012). Sometimes these co-evolutionary processes of social change proceed in a more incremental fashion, while in other cases they materialise as more abrupt changes between different social equilibria. Whatever case, it is important to recognise that the capacities of international organisations and the nation state to steer or influence social transformations through strategic interventions is fundamentally limited for several reasons.

First, it is clear that current and future debates on social transformation will be inevitably determined by competing normative visions of change whose articulation is in turn influenced by unequal relations of power and vested interests. Since a wide variety of normative agendas are currently being advanced under the banner of transformations to sustainability, it is hard to predict which socioeconomic and political paradigms will become more dominant in the future. Moreover, it is clear that the notion of sustainability *as such* has been severely criticised since the 1990s for being just another ‘empty notion’ (Luke 2005: 229). Consequently, it has become increasingly difficult to imagine that the existing institutional and policy machinery of sustainable development may be revitalised, in spite of the symbolic usefulness of sustainability as ‘boundary concept’ and as a potential rallying point for diverse coalitions of actors with an interest in broad-based social change and raising ecological awareness (Scoones 2010: 159-160).

In short, it is still unclear *how exactly* notions of transformative adaptation are supposed to differ from the wider discourse on transformations towards sustainability, and if they are not meant to differ at all, how these two concepts could be integrated politically. Even more importantly, it still remains to be seen how transformative discourses may be meaningfully distinguished from older debates about sustainability transitions and sustainable development. If transformative rhetoric is simply supposed to revitalise the older metaphoric visions of the sustainability agenda, the same familiar questions about agenda ownership and accountability that have been raised since the 1990s still need to be addressed.

Accordingly, the second major limitation with regard to the implementation of ‘transformative’ adaptation is that historical, political and institutional path dependencies and ‘lock-ins’ will necessarily have a constraining impact on broad-based and inclusive transformations. Hence it has been argued that technocratic accounts of steerable transformations are essentially unrealistic forms of Anthropocene ‘cockpitism’ (Hajer et al. 2015) or ‘fallacies of control’ (Stirling 2014). Another major critique that has been advanced against technocratic and managerial notions of transformations is that they implicitly assume the existence of a *benign state* with clearly identifiable, neutral and capable institutions (Ribot 2011, Wise et al. 2014).<sup>4</sup> Even if transformative narratives are rooted in more modest ‘bottom-up’ narratives of participatory change, there are still considerable institutional barriers that need to be overcome (Hickey and Mohan 2004). In addition, the capability of institutions to steer transformations may be further limited because institutions themselves are subject to

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<sup>4</sup> Here, we use the term ‘institution’ in a more regulative and organisational sense. The ‘designability’ of social institutions in the widest sense – including social norms and cultural-cognitive institutions – would of course be an entirely different question.

constant change. They may, for instance, be subject to leadership changes, institutional inertia, and cross-scalar political and economic pressures (Adger 2000, Smith et al. 2005). This means that transformative change has to be located at a deeper, cultural-cognitive, normative and discursive level of social institutions, whereas the latter dimension is often neglected. As John Dryzek (1996: 122) maintains: 'Formalists who hope that supportive discourses will simply fall into place once the [institutional] hardware has been established are likely to be disappointed'.

Third, it can be concluded from historical evidence that no technological innovation or political management process alone can trigger transformative change (see Jacob et al. 2012, Wise et al. 2014). Therefore, many scholars now turn their attention to cultural-cognitive change as well as social innovation, reflexive learning, and experimentation. Adopting such a theoretical perspective means to develop a politically and ontologically pluralist vision of social transformations, which nevertheless retains the political potential to challenge the systemic status quo. Arguably, however, this will not simply be achieved by providing unifying visions of transformative change (i.e. 'new stories we tell us about ourselves'). It also requires a certain degree of leadership and a mix of short and long-term regulative measures, including enabling framework conditions for creative social experimentation and innovative niches.

Broadly speaking, it can thus be concluded that the key dissonances which riddle policy debates on transformative adaptation are essentially normative and political in nature – *normative* in the sense that the transformative approach seeks to contest and critically engage with causal explanations around the social production of risk, vulnerability and injustice; *political* in the sense that transformative adaptation situates structural and systemic change at the heart of the debate and revitalises possibilities of deep normative and cultural-cognitive transformation as being the decisive riposte. Yet, the emerging transformative discourse in adaptation policy and research is mired by deep *normative ambiguity* and conceptual incongruities that may serve to hijack, stall, or re-steer political processes in ways that erode the very broad-based and socially inclusive principles of transformative ethics. In a more practical sense, there is little consensus on the normative desirability of what is to be transformed, how, and into what. We therefore assume that the normative fragmentation of transformative discourses may in some ways be politically inexorable. This may not be entirely negative, for what is arguably needed most is a normative and discursive shift that unhinges old ways of thinking and doing from their time-worn and path-dependent crevices. At the same time, it is apparent that values such as plurality, authenticity and justice will not readily translate into transformative policy outcomes and innovative social experiments. The translation of transformative thinking into concrete societal outcomes will, therefore, still depend on power-ridden institutional and political processes.

In other words, fundamental questions about power, *norm diffusion* and *norm coherence* arise in the context of transformative adaptation. It needs to be asked how transformative social change could possibly be propelled from within the system of interest, whether through local practices of self-organisation, technological innovation, or normatively desirable forms of 'traditional' knowledge, as long as the

paradigm of ecological modernisation still functions as a mechanism of discursive enclosure that inhibits political debates about the ‘limits to growth’, i.e. the impossibility to completely decouple economic growth from resource consumption (WBGU 2011: 178; also see Barry 2012). Broadly speaking, the basic idea of ecological modernisation operates on the assumption that growth-driven societies inevitably progress toward sustainable economic trajectories (toward a ‘green economy’), provided that the right incentives are put in place. Nevertheless, the basic assumption that incremental political reforms will necessarily lead to broad-based economic transformations is rooted in limited empirical evidence (WBGU 2011: 189).

Furthermore, it is evident that older debates about the limits to growth are now gradually being overshadowed by the notion of *planetary boundaries*. Planetary boundaries seek to set limits to the total human impact on planetary systems to avoid potentially dangerous thresholds and tipping points in socio-ecological systems and the biosphere (Rockström et al. 2009). Yet, due to the fact that these boundaries are essentially socially constructed, it should be stressed that the normative and political aspects of transformations are also becoming increasingly relevant for *natural scientists*. Notably, Rockström et al. (2009: 5, Fig. 3) emphasise the intrinsic link between established natural facts and value-based decisions by noticing that ‘normative judgements influence the definition and the position of planetary boundaries’.

At this point, it nonetheless remains largely unclear how planetary boundaries could be negotiated and politically or legally enforced under conditions of deep uncertainty, how potential trade-offs between particular boundaries might look like, and how the concept of planetary boundaries may relate to broader questions of social justice and development (Biermann 2012, Hajer et al. 2015). These pressing normative issues are even more pertinent since the current inability of our political and economic systems to respond to ‘the perfect moral storm’ of climate change has become exceedingly evident – whether in the form of institutional fragmentation and failure, the inability to deal with the spatiotemporal dispersion and intergenerational character of the problem, or the ethical problems arising from powerful vested interests (Gardener 2006: 397). Considering these multiple institutional and cognitive gridlocks, debates about who ‘will take up the slack’ of failed climate policy innovation – newly orchestrated international organisations, individual states, or other constellations of actors – are less than conclusive and only beginning to emerge (Jordan and Huiteima 2014: 920). Moreover, it is evident that adjustment narratives that advocate for an impact-based and technology-driven approach to adaptation are still dominant at the international level of climate politics (Ayers 2011: 63). These narratives function precisely as a mechanism of discursive enclosure, since they maintain a clear focus on Earth system change as a key driver of vulnerability and risk. However, as a direct result of this hegemonic enclosure, multiple micro-processes of discursive enclosure are created simultaneously, which operate as counter-narratives and emphasise social and structural drivers of risk, unequal power relations, and sociopolitical change beyond economically viable ‘win-win’ approaches and technology-driven policies.

Emerging norm conflict thus leads to a situation where local actors and interest groups strategically emphasise and de-emphasise specific aspects of risk and vulnerability to

advance various priorities under the banner of transformative adaptation. As long as adaptation is still ‘a new area of policy intervention in which a clear definition has not yet stabilised’ it is also unlikely that the local diffusion of conflicting norms will change due to new impulses at the international level of climate politics (Moore 2012: 32). Yet, in the absence of a strong normative consensus on the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of social transformation, the concept of transformative adaptation is in danger of becoming an ‘empty signifier’ amenable for almost any kind of political intervention. We argue that this tendency is particularly strong in accounts of transformative adaptation that pay less attention to the political, discursive and economic root causes of climate change and social vulnerability. Transformative adaptation, interpreted in this particular way, focuses on adaptive measures such as the ‘diversification of income streams’ or changes in ‘land use and location’ (Park et al. 2012: 119; also see Vermeulen et al. 2013). If the transformative approach is framed in such a way, it is implicitly ‘re-enclosed’ as adjustment or reformist adaptation by rendering exploitative economic relations invisible, and by excluding power and the ‘politics of unsustainability’ from conversations about systemic change (Blühdorn 2011: 36).

Consequently, the notion of transformative adaptation is burdened with the ontological plurality and normative ambiguity of its own ambitious goal of societal transformation. Applying a managerial and state-centric frame of reference for political analysis which defines the politicality of adaptation primarily in terms of the ‘costs, benefits, and potential effectiveness’ of organised policy making (see Javeline 2014: 424) thus simply misses a crucial political point: unequal and contested power relations which ‘shield the essentially unsustainable network of developmental technics behind each nation and in every market’ from real public accountability, transparency, and social responsibility (Luke 2005: 236). If pertinent questions about the nature of vulnerability and risk are not taken into account from the outset, cognitive and normative enclosure and institutional lock-ins are likely to become the dead end of inclusive transformative adaptation pathways. For example, in their account of transformational adaptation, Kates et al. (2012: 7156) suggest that ‘two conditions set the stage for transformational adaptation to climate change impacts: large vulnerability in certain regions, populations, or resource systems; and severe climate change that threatens to overwhelm even robust human-environment systems.’ The reasons for such ‘large vulnerability’, however, are seen to be grounded in the fact that ‘some regions and resource systems are especially vulnerable to climate change because of their physical setting, vulnerable populations, marginal productivity, or combinations of all of these’ (Kates et al. 2012: 7158). This causal explanation clearly follows a logic of discursive enclosure. On the one hand, it *naturalises* risk by attributing the risks of humanly induced climate change to a particular physical setting or set of environmental pressures. On the other, it *individualises* risk by attributing the risks of anthropogenic climate change to marginal productivity.

To put it differently, with transformative rhetoric also comes the conjuring of new *governmentalities*<sup>5</sup> such as culture, responsibility, choice, co-production, and austerity

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<sup>5</sup> The notion of governmentality has been developed by Michel Foucault. It refers to practices and discourses which seek to normalise the behaviors and identities of individuals (conducts) through the application of governmental techniques. Governmentality thus describes the physical as well as

that may produce new discursive patterns to ‘shift off responsibility to individuals’ (Newman 2013: 2). Processes of transformation are, therefore, likely to create new discursive exclusions, as long as they fail to acknowledge the social root causes and inherent politicality of vulnerability and risk, and as long as they – wittingly or unwittingly – operate with normative frames that may be misused to pass off large-scale market failure or internally differentiated and historically instituted processes of structural marginalisation as individual or environmental risk.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, however, it also needs to be considered that ‘power, resistance, and transformation can all be produced by situationally conscious human action, not simply by systemic logic or its accidental slippage’ (Kesby 2005: 2046). What is arguably needed, then, is a conceptual approach which combines structuralist and poststructuralist accounts of power. To be more precise, this means to avoid the externalisation, individualisation and naturalisation of systemic (i.e. economic, technological and institutional) risk on the one hand, and to emphasise the transformative power of human agency on the other.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we ask what the notion of transformation means for climate change adaptation. What are the normative underpinnings that configure the transformative adaptation agenda – especially if it is to be defined as fundamentally political? And what are its depoliticising tendencies?

To shed light on these complex issues, we set out by delineating three heuristic adaptation categories – adjustment, reformist and transformative – against the backdrop of the cross-cutting ESG research themes of norms, knowledge and power. Having identified the commonalities and dissonances between these heuristic frames, we illustrated how the ‘politicality’ of transformative adaptation could be studied through a three-tiered analytical process focusing on normative change perspectives, knowledge production and modes of social intervention. The basic rationale behind this approach is that a focus on the politics of transformative adaptation inevitably calls upon a more purposive and unflinching engagement with the normative templates implicit in complex and ambiguous political articulations such as justice, democracy, and radical social change – especially with regard to questions of enforceability, inclusiveness and accountability.

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the psychological effects of governing power. Governmental techniques may include auditing, surveillance, monitoring and the production of discourses about ‘duty’ and the ‘freedom of choice’ to generate a pervasive mentality of self-regulation within the populace. The term governmentality has been applied to a wide variety of political spheres such as ‘neoliberal rationalities’ and sustainable development. However, research in this area has also been criticised for hindering ‘productive conversations across the academic/practitioner divide’ and for insufficiently addressing ‘how new governmentalities were mediated and translated by state actors, or how they were refused, inhabited or reworked by those they summoned’ (Newman 2013: 19).

<sup>6</sup> We use the term ‘market failure’ simply to describe structurally produced poverty, vulnerability and risk which is related to the current economic mode of organisation. We do not wish to imply, however, that reality should necessarily live up to the ideal economic model of a ‘free’ market.

Moreover, our findings reveal that the key dissonances that riddle the concept of transformative adaptation are directly related to questions of normative ambiguity, norm diffusion and norm coherence. Hence we maintain that the conceptualisation of politicisation as a productive process of creating discursive-material enclosures and exclosures can serve as a useful reference point for future research on the politics of transformative adaptation. The reasons for suggesting this approach are analytical as much as they are political. If particular adaptive pathways are valued or prioritised over others, the very discursive, institutional and material orders that enable their legitimation will be mediated by relations of power, for example through processes of discursive framing, the allocation of material and symbolic resources, or the normalisation of concrete social practices and new governmentalities. Yet, due to the fact that current accounts of transformative adaptation are rooted in a politically and ontologically pluralist vision of social transformations, we have reason to assume that the normative fragmentation of adaptive actions and political discourses may in some ways be inexorable. Therefore, we advocate a more targeted research approach that determines how dynamic processes of politicisation influence the *appearance* of particular social problem complexes as more or less 'open' or 'closed'. Broadly speaking, this could translate to maintaining a strong focus on discursive articulations, speaker positions, as well as structural factors that enable or constrain social innovation and authentic political engagement relative to a particular social setting and normative agenda.

In conclusion, we suggest the adaptation of multiple avenues that take the proposed approach forward. On the one hand, our theoretical account of politicisation may be broadened by considering additional aspects of the wider ESG research framework such as cross-scalar interactions, accountability, agency, and architecture. For example, it needs to be better understood how the three heuristic frames of adaptation relate to particular adaptive challenges and forms of politicisation, and how their networked interactions may exhibit emergent properties. On the other, we deem it necessary to deepen current elucidations of the normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions of the knowledge/power conundrum, especially with regard to enabling conditions for 'authentic' political engagement. Since pertinent questions about the social and political nature of vulnerability and risk arise, we nevertheless believe that the overall analytical approach outlined in this paper may provide a useful addition to existing scholarship on social transformations under climate change.

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