Potentials of Climate Emergency Declarations for degrowth transformations. The ambivalent stance of German municipalities in conflicts over a post-fossil future

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Abstract

This paper addresses the scope for action by municipalities in a climate emergency and places it in the framework of ecomodern (urban) policy. We analyse the way in which two German 'climate emergency municipalities' translate conflicts of post-fossil transformation into concrete political and planning strategies. Although more than 2,200 authorities around the world have already declared a climate emergency, research on the impact of these resolutions on the political orientation of municipalities is very limited. Our research focus is on the (potentially agonistic) treatment of conflicts in planning. We argue that in times of a socio-ecological crisis, success in conflict resolution cannot refer to appeasement and depoliticisation. Instead, we propose a framework of five criteria, based on critical theory on ecomodern strategies, planning processes and degrowth. Thus, this practice-related and explorative paper connects empirical insights from the German cities of Constance and Berlin with an innovative normative framework. The findings tell a complex story of an, at least partial, admission of the failure of previous climate mitigation strategies, a lack of social institutions of limits, an instrumental relation to nature and a disregard for social injustices. The paper discusses how municipalities, in the context of ongoing tensions over the post-fossil transformation in Germany, on the one hand hold on to business-as-usual approaches, but on the other hand also set political impulses for change.

Keywords: Degrowth ▪ climate emergency ▪ municipalities ▪ conflicts ▪ post-fossil transformations

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Das Potenzial von Klimanotstandserklärungen für Transformationsbestrebungen in Richtung Postwachstumsgesellschaft. Die ambivalente Rolle deutscher Kommunen in Konflikten um eine postfossile Zukunft

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Aufsatz diskutieren wir die Handlungsmöglichkeiten von Kommunen, die den Klimanotstand ausgerufen haben, vor dem Hintergrund der Dominanz ökomoderner (Stadt-)Politik. Wir analysieren, wie zwei deutsche ‚Klimanotstandskommunen' Konflikte um die postfossile Transformation in konkrete politische und planerische Strategien umsetzen. Obwohl weltweit bereits mehr als 2.200 Städte und Gemeinden den Klimanotstand ausgerufen haben, gibt es bislang nur sehr wenige Untersuchungen zu den Auswirkungen dieser Beschlüsse auf die politische Ausrichtung der Kommunen. Unser Forschungsschwerpunkt bezieht sich auf die (potenziell agonistische) Bearbeitung von Konflikten in der Planung. In Zeiten einer sozialökologischen Krise ist eine Konfliktlösung, die auf Appeasement und Entpolitisierung basiert, nicht als Erfolg anzusehen. Stattdessen schlagen wir einen Orientierungsrahmen vor, dessen fünf Kriterien wir in der Auseinandersetzung mit kritischen Perspektiven auf ökomoderne Strategien, Pla-

nungsprozesse und Postwachstum erarbeitet haben. Dementsprechend verbindet unser praxisbezogener und explorativer Beitrag empirische Erkenntnisse aus den deutschen Städten Konstanz und Berlin mit einem innovativen normativen Orientierungsrahmen. Unsere Forschungsergebnisse erzählen eine komplexe Geschichte von einem zumindest teilweisen Eingeständnis des Scheiterns bisheriger Klimaschutzstrategien, einem Mangel an gesellschaftlichen Institutionen der Selbstbegrenzung, einem instrumentellen Verhältnis zur Natur und einer Vernachlässigung sozialer Ungerechtigkeiten. Im Aufsatz arbeiten wir heraus, wie Kommunen im Kontext aktueller Konflikte um die postfossile Transformation in Deutschland einerseits an Business-as-usual-Ansätzen festhalten, andererseits aber auch politische Impulse für Veränderungen setzen.

Schlüsselwörter: Postwachstum ▪ Klimanotstand ▪ Kommunen ▪ Konflikte ▪ postfossile Transformation

1 Introduction: Conflicts over a post-fossil transformation in Germany

Conflicts over a post-fossil transformation in Germany are evident in areas where there are the greatest transformation efforts, predominantly in the field of the electricity transition, and increasingly also the mobility sector.[1] Although both sectors are politically shaped by national legislation, the concrete conflicts are often on the local scale and the handling of conflicts shapes municipal politics and long-term planning decisions. In these conflicts, very different justice claims are articulated (Krüger 2022). Above all, the perceived lack of procedural justice is a central point of criticism. It transpires that the deliberative processes applied are incapable of counteracting the general disenchantment with politics. This is partly a result of poor implementation, but also of the exclusionary effects inherent in deliberative processes (Krüger 2022: 7–8). Civil society actors who oppose energy projects often have the impression that they cannot influence planning processes (Galvin 2018: 272). This manifests in a distrust amongst the affected people towards decision-makers from politics, administration and companies (Eichenauer 2018: 336). These phenomena indicate a disaffection with democratic institutions and their performance.

The conflicts that arise here are enforced by protagonists that oppose an acceleration of the energy transition and, in general, insist on the fulfilment of the promises of an "Imperial Mode of Living" (Brand/Wissen 2021), while consciously tolerating that climate mitigation goals will not be met. Thus, the fact that the economic model and lifestyles in the Global North, based on exclusive access to resources, labour and sinks[2], can only be secured through increased (neo-colonial) exploitation is to some extent suppressed and even legitimised with racist discrimination. Right-wing actors, for instance the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*), link this stance with authoritarian to extreme right positions that reject pluralistic democratic institutions, e.g. minority rights and freedom of the press (Eichenauer/Reusswig/Meyer-Ohlendorf et al. 2018: 641–642).

With a contrasting problem diagnosis and different objectives, the climate justice movement is also responding to disaffection with democratic institutions and their performance. Social movement actors such as *Fridays for Future, Ende Gelände, Extinction Rebellion* and *Letzte Generation* link calls for an intensification of democracy with calls for an ambitious post-fossil transformation (Sander 2016), including demands to declare a *Klimanotstand* (Climate Emergency) and act accordingly (Hirschl/Pfeifer 2020).

In the context of these lines of conflict, we analyse Climate Emergency Declarations (CED) as local political and planning responses to multiple crises. In doing so, we propose a different position for measuring success than the extent of realised social pacification and the re-establishment of economic growth for the sake of (class) compromise. Our research question concerns the extent to which Climate Emergency Declarations constitute entry points for a degrowth transformation. With our normatively oriented framework, which we spell out below as a solidary culture of self-limitation, we concretise what we mean here by degrowth transformation. Specifically, we analyse the narratives at play that shape the Climate Emergency Declarations and their aftermath in two German cities: Constance and Berlin. Our goal is to link empirical insights from the cities with a well-thought-out normative framework based on concepts from the fields of critical theory, post-autistic economics, postdevelopment and degrowth.

The paper is structured as follows. In the second section, we introduce the ecomodern approach of German national and municipal governance, before discussing its limitations with regard to enabling exploitative economic structures and furthering depoliticisation processes (Section 3). The fourth section addresses proposals for a solidary culture of self-limitation and derives our normative framework. We then explain our methodological approach in Section 5, and

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[1] In 2023, conflicts in the heating sector intensified in the course of negotiations on the Buildings Energy Act.

[2] The term "sink" refers to an ecosystem that is capable of absorbing emissions. The most important carbon sinks are forests and oceans.

our analysis results follow in the sixth section. The final part summarises the key findings and their implications for future research and planning tasks.

2 Refuelling the ecomodern approach?

The German government is committed to climate mitigation, but reluctant to challenge the primacy of growth and hegemonic power relations. Instead, ecomodern strategies (Krüger 2015; Krüger 2022) are being revitalised to tackle ecological problems without politicising overall societal structures. Economic incentives and new technologies are associated with the hope of being able to cope with the symptoms of complex problems without having to change production and consumption patterns.

While trying to avert a confrontation between opposing visions of a just transformation (Krüger 2022), the German government takes a depoliticising approach and limits negotiations to questions of technology (promotion and acceptance) and their practical implementation. Thus, ecomodern government policies attempt to avoid conflicts through accelerating approval procedures, providing generous financial support to coal regions (structural change subsidies that were approved together with the coal phase-out; Oei/Kendziorski/Herpich et al. 2020), and a general effort not to interfere too greatly with lifestyles but to change energy sources (e.g. from the internal combustion engine to the electric car). The attractiveness of the ecomodern paradigm is fed by the promise that production and consumption patterns do not have to change fundamentally, but that ecologically modernised energy production and technical and social innovations represent adequate responses to the climate crisis – while simultaneously generating economic growth (Krüger 2015: 114).

An instrumental relation to nature becomes apparent here. No intrinsic value is attributed to nature. Instead, it is subsumed under societal, especially economic, functions. Accordingly, climate mitigation is given the purpose of stabilising the growth-based development model. The premise that climate policy should not endanger economic growth but should rather generate such growth itself becomes a constraint because the alternatives to green growth are associated with renunciation and stagnation. This basic ecomodernist assumption is made explicit in the 2021 coalition agreement of the German government: "We want to increase the competitiveness of Germany as a business location as the basis for sustainable growth, prosperity and high employment in a social-ecological market economy. […] We must tackle the climate crisis together. This also presents great opportunities for our country and for Ger-

many as an industrial location: new business models and technologies can create climate neutral prosperity and good jobs" (SPD/Bündnis 90/Die Grünen/FDP 2021: 59–60).

With the hope for green growth, the strategies from business and politics to increase competitiveness correspond with the orientations and everyday practices of many people (Graefe 2017: 204), with classic examples such as (electric) automobility, industrial jobs (a fetish topic in structural change, especially in Lusatia) and overall high levels of consumption. Thus, a particular understanding of progress and freedom is universalised and enforced as the common good.[3]

Freedom is understood as independence from nature and society. This approach is manifested in the liberal demands for entrepreneurial freedom, individual development and rights of defence against the grip of the state. Progress is considered to be the accumulation of knowledge, technology and material wealth. Progress and freedom are closely related in that it is progress through scientific-technical rationality that contributes to the supposed independence of the individual (Dingler 2003: 44–46). Progress and freedom are seen as both drivers and rewards for the postulated permanent striving. Indeed, within the growth-based development model, economic growth and progress become a systemic requirement to avert societal collapse (Rosa 2017). In the coalition agreement, this inherent necessity is articulated as an imperative to increase economic competitiveness in order to deliver on the ecomodern promise of the common good: "The world is in transition at the beginning of a decade, so we cannot remain at a standstill. The climate crisis is endangering our livelihoods and threatening freedom, prosperity and security. In the face of intensified global competition, Germany and Europe must re-establish their economic strength" (SPD/Bündnis 90/Die Grünen/FDP 2021: 4).

Ecomodern approaches constitute dominant modes of governance not only at the level of state power, but also on the level of municipalities. Many scholars have pointed out that urban sustainability regimes build on ecological modernisation and entrepreneurial urbanism, hence stabilising predominant structures, the unfair distribution of resources and unjust power relations (e.g. Brenner/Marcuse/Mayer 2009). This contributes to "eco-modernist imaginaries of sustainability" (Hagbert/Wangel/Broms 2020) that avoid conflicts

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[3] Following Gramscian theories of hegemony, we understand the common good as an actively produced, more or less precarious consensus in which certain particular interests are privileged and others are excluded. The common good is always and necessarily the provisional result of the never-ceasing struggles over definitions and goals of the common good.

over a post-fossil transformation of urban infrastructures, as Mössner (2016) demonstrates for the ecological flagship city of Freiburg, Germany.

3 The constraints of the ecomodern approach

In the ecomodern approach, the necessity to achieve an ecological-economic double benefit is postulated. This implies maintaining energy consumption at a high level. In light of the large land requirements of renewable energies and the envisaged bioeconomy projects (for the substitution of fossil resources with renewable resources), the conflict avoidance strategy is reaching its limits. The competition between different demands for land use is great. There are conflicting goals between energy transition projects, nature conservation, global food security, etc. This all indicates that the aforementioned disputes on the local level over specific transformation projects will further increase. This argument also points to possible (justified) protests in the countries of the Global South, given the massive import of resources by the countries of the Global North. Workers in many regions of the world suffer under poor working conditions in order to satisfy the resource needs (minerals and metals) of the low carbon energy infrastructures in the Global North (Sovacool/Salem/Bazilian et al. 2020). Farmers fear for their livelihoods as land-use conflicts will exacerbate with the expanding bioeconomy strategies that more and more governments of the Global North pursue (Tittor 2021: 314, 322, 325). The massive extractivism of lithium, cobalt and copper – required in large quantities for the expansion of electro mobility and the large-scale realisation of so-called smart city visions – will destroy ecosystems and local economies in the Global South (Prause/Dietz 2022). The green extractivism, global injustices and postcolonial narratives that come in the guise of a frenetically celebrated global hydrogen transition are signs of the same imbalance (Kalt/Tunn 2022). These injustices and potential sources of conflict are ignored in the depoliticising ecomodernist debate.

However, even within Germany there is not an adequate focus on the justice dimensions. Here, the conflict avoidance strategy has reached its limits due to the fundamental importance of emission-intensive production and consumption patterns. Even if interventions are avoided wherever possible, incrementalist approaches (such as replacing internal-combustion-engine vehicles with electric cars) still have an impact on jobs, business models, etc. Thus, transformations will always have winners and losers. At present, German climate policy does not have a roadmap on how to make the transformation fair. Significant funding is being made available for structural change in the coal regions, but it remains unclear who will ultimately benefit and to what extent. There are compensation payments totalling €4.35 billion for the operating companies of the opencast mines and power plants, which are criticised by experts for being illegitimate and too high (Oei/Kendziorski/Herpich et al. 2020: 6–7). The claim that they are illegitimate is based on legal opinions that state there is no compensation-worthy expropriation, and they are considered too high because it was not taken into account that the expected increase in CO_2 prices would affect the economic viability of the power plants anyway.

Ironically, it is often the same protagonists who, on the one hand, torpedo social justice instruments and, on the other hand, use the feared burdens on poor households as an argument against more far-reaching transformation efforts. It seems obvious, however, that a truly ambitious socio-ecological transformation would necessarily involve redistribution from top to bottom – quite simply because the ecological footprint statistically increases with the level of income (Moser/Kleinhückelkotten 2018: 646; Otto/Kim/Dubrovsky et al. 2019: 82–83). At this point, the depoliticising, conflict-avoidance strategy reaches its limits. Only through conflicts with parts of the economy (energy companies, real estate industry, etc.) and an active redistribution policy can a just transformation be seriously strived for. A transformation towards a climate-neutral society requires the withdrawal of privileges – and this can inevitably only be achieved in conflictual confrontations (Eversberg 2020: 252), which includes dealing with the right-wing authoritarian criticism mentioned in Section 1.

The ecomodern approach assumes that the growth paradigm can be maintained provided that the energy base is appropriately changed. The condition for this would be a significant absolute decoupling of economic growth from emissions and resource consumption. Is this actually feasible though? As far as the past is concerned, the facts are unambiguous. Thus far, there has only been a relative decoupling of global economic growth from resource consumption and greenhouse gas emissions (Haberl/Wiedenhofer/Virág et al. 2020; for the wider discussion cf. Parrique/Barth/Briens et al. 2019). The ecomodern approach speculates that absolute decoupling will be achieved in the future. Without elaborating at this point, we assume that the necessary massive reductions in greenhouse gas emissions cannot be achieved in the required time – as long as the amount of goods and services produced and consumed remains at current levels or even increases. Given the urgency of the climate crisis, the precautionary principle requires what the ecomodern approach resists: overcoming the growth-based development model. There is strong resistance to this position, because it is assumed

that turning away from the growth model means stagnation and renunciation. In the next section, we discuss why, conversely, only a culture of self-limitation enables progress and freedom from an emancipatory perspective.

4 Reclaiming a solidary culture of self-limitation

In an emancipatory sense, progress is directed towards increasing options for action and reducing constraints. Progress in this sense can only begin where the necessity for progress ends (Adorno 2003: 625, 638). Given the aforementioned necessity for progress within the growth paradigm, an emancipatory understanding of progress does not strive for alternative development paths within the growth paradigm, but for alternatives to (a fixation on) growth and development (Escobar 2015).

Overcoming the acceleration logic of modernity requires an understanding of freedom that goes beyond the liberal understanding mentioned above. Without linking the notion of freedom to equality and respect for our dependence on nature, climate justice is not conceivable. Freedom must not be conditioned by privileges, which is why the protection of the individual against coercion and discrimination must be combined with regulations that guarantee equality. Polanyi (2001: 265), often referred to in the debate on transformation yet usually quoted in abbreviated form, articulated the connection between freedom and equality in the 1940s as follows: "The passing of market-economy can become the beginning of an era of unprecedented freedom. Juridical and actual freedom can be made wider and more general than ever before; regulation and control can achieve freedom not only for the few, but for all. Freedom not as an appurtenance of privilege, tainted at the source, but as a prescriptive right extending far beyond the narrow confines of the political sphere into the intimate organization of society itself."

In view of the socio-ecological crisis, the notion of freedom must be supplemented not only by the demand for equality, but also by the demand for a recognition of our dependence on nature. In the tradition of critical theory, freedom can, thus, be conceived as the ability to reflect on the inescapable relations between the individual, society and nature (Görg 2003: 34–59). We need to explore the potentials of freedom through a consciously chosen self-limitation. Hence, the ability of a society to limit itself is a condition for freedom (Kallis 2019: 121), which is to be sought, for example, in the reduction of wage labour. This is not about individual renunciation, but about social institutions of limits (Kallis 2019: 102). Negotiating institutionalised rules of limitation (of wealth, income, emis-

sion-intensive practices, etc.) has the potential to revitalise democracy as it leads to a more egalitarian society and gives people agency (Kallis 2019: 104).

Conversely, the expansion of democracy is a prerequisite for a culture of social self-limitation. The economy in particular must be transferred into the realm of democratic debate. Entry points for a democratisation of the economy can be found in practices of commoning (cf. Exner/Kratzwald 2021) or the foundational economy (Wahlund/Hansen 2022). A culture of self-limitation can only be established when democratic negotiation includes the questions of how much and what is (not) produced, how work that is considered meaningful is distributed, and under what conditions work is performed. Such a fundamental change of political and economic practices and structures cannot be achieved in agreement with those who profit from the status quo, but only against their resistance (Eversberg 2020: 252). Thus, in struggles for hegemony, it is necessary to establish a consensus on a solidary culture of self-limitation in which this emancipatory understanding of freedom and progress is universalised as the common good. It goes without saying that democratic self-limitation requires the "re-tooling" of, amongst others, regional and municipal planners to enable them to move beyond growth (Durrant/Lamker/Rydin 2023).

From these perspectives, which go far beyond the ecomodern approach, the following five questions can be formed. By understanding the multiple socio-ecological crisis as fundamental, its societal coping strategies are to be aligned with what Bloch (1987: 150) termed "utopian surplus", a different ideological horizon and a changed orientation with regard to freedom, solidarity, equality and democratisation. Thus, the questions function as criteria for assessing the Climate Emergency Declarations and the climate action that followed them:

– To what extent is the failure of the growth-based development model admitted?
– To what extent are the constraints of technological solutions recognised?
– To what extent are social institutions of limits aspired to?
– To what extent is democracy being intensified by strengthening people's agency and by democratising the economy?
– To what extent is the notion of freedom linked to equality and the recognition of our dependence on nature?

5 Cities facing the climate emergency

In light of the (repeated) revitalisation of ecomodern tendencies discussed above, it is to be investigated how far

municipal Climate Emergency Declarations act as entry projects into an alternative path as described in the previous section. After the council of Darebin, Australia, declared a climate emergency at the end of 2016, a constellation of social movement actors and transnational municipal networks helped such declarations to diffuse around the globe (Greenfield/Moloney/Granberg 2022: 2). In August 2022, it was estimated that over 2,200 local governments across 39 countries had declared a climate emergency.[4] While Davidson, Briggs, Nolan et al. (2020) mention the 2019 heat waves in Europe, melting ice sheets in Greenland and wildfire seasons in the US as key drivers for the ever-growing number of municipalities declaring a climate emergency, the declarations – and the increased climate action that follows them – can be interpreted as a result of pressure from civil society and local concerns too (Greenfield/Moloney/Granberg 2022: 12). Additionally, as many declarations refer to the IPCC's report of Global Warming of 1.5°C (IPCC 2018), the role of climate science for the political mobilisations is mentioned by Howarth, Lane and Fankhauser (2021) and Rilling and Tosun (2021), amongst others.

In general, Climate Emergency Declarations can be characterised as a "statement of intent, acting as a political gesture and stimulating local action" (Howarth/Lane/Fankhauser 2021: 37). Thus, institutional changes and new governance components have been implemented in some of the CED municipalities, e.g. a new City Office Environmental Sustainability Board and an Advisory Committee on Climate Change in Bristol, UK, and a Climate Emergency Mobilization Department and Commission in Los Angeles (Rode 2019: 7). However, in stark contrast to the clear wording of the declarations, the challenge of financing a post-declaration strategy in the face of chronically underfunded municipalities cannot be overlooked (Howarth/Lane/Fankhauser 2021: 42). Yet, the operationalisation and implementation of the intended outcomes (see also Ruiz-Campillo/Castán Broto/Westman 2021) have hardly been researched or compared, if at all. Therefore, Chou (2021: 618) asks whether "these local government declarations, symbolic as they may presently be, are the very initial stages of a 'punctuated equilibrium' whereby climate policy stasis may be disrupted by new, alternative policy approaches".

In this paper, two cities are identified for the analysis of whether Climate Emergency Declarations are evidence of an ongoing incremental ecomodern approach of urban governance or if they are accompanied by major transformations. While the city of Constance (Konstanz am Bodensee) was chosen for being the first German city to declare a climate emergency (also to identify a possible first mover strategy), the German capital Berlin was chosen as the most populated city. Several limitations put the selection of the two cases into perspective, most notably the difference in the number of inhabitants and the differing legal status. First, the selected cities vary with regard to their population size, as this allows the hurdles and pitfalls of transformation pathways to be outlined for both medium-sized and large cities. Second, Berlin is a *Bundesland* (German federal state) with more legal opportunities and obligations than a municipality such as Constance. This means that a direct comparison between the actions of the two cities is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we take an explorative approach that highlights the different narratives and actions of CED municipalities.

For this study, the analysis of the Climate Emergency Declaration and the climate action concept following the declaration are key, which explains the prevailing focus on documents, accompanying argumentation, justifications and rhetoric manifestations rather than on the effectiveness of instruments. Whether the measures are suitable to achieve the set climate targets is not part of this analysis and must be reviewed elsewhere (see also Hale/Chan/Hsu et al. 2021). As there are many climate- or transformation-related documents and concepts published by municipalities, the emphasis in this paper lies on the main documents accompanying the declaration of a climate emergency in the respective cities. The documents listed in Table 1 were analysed via qualitative content analysis and include the texts of the declarations, press releases by the respective municipality, and, above all, the concepts and catalogues of measures. The selection of the material was based on relevance to the research question under investigation and data availability. The interpretation process was oriented towards Directed Qualitative Content Analysis, as described for example by Kibiswa (2019), but adapted to our research design. Directed Qualitative Content Analysis is appropriate for research in which categories are defined a priori to the data collection. In our case, the categories are derived from the theoretically grounded normative framework. The analysis consisted of four steps. Based on the guiding questions elaborated in Section 4, the documents were first read and scanned in German for statements on these categories and text sections were marked with corresponding codes. In the second step, the categories were differentiated and further developed through sub-codes, such as municipal roles and agencies. The third step involved the translation of the relevant text extracts from German into English, with an emphasis on word contexts and contextualisation. Finally, the results of the explorative analysis from the two cities were put into relation with each other and re-connected to the literature.

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[4] https://www.cedamia.org/global/ (31.07.2023).

Table 1 Overview of documents under investigation

	City of Constance	City of Berlin
Political resolutions	– Climate Emergency Resolution of the Constance Municipal Council (Gemeinderat Konstanz 2019).	– Climate Emergency Resolution of the Berlin House of Representatives (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin 2020).
Municipal press releases and websites	– Third Anniversary Climate Emergency (Stadt Konstanz 2022a). – Climate Protection Strategy (Stadt Konstanz 2022b). – Climate Protection Strategy Constance (Information brochure) (Stadt Konstanz 2021).	– Berlin conducts climate check for Senate bills (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021b). – Climate Emergency in Berlin (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021c). – Goals and principles of climate protection policy in Berlin (Senatsverwaltung für Mobilität, Verkehr, Klimaschutz und Umwelt 2022).
Concepts and catalogues of measures	– Climate Protection Strategy (Stadt Konstanz 2022b).	– Action Plan of Berlin in recognition of the climate emergency (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021a).

6 Key findings from the Climate Emergency Declarations and their aftermath

On 2 May 2019, Constance became the first city in Germany to declare a climate emergency after protests by *Fridays for Future*, thus triggering an expansion of the climate emergency movement in the Federal Republic of Germany, too. On that day, the climate emergency resolution was passed unanimously in the Constance municipal council. Two months later, immediate measures were initiated with a second resolution in the municipal council and *Klimarelevanzabfragen* (climate relevance queries) for all council decisions were established. In order to push for a more systematic approach towards becoming climate neutral as quickly as possible as a city, a climate protection strategy was developed that sets out the path and the necessary measures towards achieving extensive climate neutrality by 2035. The strategy paper was adopted by the municipal council in November 2021 and provides 61 measures with which Constance aims to achieve its climate protection goals, covering the main topics strategy & planning, buildings, sustainable energy supply, awareness raising, consumption & leisure and mobility (Stadt Konstanz 2022a; Stadt Konstanz 2022b).

The popular initiative *Klimanotstand Berlin* (Climate Emergency Berlin), supported by numerous political organisations, was launched in spring 2019. Following discussions with politicians and the organisation of demonstrations, more than 40,000 signatures were collected and brought to the House of Representatives. On 10 December 2019, the largest German city and capital Berlin became the first federal state to recognise the climate emergency. In its resolution, the Berlin Senate indicates that ongoing global warming constitutes a climate emergency that requires additional efforts in favour of climate protection, also at Berlin state level (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin 2020). Despite stating commitment to the international climate protection agreement of Paris, which limits global warming to no more than 1.5°C compared to pre-industrial times, steps for the implementation of the resolution took time. The Senate adopted a comprehensive plan of measures in June 2021, including accelerated climate protection measures in the areas of buildings, public institutions and companies, transport and energy supply (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021a).

6.1 Admission of failure of the growth-based development model

With the 2019 resolution, the city of Constance explicitly admitted that climate protection efforts are not yet progressing fast enough, and that "in an overall assessment, the timetable adopted in 2016 in the integrated climate protection concept […] is not being met" mentioning, amongst others, indirect emissions by its citizens (Gemeinderat Konstanz 2019: 2; translation by the authors). This addresses a central aspect that is often forgotten in urban climate protection strategies. For instance, Krähmer (2021) criticises Copenhagen's strategy for climate neutrality for being based on externalisation. If only emissions produced locally are counted, emissions produced outside of the city for locally consumed products or services are being swept under the carpet.

In general, Constance's climate protection strategy characterises measures to mitigate global overheating as "massive changes in our infrastructure, our mobility and consumption patterns as well as in our way of doing business. Transformation processes require public debate and must be shaped and wanted by a large majority" (Stadt Konstanz

2022b: 7; translation by the authors). Consequently, the concept also becomes explicit with regard to the fundamental orientation of Constance's urban policy: the focus on growth alone, including sustainable growth, is rejected here with reference to scientific work on decoupling. "Model results show that a complete decoupling of economic growth and GHG emissions cannot be achieved to a sufficient degree in the time available" (Stadt Konstanz 2022b: 7; translation by the authors). Since the concept identifies growing economic and urban structures as potential hurdles for meeting climate targets, the city's strategy relies partly on alternatives to a growth orientation, e.g. citing Ulrich Brand, a prominent figure of degrowth transformation (Stadt Konstanz 2022b: 6, 44) and mentions visions of a *Postwachstumsstadt* (degrowth municipality; see also Brokow-Loga/Eckardt 2020). In doing so, the Constance strategy thus connects, at least on a rhetorical level, to debates on socio-ecological transformation which are often not accessible for urban administrative structures. While it remains questionable whether the measures actually initiate major transformations, they highlight potential beyond the usual modes of urban policy and planning.

Quite in contrast, there is little self-criticism or reflection in the Berlin documents. The catalogue of measures is brimming with self-praise and highlights the "successes of Berlin's climate protection policy to date", the "pioneering role" and "ambitious climate protection policy at the state level" (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021a: 3). Interestingly, the document mentions that in the Berlin transport sector a targeted emissions reduction of more than 20 % by 2020 contrasts with a real emission increase of almost 12 % by 2019, but the gap between aspiration and reality is not comprehensively addressed (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021a: 3). The "dynamic population growth of Berlin" (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021a: 3) is regarded as an indisputable prerequisite (and as a further growth driver in all sectors, for example for the expansion of the urban vehicle fleet), not as a challenge to be analysed.

Inherent in both approaches, however, is the framing of their respective local roles for socio-ecological transformation in inter-municipal competition. Deadlines for climate neutrality become a race, awards are up for grabs and lighthouse projects are everywhere. This continued competitive logic in the municipal climate policy field illustrates particularly strongly the prevalence of ecomodern approaches, confirming what Rosol, Béal and Mössner (2017) described as global "Greenest City" competitions that promote strategies of reputation building instead of fundamental change. While rhetorical reference is made to a state of emergency, a business-as-usual model continues to prevail in the style

of municipal actions, which suggests mitigating climate change is a game in which one city has to beat the other. The extent to which the planning documents address the wickedness of the problem (Kemmerzell 2019) with technological solutions only, will be the topic of the next section.

6.2 Recognition of the constraints of technological solutions

The Constance strategy features several statements that are quite clear on this topic, "We will not be able to prevent global warming with purely technical measures. Instead, ecological questions are at the same time social questions and thus closely linked to power and domination" (Stadt Konstanz 2022b: 6; translation by the authors). Thus, the report connects effective climate protection to the perspective of social-ecological transformation. Furthermore, the climate emergency resolution of 2019 already contains far-reaching political demands. "Only a complete dismantling of existing subsidies for fossil fuels, a socially just CO_2 price, a fundamentally changed transport policy and the promotion of social housing in line with climate protected housing construction would lay the urgently needed foundation" (Gemeinderat Konstanz 2019: 2; translation by the authors). Indeed, the Constance resolution as well as the strategy insist that meeting climate change targets at the municipal level is hampered by the current national regulatory conditions, explicitly criticising the "hesitant climate protection policy of the previous federal government" (Stadt Konstanz 2022b: 7; translation by the authors).

As a complement to the efficiency and consistency perspectives that dominate most documents on climate action, the climate protection strategy also explicitly proposes sufficiency ideas, e.g. spaces for sharing and exchanging, space- and resource-saving housing and alternatives for the emission-driving sectors of consumption and food (Stadt Konstanz 2022b: 44–45). However, a large portion of the measures proposed in the climate protection plan and prioritised by the municipality, are rather techno-orientated, e.g. the expansion of photovoltaic systems and expansion of heat networks.

The Berlin declaration and catalogue of measures that are under investigation here are far less clear on this subject. The action plan places a strong emphasis on efficiency measures – from "increasing the efficiency of energy use in buildings" (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021a: 5) to "efficient planning of cycling infrastructure" (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021a: 11) – and largely ignores sufficiency approaches. On the one hand, technological and innovative approaches form the core of the Berlin documents. Bridging technologies are mentioned and in particular the expan-

sions of infrastructures for hydrogen and synthetic gas are targeted (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021a: 13). The limits of technological solutions are not explicitly mentioned at any point. Furthermore, it can be assumed that, for instance, the envisaged hydrogen demand will not be covered by renewable energies in the foreseeable future, so that the technological orientation conceals fossil fake solutions (see above; Kalt/Tunn 2022). On the other hand, it is made clear that transformation steps will not be initiated by technologies alone, but also by regulatory measures and bans. Particularly worthy of mention are interventions in transport, such as the medium-term exclusion of vehicles with fossil-based combustion engines from the environmental zone, the explicit commitment at the federal level to a ban on new registrations for fossil-based passenger cars from 2030 at the latest (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021a: 9–10), and a socially just increase in residents' parking fees with reference to more area justice between cars and public transport (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin 2020: 2).

One pivotal point in the long-term implementation of climate policy goals in cities is often the need for additional staff in districts and central administrations – in the context of austerity urbanism (North/Nurse/Barker 2017). These needs are often pushed into the background in favour of technological innovations. In both cities, however, it can be observed that this problem is increasingly being recognised. Berlin plans to implement the necessary "personnel framework" through climate protection officers in the districts (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021a: 15–16). In Constance, the position of a mobility manager is to be re-introduced in the budget by resolution (Gemeinderat Konstanz 2019: 1) and a *Klimaneutralitätsstelle* is envisaged as part of the climate protection staff unit. However, the climate protection strategy also makes clear: "In order to make the entire administration largely climate-neutral within 13 years, one staff position and the participation of all areas will not be sufficient, [which is why the] creation of further supporting staff positions is necessary" (Stadt Konstanz 2022b: 51). The structural increase of municipal staff in the field of climate protection beyond short-term funding periods is certainly linked to the increasing importance of monitoring adherence to the imposed limits, such as the urban decarbonisation pathway or the climate impact assessment of new policies, which brings us to the next aspect examined.

6.3 Socio-political institutions of limits

Constance's climate protection strategy works with a residual municipal greenhouse gas budget and orientates its measures towards "extensive" climate neutrality by 2035 (Stadt Konstanz 2022b: 25). Berlin, on the other hand, is supposed to only be climate neutral by 2045, but nevertheless repeatedly refers to "ambitious climate protection goals" and its "pioneering role" (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021a: 3). A tightening of CO_2 emission targets – at times in sharp distinction to the nationally adopted targets – is part of the standard repertoire of climate emergency resolutions. Whether and how the subsequent scenarios and development paths are realistically designed in the medium term, however, remains controversial. In the feasibility study "Making Berlin Paris-compliant" (cf. Senatsverwaltung für Mobilität, Verkehr, Klimaschutz und Umwelt 2022), which is to be used to update the Berlin Energy and Climate Protection Programme 2030, Hirschl, Schwarz, Weiß et al. (2021) therefore also speak of many limiting factors that stand in the way of achieving climate neutrality as early as the 2030s. In political debates and planning procedures, climate-friendly transformations are said to repeatedly lose out. In this context, a "new climate governance architecture that ensures mainstreaming of the issue in all departments, efficient steering and binding implementation" (Hirschl/Schwarz/Weiß et al. 2021: 24; translation by the authors) is called for. One aspect of this integration into everyday municipal governance can be seen in the introduction of mandatory climate impact measurements in municipal policy and planning. Hirschl and Pfeifer (2020: 30) therefore also speak of a "new quality" of climate emergency resolutions.

To give the climate crisis "highest priority" (Gemeinderat Konstanz 2019: 2; translation by the authors), the resolution also includes a commitment to the climate impact assessment of all city council decision documents "and gives preference to solutions that have a positive impact on climate, environmental and species protection" (Gemeinderat Konstanz 2019: 2; translation by the authors). For Berlin, too, the House of Representatives recognised global warming as a "climate emergency which requires urgent action and additional efforts in favour of climate protection" (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin 2020: 1; translation by the authors). To monitor these additional efforts and to institutionalise limits, the resolution explicitly calls for a review of all new Senate bills and decisions with regard to their climate impact, using a "defined catalogue of criteria" (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin 2020: 1; translation by the authors). However, the development of this *Klimacheck* took time and was still not final one and a half years later (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021b).

Numerous climate emergency municipalities, at least in Germany, have included an impact assessment in their declarations. 73 % of the municipalities investigated by Hirschl and Pfeifer (2020) indicated stronger commitment and controls and responded that climate impact assessment was

mandatory for future decisions. Yet to what extent does the implementation of climate impact assessments, understood as a new tool for mainstreaming climate policies to all municipal departments, safeguard the limits the municipalities declare they respect? The answer is, at least for now, ambiguous. In their study on German municipalities, Rilling and Tosun (2021: 106) find the main consequence of declaring the climate emergency comprises the obligation to undertake climate impact assessments. While they confirm that this instrument certainly helps put climate topics on the agenda, they conclude that the process of decision-making and the integration of climate concerns into new municipal policies remain to be seen (Rilling/Tosun 2021: 108). The effect of repeated agenda setting in Constance's case is best described in an article of the German newspaper DER SPIEGEL: "Since the word 'negative' is almost always ticked [in the Constance climate assessment form], the municipality must discuss what can be done to remain as climate-friendly as possible" (Röhlig 2020; translation by the authors). Interestingly, this instrument seems to put administrative actors in a strong position due to their capability to veto projects or policy proposals (Rilling/Tosun 2021: 100).

Thus, besides impact assessments, socio-political institutions setting limits at the municipal level (e.g. instruments for redistributing street space or limiting individual consumption of living space) and a strict adherence to these limits are hardly discernible for the moment. This continuity of planning for urban growth amidst ongoing socio-ecological crises is also empirically confirmed for other cities. For example, Boeth and Kühn (2022) observe an extensive continuity of "growth coalitions" for Jena (CED in September 2019), pursuing and prioritising the aim of attracting workers to secure economic growth. On this point, it can be observed that general proposals beyond the ecomodernist business-as-usual suggest the political institutionalisation of limits primarily at the national and global level (Fitzpatrick/Parrique/Cosme 2022). In fact, it is also important to mention that, within the current growth model, social safety nets (pensions, health insurance) and municipal budgets for key functions and infrastructures are highly dependent on further economic acceleration. Thus, not tackling the question of growth in the climate emergency agenda must not only be understood as a fear of stagnation, but partly as evidence of how growth dependencies have become inscribed in multi-scalar institutional arrangements.

Even though the nation state is undoubtedly one relevant level of scale for the redistribution of income and wealth as well as for selective shrinking processes or policies aimed at reducing working hours (in wage labour), we recognise a gap in theory and practice for urban and subnational proposals for self-limitation in the face of the declared climate emergency. If degrowth is to become an impactful counter-hegemonic force, it must base its claim on a multi-scalar analysis and strategy, and hence make comprehensive orientations for action available also for municipal politics. In their systematic mapping of degrowth policy proposals, Fitzpatrick, Parrique and Cosme (2022) demonstrate the existence of proposals towards, e.g. decentralising decision-making, promoting shared housing, supporting local currencies and relocalising activities. The fact that these proposals did not make it into the catalogues of measures of the climate emergency municipalities is certainly not only due to a lack of transfer of scientific findings into politics and planning, but above all due to political majorities, negotiations and discourses. This brings us to the fourth aspect, in which questions around democratisation and decision-making are brought to the fore.

6.4 Intensification of democracy

In essence, post-fossil transformations are questions of democracy. With regard to Climate Emergency Declarations, to what extent is democracy being intensified by strengthening people's agency? On the one hand, the conventional basic setup of municipal planning and political institutions remains in place in both cities. On the other hand, small interventions have been carefully integrated into this structure, most notably climate citizens' councils. Although these councils are given exactly the same names (*Klimabürgerrat*) in both cities, their goals differ greatly. While the Berlin document defines its aim as submitting "proposals and recommendations for action for a climate-neutral Berlin" (Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021a: 20; translation by the authors), the Constance citizens' council rather involves an annual budget allocation by citizens, some of whom are selected randomly, for the promotion of ideas and projects that might have a positive impact on the climate (Stadt Konstanz 2022b: 102).

With regard to municipal companies, the decarbonisation strategies can by no means be seen as democratisation strategies. In explaining the wave of remunicipalisations of German power utilities, Wagner and Berlo (2015: 563) mention that "in contrast to large power companies municipal utilities offer many opportunities to promote the democratization of local power supply and allow the citizens to participate in the company's success". Yet despite the fact that municipal utilities and associated companies are portrayed as important stakeholders in the post-fossil transformation (Stadt Konstanz 2022b: 150–152; Senatsverwaltung für Umwelt, Verkehr und Klimaschutz 2021a: 14), no reference is made to the ongoing debates on their democratisation.

A rhetorical linking of climate protection goals with improvements in democratic participation therefore takes place only extremely marginally. It can be stated that, despite their limitations, deliberative democracy and "rational planning" continue to be portrayed as the only problem-solver (cf. Durner 2023). Although in both cases, decisions on climate emergencies were carried into the political bodies through campaigning by social movements, the reason for maintaining the status quo of democracy is undoubtedly the preservation of the power of specific actors, in this case in the form of municipal institutions. The political crisis of representation is thus largely ignored when considering the climate emergency.

This raises the question not only of the extent to which post-CED planning can take up democratic elements more strongly, but also of the extent to which the creation of the concept papers themselves was based on participatory formats or democratic innovations. The policy papers and concepts, but also the press releases, are remarkably silent on the question of input legitimacy. The two general climate emergency plans analysed here, which outline the implementation steps of the climate emergency, seem to be characterised by an expertise-oriented approach (in the case of Constance) or the political will of the Senate and the responsible Senate administration (in the case of Berlin). However, a scientific in-depth analysis of the democratisation effects of climate emergency debates at the urban and (trans-)local levels would have to provide more precise statements in the future. The last section examines the extent to which the interplay of social and ecological crises plays a role in the analysed decisions and strategy papers.

6.5 Social equality and recognition of our dependency on nature

In general, the two case studies are silent when it comes to reflecting on the inescapable relations between the individual, society and nature. The municipal documents on the climate emergency are characterised by clear language regarding the acute danger to the planetary climate, but formulate little to no narrative-shaping proposals for a different conception of freedom or a common good. At least the Constance strategy paper states in the introduction that the Constance strategy's final goal is the emergence of a "new and healthy way of coexistence between people and the environment" (Stadt Konstanz 2022b: 8; translation by the authors).

While social inequality or dependency on nature are not mentioned in the declarations themselves, the accompanying documents contain some (admittedly hesitant) statements on this. However, instead of social (in)justice or (in)equality, the documents rather speak of "social cohe-

sion" (Constance) or "social compatibility" (Berlin) – terms that are in the tradition of the ecomodern conflict avoidance strategy aiming at social pacification. Links with social issues arise regarding parking space management, the expansion of public transport and building renovation but are lacking elsewhere. Even in the area of adaptation to the consequences of climate change, the different degree to which such consequences are experienced is not presented as being dependent on social and economic status (although numerous studies repeatedly come to this conclusion, see e.g. Paavola 2017; Tenzing 2020). Nature is not seen as a value in itself; on the contrary, the relationship between humans and the world is characterised as purely instrumental. This is also done implicitly, for example in that technical innovations make up the largest part of the measures.

7 Conclusion: Climate emergency municipalities as entry projects against ecomodern myopia?

Our analysis has shown that the claims we have developed for a solidary culture of self-limitation are met to varying degrees by Climate Emergency Declaration narratives or related measures. Due to our explorative research design, we can currently only draw conclusions for Berlin and Constance. The extent to which the tendencies we have noted also apply to other cities with Climate Emergency Declarations should be the subject of further studies. In the Climate Emergency Declarations analysed, the failure and limitations of previous climate policies are acknowledged quite explicitly on a rhetorical level. However, the concrete proposals that derive from this recognition hardly intervene in the political-economic structures. Thus, the Climate Emergency Declarations under investigation here mainly reproduce ecomodern approaches, because the structures (and main actors) of urban governance remain the same – with growth-centrism at their core. Even in the case of an acknowledged emergency, which the two cities indeed declared, it seems as if an incremental approach to policy and planning is still undisputed (see also Chou 2021: 618).

Establishing impactful social institutions of limits would require significantly restricting the market principle, something which is generally shied away from. However, the prioritisation of low climate impact operationalised through obligatory assessments (*Klimacheck)* is clearly a breakthrough. How sharp this sword proves in terms of self-limitation of course depends on how it is implemented into the administrative structures. The linking of the notion of freedom with equality remains hesitant, especially where influential economic or political forces would have to be deprivileged. Importantly, social justice aspects are

not prominent parts of either campaigns or concepts, and even if our vulnerability to climate change is clearly stated, there still seems to be a long way to go towards attributing intrinsic value to nature and overcoming our instrumental relation to the same.

The processes around the Climate Emergency Declarations have led to a slight increase in democratic influence by citizens. Further strengthening of participation opportunities is being sought, for example, through citizen assemblies. However, the much-needed extension of democracy to the economic sphere, e.g. with regard to municipal companies, is not on the table at all. This routinisation is also evident in terms of governance mode. The agonistic approach of the social movements at play (*Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion*, amongst others) aimed at a rapid shift towards a decarbonised society by building pressure on municipal actors through press, campaigns and petitions (a strategy which seems to be, at least indirectly, inspired by Sutton 2017). This pressure was then channelled into long bureaucratic processes, some of which were guided by science, but most of which were conducted without further public participation. In practice, this de-escalating way of developing planning principles out of confrontational demands ultimately clashes with the declared state of an escalating emergency, reflecting conflicts between the requirements of planning law and the recommendations of agonistic and other normative planning theories (cf. Durner 2023).

At the city level, establishing institutional power for fundamental and long-term socio-ecological transformation can be regarded as a tough task, mainly due to two reasons: first, legal frameworks create an obstacle since national power determines major leverage points; and second, financing is an obstacle, because climate action is not (yet) a mandatory task for municipalities under German federal and state law. It should not be underestimated that although sub-national actors increasingly seem to recognise the climate crisis as a state of emergency, their limited capacity to act in the multi-level political system certainly is a major constraint. These limits are partly reflected in the translocal action of addressing other levels of power, which is part of the declarations. To go beyond this, cities would have to initiate changes in an orchestrated way without viewing themselves as being in competition with each other. As such, a solidary culture of self-limitation presupposes solidary political action.

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