

For a Neorealist Political Ecology

An Institutional Ecological Change Approach to Analyze the Socio-political Conditions for the Ecological Bifurcation

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Introduction

Our times are marked by the unprecedented challenge of climate change and recent years have seen an acceleration in the dangers and catastrophes linked to global warming, leading to a continuous increase in the number of people exposed to climate risks. Moreover, there is a parallel increase in the inequality of carbon emissions and in the inequality of exposure to climate risks (Chancel, Bothe, and Voituriez 2023). As shown by Chancel (2022), 21% of emissions growth between 1990 and 2019 were captured by the top 1%, while the bottom 50% was responsible for 16% of emissions growth and even declined for the middle income groups of the rich countries (p.35). Confronted to this rise in climate inequality and risks, one would expect a surge in widespread demands for eco-social policies. The past decades have been however marked by climate inaction, climate skepticism, a decline of green parties and the domination of far-right politics.

This seems like a paradox because, at first glance, increasing climate risks should gradually lead more people to support political strategies and policy proposals which would dampen the threats posed by climate change. This “ecological paradox” is akin to what has been underlined in income and wealth inequality studies regarding the lack of widespread demand for redistribution to reduce the reversal of income and wealth inequalities since the 80s (Gethin, Martinez-Toledano, and Piketty 2021a). This ecological paradox is even more striking when one considers the fact that individuals generally express greater concern and willingness to act against climate change (Hornsey and Fielding 2020).

Undoubtedly, this paradox does not stem from a lack of models and reform proposals for green transition. Recent years have been indeed marked by a proliferation of research and studies developing numerous programs of institutional change in favor of a social-ecological transformation which would take into account both income-wealth and carbon inequalities. Degrowth contributions have in that regard elaborated tremendous amount of policy proposals in a wide variety of domains. The systematic review conducted by Fitzpatrick, Parrique, and Cosme (2022) has identified around 13 broad policy themes, ranging from financial regulations, food consumption to tourism and work. Some common policy proposals

are for instance working time reduction, stronger financial regulations, inequality reduction and taxation of high income.

Moreover, degrowth is not only just a set of policies, but also encompasses a radical and ambitious project of institutional change which aims a rupture with economic growth. Such contributions have in common an emphasis on a central role given to economic planning for a successful and fast enough social-ecological transition. [Durand, Hofferberth, and Schmelzer \(2024\)](#) suggest for instance a “planning beyond growth” framework, defined as a “set of institutions supporting decision-making processes informed by bio-physical and social indicators and driven by deliberately stated social and ecological targets” (p.2) and which would combine democratic planning with a degrowth/post-growth perspective. [Durand and Keucheyan \(2024\)](#) plead for a social-ecological bifurcation, that is, an ambitious ecological planning framework to democratically reduce the negative effects of human activity on the environment. [Aglietta and Espagne \(2024\)](#) also advocate for such transition based on ecological planning, something which has been the case of ecosocialism for decades ([Löwy 2005; Lowy 2007; Löwy et al. 2022](#)).

However, whereas there is no shortages of radical projects of institutional change to act against climate change, the practical political possibilities of such projects remain widely unexplored. This problem has been underlined by [Durand and Keucheyan \(2024\)](#), who have left this question for further research: “Obviously, many areas remain to be explored, including the crucial one of the specific political conditions that make such an aspiration [i.e. ecological planning] possible. The question would be the following: to what extent could a social-ecological bloc seize upon ecological planning to establish itself as a hegemonic political force ?” (p. 247, author’s translation).

The question at stake here is the one about the forces which could initiate a process of institutional change towards a sustainable social-ecological model based on economic planning. However, existing institutional theories within ecological economics are not well-suited to tackle such a question, because they are essentially normative. This is particularly the case of Institutional Ecological Economics (IEE) ([Paavola and Adger 2005](#)) which is a body of work which had the ambition of creating a synthesis between ecological economics and institutional economics, but fails to offer a non-normative framework to analyze institutional change.

I rather argue that a new and innovative approach to ecological institutionalism can be developed based on recent developments in political economy which have in that regard tried to move beyond functionalist and normative explanations of institutional change which are widespread in economics, institutional economics and political economy ([Amable 2016](#)). Institutions do not emerge as the most efficient solutions to given problems, but as the result of

political conflict and past political compromises ([André and Delorme 1983](#)). This also applies to institutions which could be the foundations of a mode of regulation based on ecological planning. The political conditions for a social-ecological transformation based on ecological planning have however remained widely overlooked so far, and a thorough analysis of the political possibilities of existing social-ecological models of institutional change still need to be conducted.

This political impasse faced by the degrowth/post-growth literature is in part due to a lack of positive understanding of the political limits of their proposals. As emphasized by [D'Alisa and Kallis \(2020\)](#), the degrowth literature rests too much on the assumption that good policy proposals will be taken up naturally by political actors and has not yet offered any model nor theory to explain how and under what conditions radical policy and social change could take place. Whereas [D'Alisa and Kallis \(2020\)](#) argue that this is because degrowth perspectives lack a theory of the state, I argue that this is because they lack a theory of institutional change at all.

In the present paper, I argue that the neorealist approach is a very well suited framework to analyze institutional change related to the environment. As such, the approach can be used to assess the political possibilities of, not only the social-ecological transformation, but also of other perspectives such as mainstream environmental economics and even ecofascism. To do so, I also argue that the neorealist approach must be augmented and reimaged on how to integrate the environment in their framework. Using recent developments in Regulation Theory and the neorealist approach, this paper shows that it is indeed possible to develop a new political economy of institutional change framework which takes the environment into account, that is, a neorealist political ecology.

This paper is structured as follows. The first section reviews existing institutional, political sciences and political economy approaches to institutional change, ecology as a political cleavage and the political economy of green coalitions. Then, the second section explains the framework and main concepts of neorealist political economy, while emphasizing the lack of consideration of ecological issues. A third section explores how recent developments in Regulation Theory can be used to integrate the environment and ecological issues into the neorealist approach. Finally, I propose a neorealist political ecology by exploring the dynamics relationships between the environment and the three dimensions of social conflict: political, ideological and institutional. ([Amable and Palombarini 2023](#)).

Institutionalism and the environment

In institutional economics, a wide variety of approaches offer many ways and tools to analyze institutions which regulate the exploitation of the environment. Among environmental

economics and institutional theories aimed at analyzing environmental conflict and institutions, one approach stands out by its ambition to develop a specific theory of institutional environmental change: Institutional Ecological Economics (IEE). Developed separately by the works of Jouni Paavola (Paavola and Adger 2002; 2005; Paavola 2007) and Arild Vatn (Vatn 2005; 2009; 2015) during the 2000s and 2010s, this approach, had the ambition to synthesize New Institutional Economics and Ecological Economics by “combining their insights on issues such as interdependence, complexity, resilience, scale, governance, and institutional design” (Paavola and Adger 2005, p.354) to create an interdisciplinary platform of research called “environmental governance”, defined as “the establishment, reaffirmation or change of institutions to resolve conflict over environmental resources” (Paavola 2007, p.94).

The question of the emergence and change of institutions was thus at the core of IEE. The notion of interdependence, drawn from New Institutional Economics, is central to this approach because it explains the existence of institutions, considered as a way to resolve environmental conflicts caused by the interdependence between heterogeneous interests. Douai and Montalban (2012) argued that, due to several limitations and conceptual confusions, IEE fails at providing a positive theory of institutional change and environmental conflict. These limitations reside in an ambiguous combination of legitimacy and power-based explanations of institutional change. Instead of providing the tools for a positive analysis of institutions, IEE is rather an “agenda to transform reality” and finding the appropriate rules that will ultimately solve environmental issues by harmonizing antagonistic interests (Douai and Montalban 2012, p.1201).

Douai and Montalban (2012) plead instead for a “political economy of environmental conflict”. The notion of contradiction, which includes interdependence but also socio-economic dynamics, is introduced to explain the emergence of environmental conflict through three types of ecological contradictions: (1) the struggle to access scarce resources between communities; (2) the environmental impact of production; (3) the threats to profitability caused by its undermined biophysical and socio-political conditions. These contradictions are the factors behind a latent environmental conflict between social groups. An overt environmental conflict is set off when existing institutions are obsolete, that is, when they are not appropriate anymore to regulate the issues of the distribution and production and environmental resources and environmental impacts. This point is fundamental and, as I will demonstrate later, is one of the channels through which environmental dynamics interact with the three dimension of social conflict (in that case the institutional dimension). However, Douai and Montalban’s approach remains largely incomplete as only the destabilizing impact of environmental contradictions on existing political compromises are emphasized. Their political economy of

environmental conflict is merely unidirectional: from social-ecological contradictions to the break-up of the existing socio-political ecological compromises to the establishment of new institutions through political conflict. The latter aspect, although strongly underlined, is not elaborated further. To do so, it is first relevant to see how existing approaches have considered the environment as a political cleavage.

Ecology and the dimensionality of political cleavages

In political cleavages contributions, the ecological divide is often treated in two related ways. On the one hand, ecological issues are considered as belonging to “values”, “cultural” or even “identity” politics. In other words, the ecological divide and its different components would not constitute a line of social conflict per se, but could be considered as belonging to a more encompassing cleavage centered around post-materialist issues ([Inglehart 1971](#); [Inglehart and Norris 2017](#); [Kitschelt 1994](#); [Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002](#)). In these views, the degree of concern for ecological issues are strongly correlated with progressive attitudes in other cultural issues such as identity, racism or gender. According to [Inglehart \(1971\)](#), the shift in values towards ecological concerns is the result of the post-war cohorts becoming wealthier as a consequence of the period’s strong economic growth which allowed a certain detachment from material concerns. In these contributions, green parties are seen as the catalysts of the new social movements of the 70s and 80s, bringing together a more educated electorate, less preoccupied with social issues than for other issues such as quality of life, climate change and equal rights.

For [Kitschelt \(1994\)](#), the expansion of education played a great role in the emergence of this second dimension of political divide, whereas, for [Kriesi et al. \(2008\)](#), the accent is put on the role of globalization. But all this literature has in common the idea that political space was once constituted by a single left-right line of divide centered around economic matters and has been since transformed into a bidimensional space in which the economic cleavage is cut across a cultural cleavage. This idea has even been recently taken up by political economists such as [Gethin, Martinez-Toledano, and Piketty \(2021a\)](#), and, as a result, they consider the “increasing salience of environmental issues” as a sign that Western democracies have shifted to “new forms of identity-based conflicts” ([Gethin, Martinez-Toledano, and Piketty 2021b, p.2](#)).

On the other hand, considering ecological issues as part of a broader cultural cleavages assumes that they are relatively independent to the traditional left-right economic divide, which relates for instance to the degree of redistribution, the size of the welfare state or the degree of intervention of the state in the economy. This cleavage is considered to have an unique dimension, with lower education and income voters represented by left parties and high income and education voters represented by right-wing parties. After widespread

expansion of education generated a shift into a bi-dimensional political space, the cultural divide supplementing the economic cleavage, green parties became the embodiment of what Piketty called the “Brahmin Left”, that is, educated by not necessarily wealthy individuals expressing political preferences aligned with environmentalism, redistribution and pro-immigration attitudes (Piketty 2019). Whereas it is arguable that the traditional economic cleavage did not directly and expressly include ecological matters, the extent to which the latter can be separated from economic issues should not be underestimated. As Chancel et al. (2025) showed, climate inequalities are strongly correlated with income inequalities and climate change tends to contribute to economic deprivation.

The idea that political cleavages can be reduced to two dimensions is thus widespread in political science. However, some contributions have tried to move beyond this simplistic bidimensional to a tridimensional framework arguing that other divides can also constitute a unique cleavage per se. For instance, Kitschelt and Rehm (2014) consider attitudes towards immigration and foreigners as a third dimension along the redistributive (economic) and value cleavages. The question whether environmentalism constitutes an unique divide per se has been tackled by Kenny and Langsæther (2023), who argue that environment issues form a separate dimension of their own in Western countries. Using factor analysis on 14 Western countries using European Value Study data, the authors found that environmentalism loads on a separate factor from other issues such as European integration, gender equality and immigration.

Furthermore, they also show that social predictors of environmentalism are different from value cleavages. This is all the more interesting given that the emergence of the so-called cultural divide is often attributed to educational inequalities, education being the most important predictor of progressive attitudes. Whereas Kenny and Langsæther (2023) find that environmentalism support is positively correlated with education and service classes, other predictors of value cleavages such as religion or gender do not play a great role. However, as stressed by the authors themselves, recognizing environmentalism as an unique cleavage calls for a deeper examination of the different components of this divide, the latter being too complex to be simplified to a simple summative scale. (Kenny and Langsæther 2023, p.1034)

The political economy of green coalitions

Once environmentalism is recognized as a relatively independent line of divide, what remains to be understood is how and which types of social alliances supporting a green transition could emerge on this multidimensional political space. Durand and Keucheyan (2024) propose to build on the approach of Duménil and Lévy (2018) and suggest to start from the latter’s class pattern which characterizes managerial capitalism. In their work, Duménil and Lévy

offered a description of the succession of different phases of capitalism since the post-war period, each these periods being characterized by specific class alliances between popular classes, capitalists and managers. Whereas the post-war compromise or “social-democratic social order” was based on an alliance between popular classes and the managerial class under the leadership of the latter, the neoliberal order which constituted the dominant paradigm since the 1970s up to the Great Recession was based on an alliance between capitalists and managers.

While Duménil and Lévy predicted that a new social order, managerialism, would follow the demise of neoliberalism due to the increasing power of the managerial class, [Durand and Keucheyan \(2024\)](#) consider the possibility of a renewed alliance between managers and popular classes which would constitute a social base for the social-ecological transformation. Their analysis is based on the following suppositions on the social demands of the three classes regarding environmentalism. First, capitalists are the most reluctant to any radical transition based on economic planning since it would mean the end of their profitable activities which are heavily based on polluting industries. Second, managers should constitute the most favourable group to the ecological transition because of their technocratic and practicable knowledge of the issue. Finally, the expectations of popular classes are ambiguous. On the one hand, they are the most exposed to climate risks whilst they contribute less to carbon emissions than wealthier groups. On the other hand, the way and standard of living of these groups also depend on CO₂ emissions, for instance regarding transportation or consumption of electricity and many other goods and services.

[Gatti \(2022\)](#) offers a political economy model of green coalition which is also based on three social classes: the educated bourgeoisie; the working classes and the financial elite. She considers two policy dimensions: ecological legislation and income redistribution. Under the assumption that the financial elite holds shares predominantly in polluting firms, the baseline model initially predicts no ecological legislation and no redistribution, a state of affair which then leads to an alliance between the educated bourgeoisie and popular classes because the former is willing to trade less capital protection for more ecological legislation while popular groups are willing to trade more ecological legislation in return of less capital protection, hence more redistribution in their favor. In that case, the model predicts a “people’s green coalition” between the educated bourgeoisie and popular classes against the financial elite. Nevertheless, under the assumption of green financing, the financial elite would hold more shares in non-polluting activities making it more inclined to form an alliance with the educated bourgeoisie to keep capital protection in exchange of more ecological legislation. However,

neither the baseline or extended models allow for a possible alliance between popular classes and the financial elite to ensure capital protection and no environmental legislation.

This represents an important drawback of this political economy model since such alliance has been observed in real-world politics to block environmental legislation such as carbon taxes. An alliance, or at least a temporary convergence of interests between capitalists and workers is in fact possible through what Mildenberger calls the double representation of carbon polluters ([Mildenberger 2020](#)), that is, the fact that carbon interests are represented on both the capitalists and workers' sides. Climate policies call into question economic institutions that regulate social conflict and whose transformation produces winners and losers who are represented in both right and left-wing coalitions. The ecological divide is thus also in that sense a distributive conflict over material interest associated with climate risks, policies and institutional change ([Aklin and Mildenberger 2020](#)).

Elements of Neorealist Political Economy

A positive analysis of institutional change in the direction of the social-ecological transformation requires a comprehensive theoretical framework which avoids several pitfalls found in the institutional, political science and political economy contributions reviewed above. The first one is to consider institutional change only under a normative perspective, as it is done in IEE and most degrowth contributions. The second one is to reduce political cleavages to one or two dimensions, which oversimplify the space in which social coalitions are possible. Third, the approach should avoid economic determinism and not consider that social groups perceive and adopt automatically their class interests, as it is the case in [Duménil and Lévy \(2018\)](#); [Gatti \(2022\)](#) and [Durand and Keucheyan \(2024\)](#).

Such a framework can be grounded in the neorealist approach developed in the last decades by Amable and Palombarini ([2005](#); [2008](#); [2024](#)), which presents the advantage of incorporating the following elements from the outset: the multidimensionality of political cleavages and agents' expectations regarding public policy; the importance of institutions and ideology in shaping these expectations in addition to socio-economic determinants; and the key role of political strategies.

The first conceptual, theoretical and empirical contributions of neorealist political economy were first developed by [Palombarini \(2001\)](#) in his analysis of the rupture of the Italian social compromise in the 90s and [Amable \(2003\)](#) in his clustering of different models of capitalism. In [Amable \(2003\)](#), one can for instance already find the core concepts of what would then become the neorealist approach such as political equilibrium, political crisis, socio-political groups and social blocs. Subsequently, Amable and Palombarini pooled their ideas and work in a first joint book, the aim of which was to propose a non-normative theory of institutional

change and social conflict ([Amable and Palombarini 2005](#)). Their approach was then developed further in subsequent theoretical and applied contributions: [Amable and Palombarini \(2008\)](#) show how their approach breaks from economic functionalism and the firm-based approach of the Varieties of Capitalism literature ([Hall and Soskice 2001](#)): the viability of a socio-economic model is not supposed to depend on the competitiveness of the firms, but rather on the capacity of its institutions to regulate social conflict. This contribution is particularly relevant given the fact that a few years later, the so-called “growth model perspective” (GMP) tried to also offer another comparative capitalism framework that would break with the firm-based approach of Hall and Soskice by complementing its supply-side New-Keynesian economics with Post-Keynesian economics ([Baccaro and Pontusson 2018](#); [Baccaro, Blyth, and Pontusson 2022](#)). But as shown by [Amable \(2023\)](#), the ideas developed by the GMP are not new and can be found in early Regulation Theory contributions such as those of Michel Freyssenet and the GMP approach actually fails to integrate demand-side economics into the comparative capitalism framework by for instance ignoring the role of the state.

One fundamental feature and advantage of the neorealist approach, rather than being a general theory that would apply in any historical and geographical circumstances, is that it is first and foremost a method which is flexible to its case studies and can be adapted and enriched by its objects of analysis. [Amable, Guillaud, and Palombarini \(2012\)](#) investigated the political crises in France and Italy, following the break-up of the traditional dominant social blocs in the two countries since the 90s, and the possibility of a neoliberal transformation of these two model of continental capitalisms through the agregation of a new dominant social bloc. [Amable and Palombarini \(2018\)](#) and [Amable \(2017\)](#) analyzed further the political crisis and in France, its potential resolution through the formation of a bourgeois bloc and process of institutional change which moved the French model of capitalism closer to that of a neoliberal model.

The essential starting point of the neorealist approach is the fundamental diversity of socio-economic interests emanating from a heterogenous and stratified social structure, leading to an inevitable social conflict which is considered to be “rooted in the differences in the positions occupied by the agents in a multidimensional social structure which is not reducible to economic determinants” ([Amable and Palombarini 2023, p.943](#)). In that regard, the approach recognizes a certain filiation with the realist approaches of Machiavelli or Hobbes, with the difference that social conflict is not seen as rooted in human nature, but in social differentiation. One greater influence is that of Gramsci, whose concepts of hegemony and the inevitability of social conflict are at the root of neorealist political economy. Although Gramsci’s thought has undeniably shaped the approach, this influence alone is not sufficient

to classify it as Marxist as other key Marxists concepts such as the labour theory of value or the theory of the state are not taken up by the approach. Gramsci's influence, although great, is also limited: well-known Gramscian concepts such as the historical bloc should not be confused with social blocs as the former corresponds to an extremely rare historical configuration in which the dominant social bloc dominates not only politically, but also institutionally and politically ([Amable and Palombarini 2024b](#)).

The neorealist approach is furthermore a method which allows to analyze economic, political and ideological dynamics as well as their interactions. Three levels of analysis are taken into account: (1) socio-economic groups which gather individuals sharing proximity in the social structure, which is not reducible to social class; (2) socio-political groups, which are homogenous groups of agents sharing similar socio-political and public policy demands; and (3) social blocs, which are socio-political groups aggregated by political strategies. In parallel to these three levels of analysis, three dimensions of domination/social conflict are distinguished. The first is the political dimension, that is to say, whether the demands of the socio-political groups are met by public policy and thus whether those groups belong to the DSB or are excluded from it. The second dimension is institutional domination. Groups whose expectations are protected by the existing institutional architecture are considered to be institutionally dominant. Third is ideological domination. Ideology here refers to the accepted and dominant view of the world. It defines the demands which are deemed acceptable and the ones which are not. Ideology moreover serves as a filter and translation between socio-economic and socio-political groups. On the one hand, some socio-economic groups may not express expectations aligned with their class interests because they are influenced by the ideology in place. On the other hand, some expectations expressed by socio-political groups may not be socially accepted under the dominant ideology. In that case, those groups are considered to be ideologically dominated.

The combination of these three levels of domination leads to a variety of configuration: some groups can dominate in all dimensions or be dominant in only one or two. A social group can thus belong to the DSB, but be dominated ideologically or institutionally. In Switzerland, farmers were for a long time part of the Swiss DSB and were dominant in all three areas. Their interests were protected through the federal agricultural policy which accorded public subsidies and protection from international competition. Even more strikingly, in a country which is reluctant to any industrial policy coming from the state, the agricultural sector is the only one allowed by the Swiss constitution to benefit from a public industrial policy. However, the neoliberal turn affected negatively the positive image that farmers benefited from since the two World Wars. Under the pressure of neoliberalism, Swiss farmers' activities became

gradually not perceived as essential to the survival and prestige of the Swiss economy, but rather perceived as a sector in decline, lacking dynamism, producing at too high prices and receiving too much benefits. Swiss farmers, who were dominant ideologically, thus became dominated in this dimension of social conflict since neoliberalism became the dominant ideological paradigm in developed countries, whereas they stayed dominant institutionally and politically since their interest were in the end still protected by public policy and the institutional architecture. However, the pressure of neoliberalism is such that the protection that farmers benefit from are frequently put into questions by Swiss neoliberal think tanks and lobbies such as AvenirSuisse and EconomieSuisse (Baumann and Moser 2012).

Social blocs are a key concept related to political equilibrium and political crisis. A situation of political equilibrium, where social conflict is regulated, is reached when a dominant social bloc (DSB) is formed and stabilized. A DSB is thus defined as a social bloc whose political strategy at its origin is successful over the other competing strategies. From the creation of the fifth republic until the 80s, the DSB in France was for instance a right-wing/Gaullist bloc constituted by private sector executives and intermediary professions; craftsmen, shopkeepers, farmers and devout Catholics. These social groups were united around the political strategy of the Gaullists and their allied parties, whose public policies met the main social demands of these groups: limited taxation and social protection, a strong industrial policy reinforcing the competitiveness of French firms and the defense of French agriculture through transfers and the common agricultural policy. This DSB was thus validating the dirigiste development strategy which shaped the French variety of the Fordist accumulation regime during the sustained high growth period of the post-war boom. This DSB then broke up starting from the 70s with the crisis of Fordism, which combined the three crises considered in the neorealist approach: political crisis, institutional crisis and hegemonic crisis. Since we will consider the interaction of these three types of crisis with the environmental crisis, it is worth to here remind this typology.

A political crisis corresponds to the break-up of the DSB, because the political strategy in power lost the support of the socio-political groups constituting the DSB. It corresponds to a situation in which the former DSB also lost its capacity to validate its corresponding political strategy. Since the crisis is the result of an unresolving social conflict rooted in the heterogeneity of the social structure, the break-up of the DSB does not cause the crisis in itself, but merely reveals it through increasing protest against public policy and the loss of legitimacy of the political actors and coalitions in power. However, this does not imply that the reverse is true: a loss of confidence in the government and a subsequent accession in power of a new political actor is not a political crisis if the same DSB is reconducted. Different political

actors can indeed compete for the support of the same social bloc and the alternance in power by these different actors is not a sign of political crisis. One must also not confound political instability caused for example by systematic alternation of power and political crisis. There are two main possible outcomes from a break-up of the DSB. Given the existing institutional framework, other political strategies can compete to aggregate a new DSB and the political crisis is solved when one of them is successful.

On the other hand, it is possible that no political strategy manages to establish a DSB in a sustainable way within the context of the prevailing institutional architecture, because the rules of the game and the socio-political compromises prevent the emergence of a mediation space between social expectations. This may for instance come from the fact that the institutions themselves prevent the formation of social blocs (one can think, for example, of the electoral system) or that social demands no longer accept the existing socio-economic model and express a desire for institutional change. Political strategies are therefore compelled to call into question certain generalized compromises, which leads to a crisis of the institutional architecture, since the resolution of the crisis requires “the construction and structuring of a new institutional architecture, characterized by complementarities and hierarchies of its own” ([Amable and Palombarini 2024a, p.137](#)). Causality may also run from the crisis of the institutional architecture to the political crisis. The economic and social dynamic, being able to call into question certain compromises, can cause the institutional crisis to give rise to a political crisis if the conflict over institutions does not find a political solution.

Neorealist political economy has proven to be a fruitful approach for achieving non-normative insightful analyses of political crises in France and Italy. The flexibility of this approach has also allowed to offer analyses of institutional change and social conflict in very different contexts such as Colombia ([Mahecha Alzate 2024](#)) or Switzerland ([Güney 2024](#); [Charles and Vallet 2025](#)). This approach has however not yet been used to analyze the emergence and change of environmental institutions. In that regard, this field has been occupied by two different heterodox schools of thought: Institutional Ecological Economics and Regulation Theory. The following section shows that Regulation Theory offers appropriate tools to help neorealist political economy to integrate ecological issues into its scope.

Institutions, environment and Regulation Theory

Like neorealist political economy, Regulation Theory (RT) did not take into account the environment from the start. According to [Cahen-Fourot \(2023, p.88-89\)](#) three main factors account for Regulation Theory’s (RT) initial reluctance to fully engage with environmental issues. First, the founding contributions of RT were based on an analysis of the crisis of the Fordist accumulation regime ([Aglietta 1982](#); [Boyer 1978](#); [Lipietz 1979](#)). This crisis was attributed to

the exhaustion of productivity gains rather than to the oil shocks which were at that time the dominant explanation for the economic turmoil of the 1970s. Second, regulationist scholars have consistently sought to explain crises through endogenous dynamics specific to accumulation regimes. Third, institutions, defined as socio-political compromises, are understood in RT as being forged between social groups. By this definition, institutions cannot be formed with “nature”, which further contributed to sidelining environmental concerns.

A parallel can be drawn with the neglect of environmental issues within the neorealist approach. On the one hand, the intellectual context in which neorealism emerged, namely, the analysis of the political crises of the French and Italian models of continental capitalism, did not provide fertile ground for the integration of environmental considerations from the outset. On the other hand, neorealism frames its analysis around social conflict between groups. If environmental issues are not central to these conflicts, or are relegated to the background of political cleavages, then they are unlikely to become a priority in the analytical framework. For instance, had ecological cleavages been central to the restructuring of traditional left- and right-wing social blocs in France as was the case with the cleavage over European integration, environmental issues would almost certainly have featured prominently in neorealist analyses from the start.

The environment has nonetheless become an important issue for Regulationists scholars over the years, as seen by the multiplication of contributions using RT's, concepts and tools to analyze the economy-environment nexus. How RT must integrate the environment into its heuristical matrix is however still highly debated. [Magalhães \(2022\)](#) argues on this point that RT suffers from the changing place of the environment in its analytical framework and from the heterogeneity of those contributions. Among the latter, two main proposals structure the debate on the integration of the environment-economy nexus within RT. On the one hand, the environment institutional devices (EID) approach proposes to analyze the environment-economy nexus as all the institutions consisting in norms, taxes, subsidies and instruments dedicated to the regulation of environmental issues. [Boyer \(2015\)](#) argued that EIDs can be interpreted as the extension of the five institutional forms (money, state, international regime, forms of competitions, wage-labour nexus) to the area of economy-environment relation, based on the empirical work of [Elie et al. \(2012\)](#) which found a diversity of EIDs which shares similarities with [Amable \(2003\)](#) typology of capitalisms.

On the other hand, another strand argued that the economy-environment nexus cannot merely be reduced to a projection of EIDs and the five institutional forms, but constitutes a sixth institutional form per se with its own relative autonomy. [Becker and Raza \(1999, p.10-11\)](#) defined the “social relation to nature” as the sixth institutional form regulating “the access

to, and utilization of, the material world both for productive and reproductive activities” and “the spatial and temporal distribution of the ecological costs and benefits of these (re-) productive activities.”. [Cahen-Fourot and Durand \(2016, p.6\)](#) added that these rules produce and are themselves the product of conflict between socio-economic and political groups. [Cahen-Fourot \(2023\)](#) argued that these two approaches are complementary rather than exclusive. The five institutional forms exert of course an influence on the social relationship with the environment. But as climate change and the ecological constraint intensify, the social relationship to nature also exerts an increasing influence on the mode of regulation and its five other institutional forms. In other words, [Cahen-Fourot \(2023\)](#) argued that this sixth institutional form is undergoing a gradual process of institutionalization under the increasing pressure of ecological constraint. This increasing autonomization of the social relation to the environment is recognized by Robert Boyer who now considers the social relation to the environment as part of the fundamental social relations of an accumulation regime ([Boyer 2023, p.29](#)).

[Cahen-Fourot \(2020\)](#) upgrades the typology of capitalisms built by [Amable \(2003\)](#) by including this sixth institutional form. He models the social relations to the environment through several dimensions: the material aspects which include domestic (national) GDP intensity in greenhouse gases (GHG) and offshoring of GHG emissions; and the socio-political aspects which involve inequalities of distribution in GHG emissions, environmental protests and activism, and environmental policies such as environmental regulations and enforcement. His results point to five types of capitalisms with different social relation to the environment: the Northern-continental European, the Southern-central European, the Anglo-Saxon and Pacific, the Emerging Countries models and the Two Giants model. Cahen-Fourot further suggests that some models of capitalism, that is, those “associating labour-oriented policies, welfare public services and openness to foreign exchange” may “foster an ecologyprone social relation to the environment and the conditions for such a transition.” ([Cahen-Fourot 2020, p.14](#)). The issue of how the social relation to the environment can change towards more ecological prone stance is however not really developed with only a short reference to the notion of social blocs and the idea that ecological constraints will give rise to new power struggles. It is thus not clear how new social blocs would emerge to sustain an evolution of those five types of capitalism towards an eco-social model.

The foundations for a neorealist political ecology

A neorealist political ecology hence should recognize that all institutions which constitute the social relation to the environment, once put into question by some social interests, can constitute potential lines of cleavages regarding public policy and institutional change and therefore be integrated into the dimensions of policy preferences which distinguish socio-

political groups. This is what [Amable \(2021\)](#) 's empirical identification of French socio-political groups in the 2010s partially did by integrating policy demands on nuclear energy: the divide over nuclear energy is an illustrative example of a dimension of the social relations to the environment which is regularly put into question in public debates over the ecological transition. As the ecological crisis deepens, one should expect more cleavages to arise in relation to the ecological constraint. But how does the social relation to the environment integrates into a theory of institutional change such as neorealist Political Economy ? This question can be answered by analyzing the relationships between the social relation to the environment and the several levels of analyses considered by the neorealist approach as presented in [Amable and Palombarini \(2008, p.125\)](#): (1) the expectations/demands of socio-political groups and how political strategies try to cope with them; (2) the identification of social groups which benefit from economic dynamics and whose interests are protected by public policy; (3) Ideology; (4) Political mediation and (5) institutions.

For point (1), the analysis of socio-political expectations of social actors, existing neorealist scholarships have usually considered issues relevant to the five institutional forms considered in RT (monetary regime, the state, wage-labour nexus, insertion into the international regime, form of competition) or in comparative capitalisms (education system, welfare state, product market competition, labour protection, corporate governance). Based on Regulationists contributions integrating the social relation to the environment as a sixth institutional form, I argue that the latter should be integrated into the analysis of socio-political expectations. To identify socio-political groups, empirical contributions have usually resorted to latent class analysis on survey data, using issue positions variables related as close as possible to the five institutional forms ([Amable, Guillaud, and Palombarini 2011](#); [Amable 2021](#)). Now that a sixth institutional form consisting in the ecological constraint ([Becker and Raza 1999](#)) or in the social relation to the environment ([Cahen-Fourot and Durand 2016](#)) has been well integrated into RT's framework and has shown to be relevant for the diversity of capitalisms ([Cahen-Fourot 2020](#)), it needs to be taken into account for the identification of socio-political groups. This means that, in further contributions, more indicators related to environmental issues should be taken into account in applied works dedicated to the empirical identification of socio-political groups from socio-political demands.

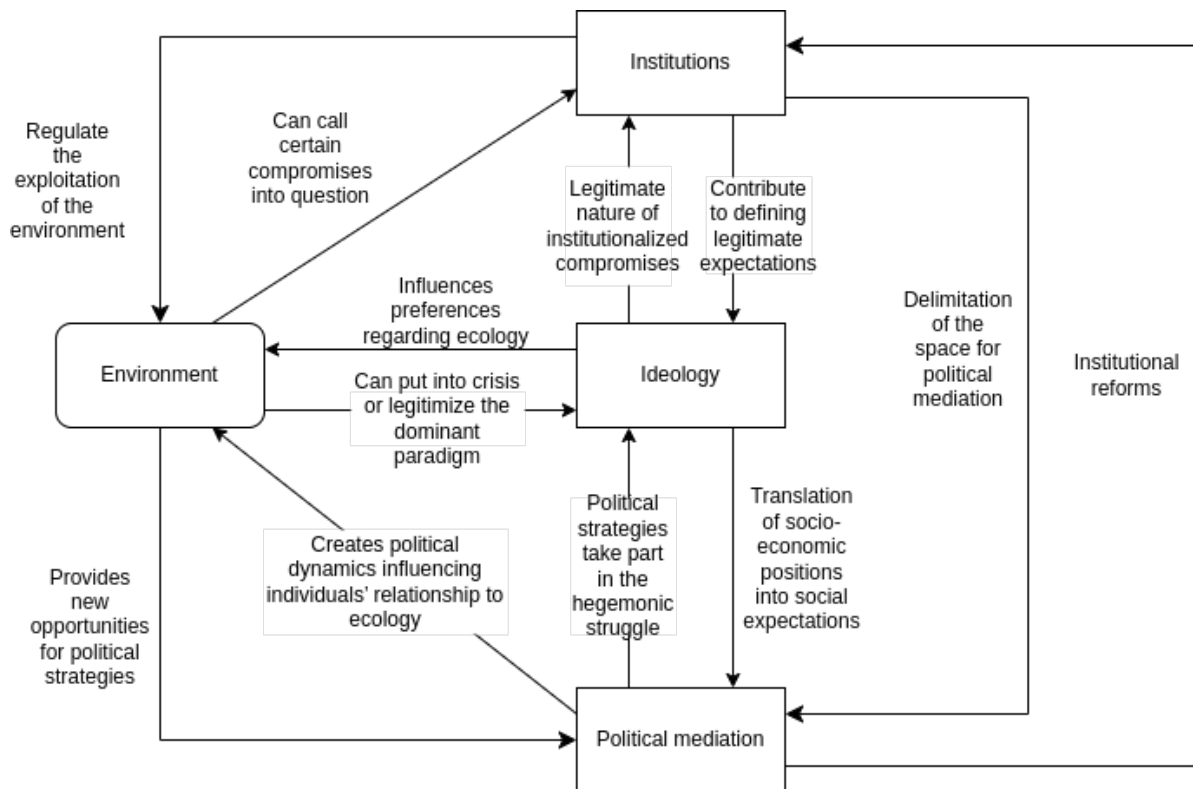


Figure 1: How the social relation to the environment (“environment”) integrates in relation to the three dimensions of social conflict (ideology, institutions, political mediation). Elaboration based on [Amable and Palombarini \(2024a, figure 5.2, p.123\)](#).

For 3, 4 and 5, Figure 1 describes schematically how the social relation to the environment integrates into neorealist political economy through the three dimensions of social conflict considered in the approach. It is first useful to underline the relationships between ideology, political mediation and institutions, which coevolve by mutually influencing each other, while also having a relative degree of autonomy. Institutions participate in the ideological struggle by delimiting the space of expectations which are considered as legitimate. For instance, the debt brake principle in Germany and Switzerland contribute to discarding any political demands which would necessitate an increase of the debt to GDP ratio in the long-run. In return, ideology influences institutional change by validating or putting into question existing socio-political compromises. The ideological shift from the Keynesian to the Neoliberal paradigms in the 70s actively contributed to the illegitimacy of institutions based on Keynesian principles in Western countries.

Ideology impacts political mediation by acting as a “filter” and translation between socio-economic and socio-political groups, thus influencing the strategies trying to aggregate socio-political groups into social blocs. Political mediation plays in exchange a great role in the ideological struggle. In France, the two policy reversals conducted first by Mitterand and then by Hollande who betrayed their social bases which brought them into power contributed

to the ideological victory of neoliberalism by proving that there was indeed “no alternative”. The relationships between institutions and political mediation are straightforward: institutions influence political mediation by delimiting the space of possible political strategies (for instance, political strategies will differ between proportional or a majoritarian election system). Political mediation enacts in return a process of institutional change or stability depending on the winning political strategy.

Let’s now consider the mutual influences between the environment and ideology, institutions and political mediation. A first important effect to consider, already underlined by [Douai and Montalban \(2012\)](#), is the fact that increasing climate risks can call existing institutions into question. To go back to the debt-brake principle example, climate change could in the long run put this institution under stress by causing so much damage that Germany and Switzerland would have no choice but to abandon this principle to finance public spending through debt. In return, the existing institutional architecture regulate the exploitation of the environment through rules, norms and taxes.

Regarding the mutual influences between ideology and the environment, the dominant paradigm influences social expectations which are deemed acceptable regarding environmental policies and regulations. The dominant neoliberal paradigm has for a long time privileged green growth policies favoring green innovations through competition policies and the internalization of externalities through taxation while it has contributed to the ideological struggle by illegitimizing solutions based on ecological planning favouring degrowth.

The influence of ideology on the formation of social (ecological) expectations is however limited to the extent that the environment also has in exchange an impact on ideology. Environmental issues such as climate change contribute in fact to “the growing gap between the promises made by dominant representations and actual achievements” which contribute “to questioning what used to be taken as common sense and fosters the rise of competing worldviews” ([Amable and Palombarini 2024a, p.147, author's translation](#)). As the Keynesian (or social-democratic) paradigm was severely damaged by the crises of the 70s by the relative failure of Keynesian policies respond to the crises , the green policies which are deemed acceptable under the dominant neoliberal paradigm are unable to solve or dampen the threats posed by climate change. In that sense, the environment thus contributes to the rise of alternative worldviews, which include but is not limited to the social-ecological paradigm.

Finally, political mediation and the environment are related in two ways. One the one hand, the environment influences political mediation by offering opportunities for new political strategies. Climate change has of course been the main factor behind the emergence of green parties in Western countries, but established parties have also tried to integrate

ecological issues into their programs. One can draw here a parallel with Lipset and Rokkan's cleavage theory, in which new parties emerge as new issues arise from exogenous revolutions. The climate crisis would correspond here to a third revolution after the industrial and national revolutions of the 19th century (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). On the other hand, political mediation and political action impact individuals' perception of ecological issues. Whereas green parties and climate activism have played a great role in politicizing climate change, political strategies from right and far-right parties have strongly contributed to the green backlash by actively promoting climate skepticism among their audience (Bomberg 2017). The green backlash is often interpreted as a populist response to unpopular green policies from which far-right parties only benefit afterwards, but it is also important to consider the reverse causality: far-right political actors can also shape citizen's views on climate change by illegitimizing ecological issues through public discourses and active propaganda (Bosetti et al. 2025).

The neorealist political ecology approach proposed here share similarities with the works of Fritz et al. (2021) and Fritz and Eversberg (2024), who analyze the social-ecological transformation conflict using Bourdieu's relational sociology. Their approach is structured around three levels of analysis. The first are the lines of conflict which delimit the space of eco-social conflict. On this point, the authors agree with the neorealist approach in recognizing the importance of the multidimensional nature of political and social conflict: "We understand the social-ecological transformation conflict as a multi-dimensional societal struggle about whether, how and how far-reaching social change should take place to solve the eco-social crisis." (Fritz and Eversberg 2024, p.40).

They identify four lines of conflict: a class struggle conflict between the upper classes favourable to all the measures which allow them to maintain the capitalist system and preserve accumulation of capital against dominated lower-class fractions which demand a more equitable transformation; an ideological struggle pitting egalitarian, social liberal individuals voting for left or green parties and in favor of the cessation of polluting lifestyle, against authoritarian and illiberal individuals voting for the right and supporting the statu quo regarding the way of living; an externalization divide caused by the negative consequences of Western lifestyle. The latter has negative repercussions, not only in southern countries, but also on the service sector in advanced countries. In the social sphere, this conflict is a dividing line between the poor but educated classes and the rich but poorly educated classes. Finally, a "distribution of transformation costs" cleavage around the issue of the groups which are going to bear the costs of eco-social transformation.

The second level of analysis are social classes defined as groups of individuals characterized by different compositions of economic and cultural capitals. The third level are mentalities, which are groups of individuals sharing the same disposition regarding eco-social transformation.

Whereas [Fritz and Eversberg \(2024\)](#) are right in underlying the multidimensional aspect of eco-social conflict and the concept of mentalities is close to that of socio-political groups¹, neorealist political ecology differs in which cleavages are taken into account. Their four lines of divide are drawn on a Bourdieusian social space whereas the cleavages taken as indicator to define socio-political groups in neorealist political ecology relate to the six institutional forms. The concept of socio-economic group is also preferred to that of social classes, which can be included in the analysis but are not indispensable in neorealist political economy.

Conclusion

The objective of the present paper was to present the foundations for a neorealist political ecology, that is, a non-normative analytical framework to analyze institutional change in relation to environmental conflict. Most ecological economics and degrowth contributions have been so far dedicated to find the “good” institutions and policies that would support an economy in accordance with the ecological constraint. Moreover, degrowth contributions which build on RT to analyze the evolution and successions of different modes of regulation and accumulation regimes have done so in a normative way. [Buch-Hansen, Koch, and Nesterova \(2024\)](#) for instance argue that degrowth must answer the question as to how the five institutional forms could stabilize a degrowth economy. One exception is [Cahen-Fourot \(2020\)](#) who augmented RT’s analytical framework to include the social relation to the environment as a sixth institutional form and thus offered a new typology of capitalisms. However, Cahen-Fourot’s static analysis must be complemented by an analysis of how these modes of regulation change through time.

To do so, I argued that neorealist approach offers a promising framework and I showed how it can follow RT path of integrating an environmental dimension. The latter can be integrated in the neorealist approach in the following ways.

On the one hand, environmental change impacts structural change and the heterogeneity of the economic structure, thus influencing the formation of social expectations regarding public policy and institutional change. Socio-political groups must be also defined according to their expectations regarding environmental policies and I argued that the social relation to the environment as a sixth institutional form as defined in [Cahen-Fourot and Durand \(2016\)](#) can

¹In the sense that mentalities and socio-political groups are both endogenously defined groups of agents sharing the same “disposition”, that is, preferences and expectation on a set of indicators.

be used as the relevant additional dimension of indicators to be considered in the identification of socio-political groups.

On the other hand, the environment is part of a coevolution dynamic with the three dimensions of social conflict: institutions, ideology and political mediation. It is important to underline in conclusion that I do not argue that the environment constitutes a fourth dimension of social conflict, but that it influences these three dimensions and that environmental change is impacted in return by them. Neorealist political ecology offers a promising field of research to answer the fundamental question of the socio-political conditions for the ecological bifurcation. This new approach can be used to explore what kind of social blocs would support such a program of radical change of institutions. This will be the object of further empirical work.

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