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The Myth of the Ecological Class: On the Embeddedness of Ecological Conflict in Social Class Antagonisms

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Abstract

Climate change and ecological crises are not only impacting temperatures and environments but are also reshaping the political dynamics within late-modern societies. For decades, liberal democracies have predominantly relied on a combination of grassroots subpolitical self-organization from below and market-based techno-scientific governance from above as their primary response to ecological challenges. However, in recent years, the escalating crisis of planetary ecology has led to a growing chorus of voices, both within society and academia, advocating for new forms of politicizing ecological issues. Particularly noteworthy is the concept of ecological class, which has emerged in the context of debates that place ecological concerns at the forefront of political contention. We problematize the predominant theorization of ecological class developed by Latour and Schultz by scrutinizing its geographical and subjectivist conceptualization. We stress the need to capture multifaceted objective and subjective class positionings and highlight the inherently relational nature of all class conflict. Drawing upon data on ecological inequalities, we contend that the core dimensions of ecological class conflict are fundamentally rooted in social class antagonism. Thus, ecological classes are actually social classes.

Keywords class, resilience, inequality, eco-politics, ecological conflict

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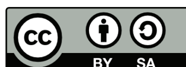

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1. Introduction

In his 1988/1995 book on *Ecological Politics in the Age of Risk*, Ulrich Beck proposed a vision for the revitalization of modern societies through ecological politics. Beck introduced the concept of *subpolitics* to describe a process whereby ecological issues, overlooked by formal politics, were to be taken up by peripheral groups in society, such as civic associations and individual citizens. He anticipated that these actors would make significant contributions to addressing ecological problems and integrating ecological issues into mainstream politics, driven by increased citizen engagement with ecological risks. Beck's notion of subpolitics envisioned a democratic expansion, wherein the democratic nature of risk, allegedly affecting most people similarly, would lead to greater citizen involvement in politics, thereby fostering a more democratic and sustainable society.

However, today, this vision of modernity's self-recovery from self-induced risks appears increasingly disconnected from reality. While citizens, civic associations, and formal politics have indeed embraced ecological issues as significant concerns in recent decades, and ecological movements remain proponents of subpolitical protest, these ecopolitical efforts have not succeeded in altering the planetary trajectory towards genuine sustainability (Beckert, 2022; Blühdorn et al., 2019). Instead of effecting systemic changes, subpolitics have become intertwined with market-centric approaches to ecological governance, such as the carbon markets of *green capitalism* (Buller, 2022) and policies promoting structural adaptation (Felli, 2021). Along these lines, an array of scholars has diagnosed the making of an ecological spirit of capitalism (Chiapello, 2013; Gajewski & Kungl, 2024; Goldstein, 2018). Ecological efforts are thereby increasingly depoliticized. This has resulted in what has been termed the *sustainable unsustainability* (Blühdorn et al., 2019) of late-modern societies.

Furthermore, the depoliticization of ecological issues through markets has been complemented by technocratic approaches at the individual level. While supply-side issues in energy, transportation, housing, or manufacturing were addressed through price mechanisms, individual engagement was largely confined to areas of consumption, where individuals were encouraged to reduce their ecological footprints (Huber, 2022) while simultaneously investing in services aimed at enhancing individual resilience to crises (Chandler & Reid, 2016). Consequently, contemporary ecopolitics in liberal democracies seems to operate in a rather unpolitical space, characterized by technocratic depoliticization and structural individualization through consumption and resilience strategies.

For decades, scholars and activists have been exploring the intersection of environmental struggles and social inequalities (Brand, 2009; Räthzel, 2021), particularly in the Global South, where ecological inequality and class antagonism have long been recognized as inseparable (Backhouse, 2015; Dietz & Engels, 2017; Graf, 2024; Martinez-Alier, 1991). Lately, new theorizations of ecological class have been put forward that posit that the acceleration of the planetary ecological crisis necessitates new forms of politicizing ecological issues. The most prominent theorization of ecological class has been formulated by Bruno Latour and Nicolaj Schultz. In both the work on *geo-social classes* (Latour, 2018; Stein Pedersen et al., 2019) and *the emergence of an ecological class* (Latour & Schultz, 2022), the duo presents provocative and stimulating thoughts on how to reconsider the notion of class in the new climatic regime. Unfortunately, the theorizations often remain out of touch with empirical findings and conceptually either fixate on geographical factors (Latour, 2018; Stein Pedersen et al., 2019) or the subjective orientations of individuals (Latour & Schultz, 2022).

Class is inherently a political concept, which may explain the renewed interest in a category traditionally associated with the analysis of industrial society and, thus, rather adverse to ideas of ecological transformation. Class, however, derives its political significance from a combination of objective hierarchical positions within society and subjective self-identifications of class members. Drawing on Marx's distinction between a class in-itself and for-itself (1852/1963) as well as Bourdieu's differentiation between a class on paper and a realized class (1987), we hold that this two-sided conceptualization is neglected in Latour and Schultz's work. On the one hand, class captures objective positions within a social hierarchy, thus creating the possibility to politicize social (or now possibly ecological) inequalities in terms of equality, justice, or fairness. On the other hand, a more profound meaning of class suggests that objective hierarchical positions are linked to shared identities of the respective members of a class. Classes become political entities by means of self-awareness, which historically is strongly linked to particular shared values and inter-

pretations of society (Lamont, 1992), daily lifestyles and cultural habits (Bourdieu, 1979/2013; Weber, 1921/1978), and intermediary institutions that stabilize and reproduce class as a political entity (Gramsci, 1971).

As has been noted, the formation of shared class subjectivities does not follow automatically from shared objective conditions. Historically, proletarian subjectivity emerged as a political force long before industrialization (Federici, 2004), and the modern working class existed as a cultural reality prior to the advent of large-scale manufacturing (Thompson, 1963/2013). Historically, the working class was formed through a complex set of factors, which came together in shared cultural orientations and practices. Its constitution, Thompson argues, was a complex process of self-making, not a dynamic unfolding automatically by means of technological determinism, nor brought upon the masses by enlightened intellectuals or activists (Thompson, 1963/2013, p. 9). More profoundly, a shared experience of exploitation and disadvantage, in many different dimensions, supported a process of self-making grounded in social conflict. Thompson crucially embedded his historical and cultural approach to class within an antagonistic framework: For the historical working class to become a political force, it needed to perceive itself in an antagonistic relationship to another class. As Thompson wrote:

> Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. ... If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not. (Thompson, 1963/2013, p. 10)

In this article, we draw on neo-Marxist relational perspectives on class to critically examine the concept of ecological class as proposed by Latour and Schultz. Our central aim is not to develop our own ecological class theory but to demonstrate the shortcomings of recent proposals and thereby re-embed the discussion of ecological inequalities within a broader tradition of class analysis that accounts for socio-material struggles, two-sided power relations, and historical processes. We will begin by reconstructing and examining the discourse surrounding ecological class and its key features, particularly its framing of ecological conflict as well as the (missing) relationship between objective class positions and subjective class identities. We will then utilize data on ecological inequalities to argue that ecological class conflict manifests in three central dimensions: responsibility for ecological harm, access to resources, and protection or resilience. Analyzing ecological class conflict within this framework reveals that ecological class antagonism is ultimately rooted in social class antagonism. Rather than the emergence of distinct ecological class conflict or ecological class identities, what we are witnessing is the increasing incorporation of ecological issues as another dimension of conflict between existing socioeconomic classes. In this sense, ecological classes are essentially social classes. Instead of fantasizing about entirely new ecological formations, we need to recognize social classes as formations that entail an ecological dimension. Consequently, the politics of ecological class conflict may be unfolding in a more traditional setting than suggested by the literature on ecological class. In the last section, we will reflect on the implications implied by the introduction of ecological issues into class conflict.

2. Class and Ecology

Inquiring into the nexus of class and ecology is not a novel endeavor. Research on working-class environmentalism and ecological distribution conflicts has demonstrated that ecological and social antagonisms cannot be separated (Brand, 2009; Räthzel, 2021), especially in the context of extractivist structures, where corporations seek to exploit resources at the expense of marginalized communities, particularly prevalent in the Global South (Backhouse, 2015; Dietz & Engels, 2017; Graf, 2024; Martinez-Alier, 1991). Along these lines, another key contribution by social scientists and economists has been to assess the ecological debts owed by the economically affluent Global North to the Global South (Brand & Wissen, 2013; Chancel et al., 2022; Latouche, 2009; Lessenich, 2019), as well as the examination of generational disparities in the context of climate change (Boersema, 2001; White, 2017). This line of work stresses that ecological issues are negotiated within an uneven social terrain.

Secondly, a significant and related body of research has coalesced around a resurgence of eco-Marxist theoretical approaches. Recapitulating the central claims of this field is important to understand the departure point of the concept of ecological class developed by

Latour and Schultz. The field diverges somewhat from empirical research on ecological inequalities, instead concentrating on the theoretical frameworks necessary to analyze the ecological crisis from a Marxist perspective. As this literature points out, in his seminal writings, Karl Marx acknowledged the fundamental relationship between human beings and the natural environment (Marx & Engels, 1932/1970). He used the concept of *metabolism* (Stoffwechsel) to describe the exchange and interaction between human beings and nature (Marx, 1867/2004). Building on Marx's recognition of the intricate relationship between humans and the natural environment, these scholars argue that capitalism's relentless pursuit of profit and growth is the primary driver of severe ecological crises. The capitalist mode of production, driven by the need for constant expansion and the extraction of resources, is considered to be at the heart of environmental degradation, resource depletion, and the disruption of ecological systems. As a result, advocates of this Marxist critique urge us to replace the notion of the Anthropocene, popularized by the natural scientist Paul J. Crutzen, with the notion of the *Capitalocene* (Moore, 2015). They argue that the climate crisis is predominantly the result of objective contradiction between the logic of capital vis-à-vis the metabolism of nature (Altvater, 2016; Foster, 2000; Saito, 2017).

Despite its focus on transforming ecological relations, the eco-Marxist school has largely overlooked a conceptual reevaluation of class (see Foster, 2000; Malm, 2016; Moore, 2015; Saito, 2023). When class is addressed, it tends to be in terms of analyzing the ecological attitudes of existing social groups, neglecting ecological inequalities that would inform such attitudes according to materialist class theory (Huber, 2022). The question of how to reconceptualize the constituents of different social groups in the Capitalocene remains largely unexplored. Contemporary eco-Marxists do not theoretically reconsider the concept of class, nor do they develop a clear understanding of ecological class conflict.

Against this backdrop, further attempts in academic discourse towards elevating class in discussions of the politicization of climate change and ecological crisis have occurred in recent years. Surprisingly, these attempts have not come from scholars entrenched in Marxism but from the late Bruno Latour, who has long critiqued the materialism inherent in traditional Marxist class theory. Disillusioned with the failure of civic society-based subpolitics and technocratic governance to address the ecological crisis, Latour, along with Nicolaj Schultz, has posited the "emergence of an ecological class" (Latour, 2018; Latour & Schultz, 2022; Schultz, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, for classes to become political entities, they need to be placed in a context of conflict in order to develop an antagonistic relationship to another class. It is this conflictual relationship that facilitates the emergence of a shared identity within a particular class, which in turn fuels political conflict (Thompson, 1963/2013). To assess whether the discussions surrounding ecological class by Latour and Schultz align with this political understanding of class, we will first examine how they frame ecological class conflict.

2.1 Ecological Class Conflict?

Interestingly, Latour and Schultz do not frame eco-classes by highlighting the agency of nonhuman actors or exploring more-than-human classes. Despite Latour's earlier theoretical activities around actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), their model of class remains human-centric. To map out the new political landscape, the duo's starting point is that drastic climatic changes are transforming social struggles into geo-social struggles over habitable land and territory. In their work on geo-social struggle (Latour, 2018; Stein Pedersen et al., 2019), which they unfortunately do not systematically link with their writings on the emergence of an ecological class (Latour & Schultz, 2022), they focus essentially on objective class locations: Latour and Schultz argue that in the "new climatic regime" (Latour, 2018), class should be defined by human actors' access to the means of reproduction rather than merely production. Through the concept of geo-social class, they highlight that actors' terrestrial positions determine the chances for their reproduction. In an interview, they elaborate on the notion of geo-social class:

> All these words with hyphens just mean that we try to bring together two sets of literature, and it would be better if there were just one. But the idea is that if you look at the definition of what a social class is, in a classic Marxist materialist way, and then add the question of what is the land or the territory in which theseclasses live, then you can begin to redescribe the ecological situation of classes. (Stein Pedersen et al., 2019, p. 225)

While Marx tied the class position of an actor to the question of the ownership of the means of production, Latour and Schultz additionally consider class in the context of the territorial embeddedness of actors. Through this view, a factory worker who lives in a hurricane-threatened area will have a different geo-social class position than an economically equivalent factory worker who lives in an ecologically more peaceful habitat. Echoing arguments of the late Ulrich Beck, who theorized about inequalities of geographical altitude in the face of rising sea levels, this points to the relevance of habitable land and differential geographical exposure to consequences of climate change. However, Schultz and Latour remain more closely attached to Marx by thinking geo-social classes through the concept of exploitation. They hold that exploitation also takes place through living off other people's soil, through the reaping of "surplus existence," that disallows the durable existence of other people's conditions of reproduction (Latour, 2018, p. 17; Schultz, 2020, p. 6).

At times, Latour and Schultz even want to expand their reconceptualization of class beyond the matter of habitat. They argue that a wide array of material factors must be taken into account to understand class in the new climatic regime:

> But today, we have to develop tools to articulate the wider array of material conditions of subsistence under the layers of the system of production, the networks of existences that have proven vital to understand the reproduction of societies and people's position in this process of reproduction. This is theambition of the concept of geo-social classes. (Schultz, 2020, p. 6)

However, they remain rather silent on the specific factors that need to be considered in order to specify ecological class conflict. Consequently, their materialist expansion of the class concept remains patchy. Their failure to specify the central elements of the broader array of material conditions that must be taken into account results in their framework only allowing for inductive, micro-level-oriented research designs—a limitation that has plagued actor-network theory. More significantly, opaque concepts like *means of subsistence* or the connection of social class to territory lack analytical clarity, rendering them unable to provide a clear understanding of both ecological class conflict and subjective class formation. Furthermore, linking classes to territory could merely entail discussing national social classes, as traditional class theory has done for a long time. However, such approaches have been subject to criticism from social theorists for decades, particularly those considering class in the context of economic globalization (e.g., Wallerstein, 2004) or planetary risk (e.g., Beck, 1986/1992).

This is likely not what Latour and Schultz intended, as they place particular importance on soil and habitability threatened by ecological exploitation. However, emphasizing geography in this manner presents another issue: For instance, when natural resources in a specific area are industrially exploited by a local industrial working class and then further processed by another group of workers in a territorial context where there is less ecological harm, the ecological aspect of class conflict emerges between these two sections of industrial workers. However, being part of the same value chain or perhaps even the same company, both groups are actually systematically involved in the same process of ecological exploitation. How plausible is it to assume that such relations could, nevertheless, represent ecological class antagonisms necessary for subjective class formation? Furthermore, how could these ecological conflicts be described as sources of the progressive dynamization of political conflict in the Anthropocene? Placing territorial issues at the center not only remains unclear but also tends to overlook central dimensions of ecological exploitation, which could be significant both in determining objective ecological class locations and in shaping the self-awareness of an ecological class.

2.2 Subjective Class Formation?

With Latour and Schultz, lacking a clear concept of ecological exploitation, the connection between material conditions in class locations and subjective class identities remains entirely unclear. Even though Marx (1852/1963) himself already pointed to complex relationships between how individuals are positioned in terms of resources at their disposal on the one hand, and what kind of ideologies and interests they pursue on the other hand, Latour and Schultz do not really engage with this heuristic. Their model, which heavily mobilizes Marxist repertoires, does not focus on the interplay between positions and identities.

Analytically, this incurs significant costs, as such a dual perspective has been fruitfully explored in the literature on class, including works by Gramsci (1971), members of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1981) or Bourdieu (2005), who offered crucial insights into why the working classes within industrial society supported fascist or bourgeois parties over socialist ones. With Schultz and Latour, however, class in-itself and class for-itself remain entirely disconnected. They either examine positions or identities. In their discussions on geo-social class formation (Latour, 2018; Schultz, 2020), they focus on the objective class positions of actors, understood as their economic and terrestrial positions. Conversely, in their manifesto *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class*, they narrowly concentrate on the pro-ecological positionings of actors: "The ecological class, then, is the one that takes issue with habitability" (Latour & Schultz, 2022, p. 24).

Ultimately, membership in the "revolutionary" ecological class becomes a matter of individual choice according to this perspective. Whoever aligns with soil and subsistence (whatever that precisely entails) is deemed part of the ecological class, making it more akin to a social movement, one that individuals can opt to join or abstain from, rather than a class rooted in a shared material experience of inequality, from which escape is hardly feasible, necessitating a process of subjectivation. This reduces class to a matter of pure self-identification, which not only contradicts Latour and Schultz's attempts to ground ecological class in material conditions of subsistence, territoriality, and so forth, but also transforms any potential antagonism into a matter of perception. The social terrain is flattened. While one can frame political conflict in this manner, it does not align with a sociological notion of class. Antagonisms, importantly, not only shape objective but also subjective positionings of actors. As Dorschel (2024), for instance, has shown, members of the upper-middle class signal care about climate change in distinctive ways by mobilizing academic concepts and deploying an investment logic. Cultivating an ecological consciousness is thus linked to symbolic class (re)production strategies and should not be generalized as indicating the emergence of a homogeneous social force.

If class is to be considered a political concept, as is evidently the case with Latour and Schultz, it is imperative to delve deeper into the potential antagonisms that may constitute both objective and subjective class positions. As we will argue in the following section, the most straightforward approach to accomplishing this is to incorporate empirical findings from the research on ecological inequalities. Ecological inequalities concern the uneven distribution of what one might term *ecological life chances*. Therefore, we contend that it is essential to consider multidimensional experiences of exploitation in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of ecological class conflict and potential eco-class formation.

3. Ecological Inequalities

To transcend vague terms like means of subsistence or *taking issue with habitability* and to move towards a framework capable of capturing ecological class formation, we will now discuss empirical research concerning ecological inequalities. Fortunately, Lucas Chancel has provided an impressive body of historical data on ecological inequalities, which we can utilize to gain a more saturated understanding of what ecological class conflict entails in terms of objective class positions.
Chancel (2020) identifies ecological inequality across five dimensions:

- Unequal access to natural resources
- Unequal exposure to the risks of environmental disturbances
  Unequal responsibility for the degradation of natural resources
- Unequal exposure to the effects of environmental protection policies
- Unequal say in decisions concerning the management of natural resources

Analytically, we hold that this model can be condensed into three dimensions:

1. *Ecological Responsibility*, which encompasses both the current and historical carbon emissions of actors as well as other forms of pollution that result in environmental degradation.
2. *Access to Ecological Goods and Power*, which includes actors' access to natural resources as well as political resources.
3. *Options for Resilience* when confronting ecological harm, encompassing actors' unequal exposure to risk and the availability of supportive policies.

3.1 Ecological Responsibility

When examining inequalities of responsibility, access, and resilience empirically, it becomes evident that these dimensions are structured in a highly antagonistic manner. We argue that we need to take this conflictive configuration into account to genuinely understand group formations in the new climatic regime.

Inequalities of responsibility for ecological crisis can be assessed in part by considering actors' current and historical carbon emissions. Unsurprisingly, significant differences in emissions exist between highly industrialized consumer societies, historically represented by affluent Western countries, and emerging and developing nations. For instance, when examining total historical emissions, North America accounts for 27%, Europe 22%, China 11%, South and Southeast Asia 9%, Russia and Central Asia 9%, East Asia (including Japan) 6%, Latin America 6%, the Middle East and North Africa 6%, and Sub-Saharan Africa 4% (Chancel et al., 2022, p. 126).

While these figures indicate substantial inequalities across countries and regions, Chancel finds that inequalities between specific social groups within regions and globally are even greater than disparities between regions. In 2019, the wealthiest 1% emitted an average of 110 tonnes of carbon per year, which is 69 times more than the lower half of the global population, which emitted only 1.6 tonnes on average (Chancel et al., 2022, p. 132). Importantly, emissions from the global top 1% have increased significantly since 1990 (Chancel et al., 2022, p. 133), while emissions from the working and middle classes in affluent countries have actually decreased. In countries such as the United States or France, the emissions of the lower half of the population in 2019 were nearing the targets established for the population average according to the Paris Agreement on climate change (Chancel et al., 2022, p. 140)—which is not to be confused with the emission levels actually necessary to achieve those goals.

From an analytical perspective, the Paris Agreement holds immense significance in understanding why data concerning historical and current responsibility for climate change must be viewed through the lens of social antagonism. The agreement establishes limits on emissions permissible to maintain a reasonably healthy planet that can then be attributed to countries, individuals, or groups. When a particular group exceeds its allotted share of the emission budget, it inevitably imposes a reduction burden on other groups to meet the established goals. Carbon emissions thus embody a form of exploitation, whereby the overconsumption by one group encroaches upon the budget allocated to another group. Consequently, whether observed globally or within specific countries or regions, there exists a conflict between groups characterized by differing emission rates.

However, upon closer inspection of these groups, it becomes evident that they do not arise from individuals voluntarily aligning themselves with environmental concerns. Instead, emission levels typically reflect disparities in economic status (Lindner et al., 2025). They are also not necessarily linked to territory, as the overconsumption of the global super-rich exemplifies. In essence, if ecological inequalities symbolize clashes between classes, concerning responsibility for climate change, these appear to be conflicts rooted in traditional indicators of social classes partly stripped of their territorial roots. When looking at present emissions, there is a group of super-wealthy individuals who are increasingly globalized and antagonistically opposed to several other groups, among them the lower half of the population in rich countries, whose emissions have recently declined, but who are also not occupying a homogeneous territorial position.

3.2 Access to Ecological Goods and Power

A similar scenario unfolds when considering disparities in access to natural resources and political power. Regarding access to natural resources, Chancel illustrates inequalities using the examples of energy, water, food, and territory. Energy consumption exhibits significant disparities between countries, with pronounced variations also evident within countries of varying economic standings. For instance, in France,

> the bottom 10 percent in respect of income consumes about 70 kWh per day, not quite half of the average figure. Someone belonging to the top 10 percent consumes more than 260 kWh per day, or about 70 percent more than the average and 3.6 times what a member of the lowest decile consumes. (Chancel et al., 2022, p. 140)

In India as well, the contrast is stark, with the poorest 10% requiring about 6 kWh per person per day, while

the wealthiest 10% consume around 32 kWh (Chancel et al., 2022, p. 140), five times as much. Although attributing data on water, food, and territory to individuals or groups is methodologically challenging, Chancel emphasizes that access to and distribution of these resources heavily correlate with income levels. Similarly, access to political power is unequally distributed, with political and economic decision-making being heavily skewed. Consequently, Chancel advocates for a more democratic distribution of decision-making power concerning access to natural resources.[1] In terms of potential class antagonism, we can observe a conflictual dynamic in the dimension of access to natural resources and power. Natural goods such as energy, water, food, or soil are all finite resources. When managed through markets, access hinges on economic capital. The overconsumption by a certain group consequently leads to higher prices for all, resulting in unequal access. Thus, we may describe this context as one of exploitation, where the excessive access of one group depends on restricting access for other groups. Ecological conflict emerges as a consequence of unequal direct and indirect consumption driven by varying levels of income and wealth. Ecological access inequality is, in essence, social inequality. If this conflict were to be politicized, it would be between rich and poor individuals or groups rather than between friends and foes of the earth.

3.3 Options for Resilience

Ecological conflicts extend beyond unequal responsibility for damage and loss or the resulting disparities in access to certain goods. They also encompass exposure to ecological risks, such as droughts, fires, floods, or other disasters. Individuals can significantly vary in their ability to shield themselves from such catastrophes and in their capacity to withstand related harm, both economically and psychologically. In many cases, discrepancies arise in terms of private resources and access to political support. For instance, while affluent individuals may have the means to construct their homes using resilient materials, those with fewer financial resources may lack this option.

Indeed, a much higher risk of exposure to various ecological hazards exists in impoverished communities, particularly concerning pollution: Whether it's exposure to lead in drinking water, ambient air pollution due to unhealthy urban environments, household air pollution from cooking indoors with open fires or stoves, or residing near industrial pollution sites, numerous studies indicate that the likelihood of exposure is significantly higher for poorer segments of the population. The same pattern applies to many natural disasters. A frequently cited example is Hurricane Katrina, which struck Louisiana and New Orleans in 2005 (Chancel et al., 2022, p. 87). Not only were the most affected areas predominantly inhabited by impoverished People of Color, but these individuals also often lacked the means to evacuate due to limited transportation options. Furthermore, in addition to facing higher exposure rates, economically disadvantaged individuals also encounter greater challenges in rebuilding after a disaster. They frequently lose all their belongings in such events, whereas wealthier individuals may store their possessions elsewhere and have access to resources for post-catastrophe reconstruction (Chancel et al., 2022, p. 89). This discrepancy extends to individual resources and the ability to access supportive policies. On one hand, their structural resilience may be initially stronger as they reside in communities capable of pooling greater resources for environmental risk protection. On the other hand, they possess greater political influence and, once again, more resources for recovery after external shocks.

Hence, resilience is not merely a psychological attribute of individuals but rather a structural characteristic of certain groups and communities, rooted in their economic, cultural, and social capital and subsequent capacity to shield themselves from harm and recover after disasters. Similar to responsibility for ecological damage and access to natural resources and decision-making power, the ability to be resilient appears to be particularly determined by economic prosperity. Since risks often hinge on location—such as residing in higher or lower altitudes within flood-prone urban areas or proximity to industrial pollution—resilience options become subjects of potential conflict and contention, as there is competition for safety and habitability. This underscores another aspect where concerns of soil, habitability, and territory, which Schultz and Latour strongly emphasize when they speak of geo-social classes, indeed exert significant influence in ecological inequalities. These inequalities entail objective conflicts and group antagonisms, yet this antagonism, once more, aligns with economic wealth rather than ecological awareness. Furthermore, cultural and social capital arguably also enhance possibilities to build up resilience. Cultural capital, in the form of knowledge, education, and skills, can equip

individuals with the ability to adapt to environmental changes, navigate bureaucratic systems, and implement sustainable practices in the face of ecological challenges. Social capital, in the form of networks of support and community ties, can provide crucial resources for recovery, from securing aid and relocation assistance to fostering mutual support in times of crisis. These forms of capital enable certain actors to anticipate, respond to, and recover from ecological disruptions more effectively than others, reinforcing existing social hierarchies rather than dissolving them. Thus, resilience is not merely a matter of individual will or awareness but is structurally distributed, shaped by forms of economic, cultural, and social capital.

Considering empirical aspects of ecological inequality, we can discern nuances of potential class antagonism. Indeed, under certain circumstances, this antagonism could theoretically evolve into class conflict. However, it is misleading to depict this as a conflict between ecological classes if these classes are perceived solely through the lens of geographic location or ecological consciousness. In reality, what we are rather witnessing is ecology objectively increasingly becoming another dimension of conflicts between socio-economic classes rather than the emergence of distinct ecological class relations. Put bluntly: Ecological classes are essentially social classes.

4. The Politics of Ecological Class

With increasing concern over the ecological crisis, evident in both academic and activist spheres, dissatisfaction with prevailing models of eco-politics has been mounting. Market-driven approaches to ecological governance, such as carbon markets, have not only faced criticism for their inadequacy in effectively addressing ecological risks but also for their attempt to depoliticize these risks by transforming them into matters of technocratic governance from above. Interconnected with this is an increasing disillusionment with the ideology of so-called green capitalism, which promised that climate change mitigation was possible within the paradigm of economic growth. Furthermore, a disillusionment with subpolitical democratization has been on the rise. Not only have grassroots eco-politics failed to alter the planetary trajectory towards genuine sustainability, subpolitics are also problematized for their transferal of political accountability for essentially global issues to individuals, reducing citizens to mere consumers and nudging them towards individual resilience strategies rather than advocating for collective responsibility.

One way to address these dissatisfactions with prevailing forms of eco-politics is to foster discussions that hone in on ecological inequalities and mobilize these for political unrest and protest. A notable example of this approach involves framing eco-politics through the lens of ecological class conflict. Since class embodies a unique political dimension, applying this viewpoint to ecological issues offers a novel and potentially transformative approach.

In this article, we examined whether the concept of ecological class, as formulated by Latour and Schultz, can truly serve as a viable framework for capturing political conflict in the wake of ecological shifts. We proceeded in two steps. Firstly, building on neo-Marxist social theories, we argued that, as a political construct, class is fundamentally relational; thus, for a class to serve as an agent of political change, it must engage in antagonistic conflict with another class. Secondly, we argued that this conflict must become an intrinsic aspect of the respective class's identity in order to transform it into a political agent.

By analyzing Latour's and Schultz's concept of ecological class in this manner, we contended that they fail to identify a class relation rooted in ecological antagonism. Because they do not pinpoint the social groups that would represent such an antagonism, membership in the ecological class essentially becomes a matter of individual choice. In other words, there is no common socio-material experience upon which the identity of the ecological class that Latour and Schultz construct could be grounded. Consequently, there is essentially no socio-materialism of shared experience inherent in such a concept of ecological class. For instance, if the executive of an oil company were to decide to advocate against climate change after retiring from a company where they spent their entire career devastating local environments and contributing heavily to climate change, they would still be considered part of the ecological class. Following the duo's theorizations, the executive could even be considered part of the ecological class while still employed by that company. For Latour and Schultz, ecologically conscious members of the global elite can be positioned in the same class as indigenous activists protesting deforestation. Framed in this manner, it would be more accurate to discuss what is addressed

by Latour and Schultz as an abstract social movement that individuals can join based on their (temporary) personal beliefs rather than a class rooted in a shared material experience.

To illustrate the existence of genuine group-based antagonism, specifically ecological conflict, we drew on Chancel's research on ecological inequalities. By considering the dimensions of ecological responsibility, access to ecological resources and power dynamics, as well as options for resilience, we contended that all three dimensions indicate robust antagonistic relationships among social groups. This is because pollutants, ecological resources, and opportunities for resilience are all commodities whose excessive consumption by one group inevitably leads to deprivation for others. Ecological conflicts manifest along the lines of social disparities, particularly economic wealth, transcending geographical boundaries to significant extents—illustrated prominently by the existence of a super-rich global polluter class. In essence, objective ecological conflict, akin to class conflict, is firmly entrenched in social class antagonism rather than individual awareness, choice, and willingness to engage for survival, as posited by Latour and Schultz. If ecological classes were to exist, they would essentially be social classes.

This, undoubtedly, carries significant implications for how we conceptualize eco-politics and ecological conflict in contemporary society. Firstly, we find little evidence to suggest the making of a planetary eco-class akin to E. P. Thompson's renowned analysis of the English working class currently underway. The historical formation of the working class was rooted in a shared material experience, which, devoid of determinism, coalesced through shared cultural orientations and practices. Its development was a self-constituting process unfolding within the lifeworlds of the proletariat. In contrast, the discourse surrounding ecological class tends to exhaust itself in intellectual imaginations. This isn't to suggest that objective ecological conflicts will never contribute to the emergence of class-centered ecological conflict. While spotting class formations that are primarily determined by ecological subjectivities seems out of touch with empirical reality, it appears we are moving towards societal configurations where conflicts over ecological issues play a more prominent role. In fact, as social conflicts in highly industrialized societies increasingly revolve around issues of ecological modernization—about who bears its burdens, who benefits from it, and who may face diminished resources—we may already be witnessing contours of class-centered ecological conflict. However, the respective eco-classes advocating for their interests regarding the costs and benefits of ecological modernization are not composed of individuals necessarily or typically concerned with habitability in the manner proposed by Latour and Schultz. Instead, they appear to rather represent social classes closely engaged in economic disputes, with ecological considerations largely confined to matters of technocratic modernization. If this holds true, primarily because class identities are still rooted in shared economic experiences, we can anticipate a shift only under conditions where ecological devastation becomes even more pronounced. Moreover, these conditions would need to be increasingly experienced disparately, among various groups. Whether, at such a juncture, class-based solidarity can still be fostered in a constructive manner remains to be seen.

Notes

[1] It must be acknowledged at this point that much of the available data explores ecological disparities in the context of income rather than wealth inequalities. This is a significant limitation that calls for future studies that pursue a multi-dimensional conceptualization and operationalization of economic capital.

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