

Crisis and Socio-Ecological Transformation

Second Call for the RLS Graduate Programme

Context: The Intensification of Socio-Ecological Contradictions

Contemporary societies around the world are characterized by contradictory socio-ecological dynamics, some of which take on very different forms in the Global North and Global South. *First*, the environmental crisis is dramatically worsening on a global scale. Climate change threatens to spiral out of control if steps are not taken towards decarbonization in the next few years. Some climate scientists fear that we may have already surpassed a number of tipping points in the climate system: in other words, limits beyond which global warming will lead to a series of self-amplifying effects. All around the world, we are seeing an increase in the rate and intensity of crises and catastrophic events that will continue to repeatedly interrupt socio-economic processes and threaten the functioning of important infrastructure systems—to the detriment of subaltern people in particular. The consequences of biodiversity loss (which are intertwined with climate change) are unlikely to lessen in severity, although the general public tends to pay less attention to them. Effects such as the destruction of ecosystems, the extinction of animal and plant species, and the loss of genetic diversity primarily caused by the expansion of industrial farming are distributed unevenly in space and time; they are now robbing a great many people in the Global South, such as smallholders and Indigenous communities, of the basis for their livelihood. Increasingly grave consequences are forecast for human health and nutrition. In the Global North, too, these effects are compounded by an increase in social inequality, which threatens to exacerbate them. The destruction of ecosystems caused by deforestation is also diminishing the habitats of wild animals. As a result, these animals are more likely to come into contact with humans, thus potentially spreading microbes to human hosts that can then transform into deadly pathogens once inside the human body. The risk of further pandemics like COVID-19 is increasing.

Secondly, these and other crises are being increasingly effectively politicized. In the Global South, counter-movements that demand climate justice and oppose an extractivist economic system have been growing since the 1970s. In the Global North, the students movement Fridays for Future, initiatives against coal mining such as *Ende Gelände*, or the distinct increase in criticism of the

socio-ecological consequences of (electric-)automobility have put the environmental question (back) on the social and political agenda. Environmental issues are also increasingly becoming a focus for trade unions and labour movements. While some forces are applying the brakes, citing the belief that a rigorous ecologization of the economy would jeopardize numerous jobs, others emphasize the need to effectively counter the environmental crisis, also for employment and sociopolitical reasons (the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy and the IG Metall metalworkers' union's cautious receptivity to the question of a socio-ecological transformation are worth mentioning here). Programmes like the European Green Deal or Germany's climate action package have to be seen against the background of social debates and the new climate movement. At the same time, these programmes—or rather, the fact that they fail to offer an adequate solution to the problems at hand and that their specifics are disputed—indicate the social forces that stand in the way of a socio-ecological transformation.

Thirdly, this configuration is further exacerbated by the fact that in many places, social counter forces of inertia are manifesting in the form of right-wing authoritarian movements, parties, and governments. Their appeal is rooted not least in their denial of the environmental crisis, or rather their ability to frame the issue in nationalist and racist terms and thus suggest that it would be possible to perpetuate a socio-ecologically destructive mode of production and living with all its exclusive advantages. These movements accept an intensification of geopolitical and economic tensions, which threaten to erupt in the form of violent conflicts over resources. However, the right-wing position is merely the radicalized version of a hope, still held by a majority of people in highly industrialized societies, that the ecological challenge can be managed primarily through technological innovations and market-based instruments – and that this can be done without far-reaching redistribution policies or a fundamental change in their everyday mode of living. The success of the FDP and the Greens among first-time and young voters in the recent Bundestag elections testifies to the appeal of proposals based on socio-political modernization that systematically fall short of the necessities of a socio-ecological transformation.

In this respect, contemporary intra-societal and global configurations are characterized by conflicting developments, which, *fourthly*, could be intensified by the coronavirus pandemic. The extremely unequal access to vaccines around the world and the COVID policies of right-wing governments such as Brazil's are leading to increasingly disastrous socio-ecological crisis scenarios. In many countries, non-existent health-care systems, those decimated by neoliberalism, or those

permeated by class and racial biases, brutally illustrate the systemic deficits of capitalist societies. Exhausted care workers, care workers from the global South or large parts of those who do unpaid care work in families (mostly women) are barely able to cushion the crisis of social reproduction. At the same time, struggles for better working and care conditions in the health system and other areas are increasing worldwide. The Corona pandemic has sharpened the focus on what is socially necessary. It has also indicated the possibility of concentrating social resources on sectors that are necessary for reproduction. This could be an important prerequisite for re-thinking and re-organizing both economic and social structures and systems, namely in terms of social needs, and starting with care work and the social and material infrastructures upon which individual physical reproduction, as well as social reproduction are based. At the same time, this would also be an important step towards socio-ecological transformation.

Topics: State, Work, Infrastructures

The graduate programme examines these contradictory developments and conflictual dynamics from a political ecology perspective: it assumes that the causes for both the environmental crisis and the uneven distribution of its consequences can be found in the structural indifference of capitalist societies towards their own social and environmental conditions for reproduction, as well as in patriarchal and racist relations of power and domination. A renewed process of social and political democratization, as well as the reduction of social inequality, are therefore considered to be essential preconditions for overcoming the crisis. The programme seeks to increase participants' empirical knowledge of these interrelationships, reflect on them theoretically, identify the potentials and prerequisites for a successful struggle for socio-ecological transformation, and make this knowledge available in order to aid in orienting these struggles.

The programme commenced on 1 October 2021 with four scholarships recipients. Four more stipends will be awarded on 1 October 2022. Applications can be submitted on the following three topics and individual questions related to them:

- *Transformation of statehood*: How do state structures and processes change over the course of an intensifying socio-ecological crisis? Which strategies are being developed by the state in order to deal with the crisis? What are the limits and contradictions of international environmental policy? What role do geopolitical shifts play in efforts to regulate the crisis? To what extent are nations in the Global South involved in the process of formulating international climate policy, and conversely, to what extent does global environmental policy act as a disciplining structure in the

relations of global inequality? How should the various Green Deal and Green New Deal projects be assessed? Which contradictions of the capitalist state manifest themselves in the course of the crisis and how could they be politicized in an emancipatory way? What are the different relations between state, economy, and civil society that are practically related to this? To what extent do state crisis policies break with the existing social power relations? What role does the class dimension of the ecological crisis (for example, in the form of resource consumption by the super-rich) play in the formulation of policies and how could this be politicized?

- *Transformation of work*: How does the ecological crisis relate to the many crisis tendencies that can be observed in the world of work (precarization, exhaustion, work intensification)? What does the ecological-technological modernization in the Global North mean for jobs and workers in the Global South whose income depends on formal and informal work in coal mining or oil production? How do trade unions approach the debates around transformation? What role do trade unions play in the transformation process? What are the conditions that hinder and enable the development of an environmental and feminist class politics based on new alliances between environmental political actors, feminist movements, and trade unions? What are the starting points for initiating a socio-ecological transformation on the shop floors? What can be learned from previous experiences with the socio-ecological conversion of industrial production for the current debates around transformation? What ecological potential is there in reducing working hours and in generally shifting the social organization of labour in such a way that the definition of labour is significantly expanded, and the gendered and racialized inequality inherent in the distribution of care and wage labour are surmounted?

- *Infrastructure policy*: What patterns of adapting to the impacts of climate change are emerging in the face of the accumulation of disruptive events? Which policies to adapt material and social infrastructures to socio-ecological threats and disruptions can be observed? How should adapting to the impacts of climate change be considered from an emancipatory perspective? What can be learned from inclusive, partly self-organized adaptation policies and practices in different social sectors (such as agriculture, forestry, settlement development, industrial production, crisis management strategies in the wake of disasters) in the Global South and North? What experiments have been trialled that involve a socio-ecological organization of infrastructure systems (e.g. energy democracy, food sovereignty, sustainable mobility in cities and rural areas), what conflicts are being waged over the socio-ecological transformation of infrastructure systems? What lessons

can be learned from these conflicts for an “economy of everyday life”? How can critical infrastructures be organized in a way that is appropriate to the worsening environmental and social crises? What role do questions of property play in this; to what extent does social equality in combatting the environmental crisis and adapting to its unavoidable consequences require a change in structures of ownership and a democratization (of the economy)?

Application: Requirements and Deadlines

Applications are open to doctoral students from the fields of sociology, political science, and geography, as well as other related disciplines (for example, ethnology, psychology, or developmental research). Interested parties need not apply for admission to a doctoral programme or for academic supervision in advance; participants in the graduate programme will be provided with academic supervision from the pool of advisors. The pool includes Maria Backhouse (Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena), Sybille Bauriedl (Europa-Universität Flensburg), Ulrich Brand (Universität Wien), Kristina Dietz (Universität Wien), Dennis Eversberg (Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena), Christoph Görg (Universität für Bodenkultur, Wien), Melanie Jaeger-Erben (Brandenburgisch -Technische Universität Cottbus), Stephan Lessenich (Institut für Sozialforschung an der Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main), and Markus Wissen (Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Recht Berlin). The graduate programme is institutionally linked to the Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Recht Berlin (Berlin School of Economics and Law). Scholarships recipients are expected to be willing to relocate to the programme location. Doctoral theses can also be written in English, but applicants must provide proof of German language proficiency of at least B2 level. Students are obligated to participate in the classes conducted in the context of the programme.

The application deadline is 1 April 2022, and the scholarship is effective as of 1 October 2021. For further information regarding application forms, required documents, and the requirements for the written application, please visit our website: <https://www.rosalux.de/stiftung/studienwerk/>