

Crowdsourcing Utopia. How Vienna's Environmental Alternative Action Organizations Tackle the Lack of Transformative Agency in Eco-politics

Michael Deflorian, MA

Institute for Sustainability, University of Applied Sciences Wiener Neustadt

michael.deflorian@fhwn.ac.at

In recent years, the landscape of environmental movements has seen growth in a particular style of activism: organizations that seek to change social structures *directly* by establishing sustainable everyday practices. These environmental alternative action organizations (EAAOs) come in various shapes and forms and include food cooperatives, community-supported agriculture, repair cafés, bike kitchens, upcycling initiatives, libraries of things and co-housing projects, only to name a few (de Moor, Catney, and Doherty 2021; Giugni and Grasso 2018; Kousis and Uba 2021). Scholars have traced the recent increase in EAAOs – which have been part of the action repertoires of social movements for more than a hundred years – to two conjunctures: the great frustration of the 2009 climate summit in Copenhagen (de Moor, Catney, and Doherty 2021; Schlosberg and Craven 2019) and the economic turndown following the financial crisis of the same year (Zamponi and Bosi 2018; Asara 2020). In the meantime, climate activism has returned to state-centered street protest and the world economy has recovered to a large degree (at least until the breakout of COVID-19), yet EAAOs continue to flourish, and with them, the academic interest in mapping and understanding them.

In political science, this has been done by debating whether these organizations reinvigorate an eco-politics that has become stuck in the treadmills of liberal democracy, or whether they reflect a post-political or post-ecologist constellation with negligible effects for the environment (Schlosberg and Craven 2019; Meyer 2015; Blühdorn 2017; Blühdorn and Deflorian 2021; MacGregor 2021; Varvarousis, Asara, and Akbulut 2021; Eckersley 2020; Laage-Thomsen and Blok 2020). In the theoretical realm, two interpretations have dominated the discussion so far. With colleagues, David Schlosberg has developed the account of 'sustainable materialist movements', according to which EAAOs share a new materialist view of the world, in which harmful flows and stocks of energy and matter are to be replaced with sustainable ones, by creating local institutions that cater to the everyday needs of citizens (Schlosberg and Coles 2016; Schlosberg 2019; Schlosberg and Craven 2019). In contrast, Ingolfur Blühdorn diagnoses 'theme parks of self-experience' (Blühdorn 2006), in which activists that have become complicit with consumer capitalism and 'the politics of unsustainability' that maintain it can simulate notions of autonomy and authenticity, only aggravating the depoliticized nature of contemporary environmental governance (Blühdorn 2017, 2014). In the course of this debate, empirical researchers have warned against all to 'neat framings' that are more driven by the pursuit of theoretical consistency than by the attempt to grasp the complexities of real-world EAAOs that cannot but operate under intricate conditions. What is needed, Sherilyn MacGregor suggests, are 'situated descriptions' and 'both-and-interpretations', with which the actual grievances, strategies and challenges of EAAOs can be properly understood and theoretical accounts sufficiently grounded (MacGregor 2021, 334; see also Berglund 2017; Laage-Thomsen and Blok 2020). Only then, it is argued, may robust conclusions about the organizations' strategic offer and transformative potential be drawn.

In the global North, the scholarly community has provided such situated descriptions primarily from countries that have severely suffered from austerity measures and the neoliberal transformation of the welfare state, such as the European South and the Anglophone world. In Greece, Italy and Spain, EAAOs have been found to be a collective response to the dramatic 'roll-back' of safety nets in the course of the public debt crisis, simultaneously empowering local communities and providing a coping mechanism in the absence of governmental support (Varvarousis, Asara, and Akbulut 2021; Asara

2020; Zamponi and Bosi 2018). In the UK and the US, where the 'roll-back' of the welfare state has been early accompanied by a 'roll-out' of new public management, EAOs have not only been interpreted as contesting and coping, but as coopted as well: public-private partnerships have been imposed in such a way that civil society organizations utilize their energies to manage socio-environmental problems in a pre-destined manner (de Moor, Catney, and Doherty 2021; McClintock 2014; MacGregor 2021).

Western countries that have *evaded* harsh austerity measures and experienced a *softer* introduction of neoliberal public policy, however, have received far less attention in comparison, leaving situated research without clear results. Existing studies indicate that EAOs may experience the aforementioned dynamics here as well (Mayer 2013; Uitermark and Nicholls 2014; Tonkiss 2013), yet demonstrate national or regional idiosyncrasies that help explain their non-contentious and escapist appearance, such as strong beliefs in scientific knowledge in Finland (Berglund 2017), the differentiation of local sustainability governance in Denmark (Laage-Thomsen and Blok 2020) or the opaque nature of bureaucratic structures in Berlin (Hector and Botero 2021). These results demonstrate the need for additional research that traces the situated grievances, strategies and challenges of EAOs in less neoliberalized societies and compares them with the existing body of theoretical and empirical knowledge.

This paper contributes to closing this research gap by providing case studies from the city of Vienna. Unlike most Western countries, Austria has avoided strong austerity measures post 2009, while its capitol maintains a famously large public sector and foundational economy. In order to assess EAOs' critiques, tactics and obstacles and compare them with the existing body of knowledge in this particular context, I conducted ethnographic research on three organizations. All of them represent salient collective actions in the city's EAO landscape and mobilize a unique everyday practice for alleviating environmental problems: a library of things, a community garden, and a cloth-swapping initiative. Based on theory-driven participant observation and 27 problem-centered interviews, I created an interpretative account that reflects the empirical specificities of each case and communicates with dominant conceptualizations and situated studies of EAOs.

The results of my study produce a differentiated image of the organizations' grievances, strategies and challenges. Concerning the former, participants tend to be frustrated by the absence of effective regulation on various levels of liberal democratic government (as suggested by Schlosberg), but also by their personal failure at conforming to ecologist ideals in consumer society (as proposed by Blühdorn). The organizations' answer to this double lack of eco-political agency is to 'crowdsource' utopian everyday practices: by communicating non-contentious frames and offering flexible formats of participation, a multitude of practitioners is attracted to jointly create an alternative everyday practice in their personal lives: sharing things instead of owning them, cultivating an organic community garden and swapping cloths instead of buying new ones. Compared to organizations in strongly neoliberalized societies, the three EAOs show only minor signs of a coping strategy for marginalized groups and only a moderate risk of being coopted by government actors. In fact, the organizations' main challenge lies in guaranteeing a low-threshold for participants without overburdening organizers who willingly shoulder most of the grassroots work and responsibility. Moreover, the crowdsourcing strategy is limited in a crucial way: while responding to the mundane needs of citizens allows EAOs to generate considerable 'resonance' (Meyer 2015), their decision to target *practices instead of policies* precludes them from engaging in political processes that could elevate the impact of their activities. To compensate for this weakness, I argue that the public sector should recognize EAOs as rudimentary 'infrastructures of the everyday' (Foundational Economy Collective 2018) and support them institutionally, as already initiated by the City of Vienna in the case of neighborhood repair cafés.

References

- Asara, Viviana. 2020. "Untangling the Radical Imaginaries of the Indignados' Movement: Commons, Autonomy and Ecologism." *Environmental Politics* 10 (1): 1–25.
- Berglund, Eeva. 2017. "Steering Clear of Politics: Local Virtues in Helsinki's Design Activism." *JPE* 24 (1): 566.
- Blühdorn, Ingolfur. 2006. "Self-Experience in the Theme Park of Radical Action? Social Movements and Political Articulation in the Late-Modern Condition." *European Journal of Social Theory* 9 (1): 23–42.
- . 2014. "Post-Ecologist Governmentality: Post-Democracy, Post-Politics and the Politics of Unsustainability." In *the Post-Political and Its Discontents. Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical Politics*, edited by Japhy Wilson and Erik Swyngedouw, 146–66. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Accessed December 01, 2016.
- . 2017. "Post-Capitalism, Post-Growth, Post-Consumerism? Eco-Political Hopes Beyond Sustainability." *Global Discourse* 7 (1): 42–61. Accessed July 06, 2018.
- Blühdorn, Ingolfur, and Michael Deflorian. 2021. "Politicisation Beyond Post-Politics: New Social Activism and the Reconfiguration of Political Discourse." *Social Movement Studies* 52 (4): 259–75.
- de Moor, Joost, Philip Catney, and Brian Doherty. 2021. "What Hampers 'Political' Action in Environmental Alternative Action Organizations? Exploring the Scope for Strategic Agency Under Post-Political Conditions." *Social Movement Studies* 20 (3): 312–28.
- Eckersley, Robyn. 2020. "Ecological Democracy and the Rise and Decline of Liberal Democracy: Looking Back, Looking Forward." *Environmental Politics* 29 (2): 214–34. Accessed June 03, 2021.
- Foundational Economy Collective. 2018. *Foundational Economy: The Infrastructure of Everyday Life*. The Manchester capitalism book series. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Giugni, Marco, and Maria Grasso. 2018. "Alternative Action Organizations: Social Solidarity or Political Advocacy?" *American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (6): 778–95.
- Hector, Philip, and Andrea Botero. 2021. "Generative Repair: Everyday Infrastructuring Between DIY Citizen Initiatives and Institutional Arrangements." *CoDesign*, 1–17.
- Kousis, Maria, and Katrin Uba. 2021. "(Non)Environmental Alternative Action Organizations Under the Impacts of the Global Financial Crisis: A Comparative European Perspective." *Sustainability* 13 (16): 8989.
- Laage-Thomsen, Jakob, and Anders Blok. 2020. "Civic Modes of Greening the City? Urban Natures in-Between Familiar Engagement and Green Critique." *Local Environment* 25 (2): 162–78.
- MacGregor, Sherilyn. 2021. "Finding Transformative Potential in the Cracks? The Ambiguities of Urban Environmental Activism in a Neoliberal City." *Social Movement Studies* 20 (3): 329–45.
- Mayer, Margit. 2013. "First World Urban Activism." *City* 17 (1): 5–19.
- McClintock, Nathan. 2014. "Radical, Reformist, and Garden-Variety Neoliberal: Coming to Terms with Urban Agriculture's Contradictions." *Local Environment* 19 (2): 147–71.
- Meyer, John M. 2015. *Engaging the Everyday: Environmental Social Criticism and the Resonance Dilemma*. Cambridge Mass. u.a. MIT Press.
- Schlosberg, David. 2019. "From Postmaterialism to Sustainable Materialism: The Environmental Politics of Practice-Based Movements." *Environmental Politics* 8 (4): 1–21.
- Schlosberg, David, and Romand Coles. 2016. "The New Environmentalism of Everyday Life: Sustainability, Material Flows and Movements." *Contemporary Political Theory* 15 (2): 160–81.
- Schlosberg, David, and Luke Craven. 2019. *Sustainable Materialism: Environmental Movements and the Politics of Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tonkiss, Fran. 2013. "Austerity Urbanism and the Makeshift City." *City* 17 (3): 312–24. Accessed June 16, 2021.
- Uitermark, Justus, and Walter Nicholls. 2014. "From Politicization to Policing: The Rise and Decline of New Social Movements in Amsterdam and Paris." *Antipode* 46 (4): 970–91.
- Varvarousis, Angelos, Viviana Asara, and Bengi Akbulut. 2021. "Commons: A Social Outcome of the Movement of the Squares." *Social Movement Studies* 20 (3): 292–311. Accessed June 14, 2021.
- Zamponi, Lorenzo, and Lorenzo Bosi. 2018. "Politicizing Solidarity in Times of Crisis: The Politics of Alternative Action Organizations in Greece, Italy, and Spain." *American Behavioral Scientist* 62 (6): 796–815.