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AN ECONOMIC TAIL WAGGING AN ECOLOGICAL DOG? WELL-BEING AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ENTANGLED HISTORY

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Introduction

As explained in the introduction of this book, planetary well-being is a state that impartially acknowledges human and nonhuman well-being as a part of healthy Earth systems and ecosystems (Kortetmäki *et al.*, 2021). In this chapter, environmental history is used to add a temporal perspective to understanding planetary well-being. As the realization of planetary well-being requires, for instance, restraints to the human use of natural resources, it is necessary to look into the past and ask, "What has prevented less anthropocentric conceptions of well-being from thriving and why?" This is all the more important since historically, it has been typical for modern industrial societies to promote an understanding of well-being with a sociocentric[1] emphasis with little to no attention paid to the well-being of either other species or future human generations.

This sociocentric emphasis, while often taken for granted, not only simplifies our reality enormously into mere social needs but has also been criticized for easily turning both nature and humans into mere resources for societal (economic) needs (Connolly, 2017). This chapter presents an example of how this tendency can be understood historically in the field of politics, in which the adaptation of a more ecocentric framework for well-being has proven particularly difficult.

Examples of different conceptualizations given to *sustainable development* over time by global and national actors, such as the European Union (EU) and the Green Parties in Finland and Germany, demonstrate how our understanding of well-being develops in time entangled with our social processes. We analyze why the practical implications of a non-anthropocentric understanding of well-being have not flourished and how different path dependencies and social needs provide incentives for a drawback that typically occurs despite good intentions.

As the examples below suggest, these path dependencies are based on perceiving the world sociocentrically and are constructed with discourses that have political incentives. Finally, we consider what it means to break free from the confines that these path dependencies place on political decision-making. We claim, following Mazzucato (2014), that what has really been lacking is the political will to do so. Noticing this requires stepping out of a sociocentric understanding of well-being while keeping the entangled nature of humans and the nonhuman environment in sight. Understanding these cultural mechanisms is a vital part of promoting a planetary, systems-oriented, and non-anthropocentric understanding of well-being.

While environmental history deepens perspectives on planetary well-being, an entanglement-oriented approach also provides new layers of interpretation for historical research. The history scholarship has traditionally focused on humans as the *primus motor* of historical change, with little attention paid to the nonhuman world or the entanglements between the two. Environmental historians have criticized the strict nature–culture dichotomy from the 1960s onwards, and more recent scholarship has created ways to look beyond the more or less imaginary boundary between societies and the environment (McEvoy, 1987; Worster, 1987; Haila and Lähde, 2003; Penna and Rivers, 2013; Rigby, 2015; Carey, 2017; Pritchard and Zimring, 2020; Chakrabarty, 2021). However, till today, many historical accounts are focusing on the societal aspects of human culture and remain oblivious to the nonhuman world—even when addressing environmental politics.

In his influential book *Facing the Planetary*, political theorist William Connolly (2017) called this standpoint as falsely perceiving the human culture as "internal to itself" instead of understanding humans as part of an organic reality through the lens of "entangled humanism". Environmental history enables overcoming the simplistic understanding of reality mentioned above while departing from the more traditional paradigm of historical studies. Humans do not only directly affect nature, but the effect is also created by natural processes reacting to human action; thus, the outcome is a dynamic entanglement of natural phenomena and human activity. These kinds of entanglements are to be found everywhere, as the relationship between humans and the environment is always reciprocal (*ibid.*, pp. 155–157, 168–169).

Furthermore, our conception of well-being guiding our political and economic action is also entangled with deeper interconnected processes that humans and nature share. This understanding has been problematic in political discourse. Connolly (*ibid.*, pp. 9–16) has pointed out how political attempts to formulate more systems-oriented approaches to environmental questions have typically been "dragged down" to mere sociocentric perspectives over time, turning nature into "a deposit of resources". More anthropocentric and materialistic conceptions of well-being that promote, for instance, economic productivity over ecological needs direct human actions in a way that may damage the well-being of ecosystems. These conceptions are typically the consequences of (mal)developments and social

path dependencies that run over time and are thus subject to historical research while being closely connected with the entangled actions and responses between human societies and nature. For this reason, the environmental historical framing of questions is useful, as it acknowledges the nonhuman, thus widening the scope of historical research.

The lack of an ecological, systems-oriented conceptualization of well-being becomes more visible from an entangled perspective. Political attempts to resolve one environmental problem often simply create or exacerbate another kind of problem. To use an example of this presented by John Dryzek (2005a), building tall smokestacks to reduce local pollution caused in the end more long-distance pollution, such as acid rain. As environmental issues are solved one problem at a time, separately and from a sociocentric perspective, the events are disconnected from the entangled surroundings from where they occur. When addressing political issues such as the smokestack problem, emphasis has been placed on anthropocentric needs, which led to the harm only being relocated elsewhere, leaving the initial problem unsolved. Paradoxically, acknowledging only human needs causes human well-being to suffer as well. The problems do not disappear but simply tend to be transferred to other areas of life (*ibid.*).

Thus, it is of key importance to understand that human well-being is not separable from the well-being of other living entities and the nonhuman world. It then becomes an intriguing question as to why such a perception of well-being has so often been drawn back to sociocentric standpoints. This entangled perspective opens up new research questions for historical research. Most notably, it raises the need to analyze the different path dependencies behind the aforementioned drawbacks. Understanding social (mal)developments and path dependencies becomes a vital task if we are to understand the mechanisms that prevent us from applying planetary well-being in contexts of action, such as politics, from an entangled perspective. According to historical sociologist James Mahoney, social path dependencies occur when earlier decisions raise expectations of an "increased return" for similar future decisions, turning a chain of decisions into self-reinforcing sequences (Mahoney, 2000, pp. 507–512). As the example below will suggest, these vicious cycles, particularly detectable in politics, have drawn new ecological thinking back to older, more politically convenient, and more anthropocentric modes of understanding well-being.

This explains the abovementioned notion that non-anthropocentric conceptualizations of well-being are "dragged down" to a state of sociocentric normalcy within systems of capitalism, socialism, and nationalism (Connolly, 2017). Through an environmental historical approach, different kinds of chronic path dependencies can be made visible and scrutinized critically in order to reveal how and why such drawbacks occur in the political context. Using the concept of *sustainable development*, we explore the incentives behind this return to normalcy, which tends to inhibit new conceptualizations of well-being.

Sustainable development and the history of entanglements

The adaptation of *sustainable development* marked a new framework for environmental politics from the late 1980s onwards. Analyzing the concept in its political context in the EU reveals how the term has been used as a conceptual tool to draw an understanding of well-being back in more anthropocentric directions. These changes have guided environmental thinking towards a more market-oriented, anthropocentric direction due to political and economic reasons on the national level—for example, in the Finnish and German Green Parties. This new direction was based on social path dependencies which caused, for instance, the Green Parties to de-radicalize their political programmes. We analyze the incentives causing this return to normalcy in political and economic spheres, thus retarding the development of a more holistic and less anthropocentric understanding of well-being. Mapping such path dependencies, which limit the visions of well-being to short-term economic interests, is vital in order to understand the obstacles that our societal and cultural needs place on the advancement of new ideas regarding planetary well-being.

The roots of these debates are in the 1970s, when a variety of rising environmental and grassroots movements presented the public with new radical discourses (Guha, 2000; Radkau, 2011; Mende, 2012). Deep ecological discourses called for a complete abandoning of anthropocentric conceptualizations of well-being; eco-feminists and social-greens noted that human well-being was also jeopardized by the Western mindset of hierarchy, domination, and conquest of nature and should be replaced by a sense of companionship both with other species and between humans (Naess, 1997; Dryzek, 2005b; Radkau, 2005). Still, others were set out to create alternative ways of living with ideals of grassroots democracy, decentralized economic life, and a deeper connection with nature as foundations for a new conceptualization of well-being. All, however, agreed that perceiving nature as a mere resource storage for human well-being was detrimental to both nature and even the survival of human societies. Green parties were typically founded as political representatives for these diverse grassroots movements and their ideals (Dryzek, 2005b; Hockenos, 2007; Milder, 2017; Warde, Libby and Sörlin, 2018).

In the political world, a more moderate discussion arose in an attempt to reconcile the challenges presented by these new discourses on economic needs. Although this discussion had been developing since the early 1970s, the concept of *sustainable development* became a political catchword for moderate environmentalism in 1987, after the United Nations' Brundtland Commission, led by Norwegian Social Democratic Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, defined the concept. The Commission merged social-democratic themes, economic development, and social equality with the goal of environmental protection (Dryzek, 2005b; Dryzek and Schosberg, 2005; Rumpala, 2011; Warde, Libby and Sörlin, 2018). This was a major turn in the history of environmental discourse. Historian Matthias Schmeltzer pointed out that, despite including *development* in the concept, the point of the

concept in 1987 was not mainly to emphasize growth. However, as Schmeltzer (2016, pp. 321–322) put it, "the report's more nuanced analysis and its focus on […] linking social and ecological questions in a context of global inequalities were soon forgotten". As early as 1989, the OECD's Ministerial Declaration endorsed "sustainable development" while reframing it entirely, with the explicit goal to maintain economic growth within the framework of environmental protection and with the use of optimum market mechanisms (*ibid.*). In the 1992 Earth Summit, the concept was used to promote "global governance" at the expense of local control in favour of free trade and sustainable consumption (Guha, 2000, pp. 140–142; Hinton and Goodman, 2010).

The change in meaning compared to the 1987 Brundtland Commission was notable. The EU soon followed, as the European Commission set its goal of promoting environmentally sustainable industry competitiveness. The stagnant economy in the early 1990s and the liberalization of global markets caused the harmonized environmental regulations of the 1980s to fall out of fashion (Knill and Liefferink, 2007). New "simplified regulation" of the environment was designed to create pressure on industries from below by affecting consumer behaviour, thus effectively re-allocating environmental responsibility from producers to consumers. Britain's Margaret Thatcher in particular was aggressively pursuing the idea of citizens-as-consumers who would make enlightened decisions on the free markets and consequently allow a softer incentive for industries to react to environmental pressure without necessarily hurting their competitiveness with harsh top-down regulations (*ibid.*). By replacing regulations with these market-friendlier measures, the EU was set to compete with the American and Japanese industries, which were ahead in the global markets (Blair, 2010).

Reframing sustainable development for sociocentric needs

Two documents are examined here to fully grasp the environmental discussion in the EU back in the 1990s: The Commission's policy commentaries on the Molitor Report[2] and the 5th Environmental Action Programme (EAP). Knill and Liefferink pointed out that when the 5th EAP was published in 1993, it reflected "a major departure from approaches propagated in earlier programmes", both conceptually and substantially (Knill and Liefferink, 2007, p. 163). Earlier EAPs emphasized forms of hierarchical intervention. Now, the focus was still on legislation to set environmental standards but also on "economic instruments" to encourage the production and use of environmentally friendly products and processes, according to the Commission. Using these instruments was to be studied "in the context of the general economic objectives of the Community, such as employment, competitiveness and growth" (European Commission, 1998, p. 6). Horizontal and financial mechanisms would promote environmentally friendly production by, for example, providing information for the consumer in order to affect behavioural change while providing industries with voluntary possibilities

to meet new consumer demands without risking competitiveness or productivity (European Commission, 1993, 1998).

This trend continued two years later with the Molitor Report, formulated by members of "industry, trade unions, academics, and law" (European Commission, 1995, 1b) and led by Bernhard Molitor, an economist and an expert in economic (but not environmental) policies. Tellingly, there is no mention of any environmental experts or scientists belonging to the group that was forging together the outlines of environmental political recommendations for the EU for decades to come, as will be described below. The Commission's new recommendation to start adapting the new deregulatory environmental policy framework on a national level was, in the Commission's own report, portrayed as "an important prerequisite to European industry improving its competitive position" (*ibid.*) and a continuation of questioning the strong top-down environmental regulation because of this economically associated reason (Knill and Liefferink, 2007).

The Molitor Report outlined a market-oriented turn in the EU's environmental political thinking, which member countries soon followed. A human-centred and growth-oriented conceptualization of well-being was visible in the explicit premises of the Report, which focused on the sustainable use of natural resources mainly for human economic benefit. According to the European Commission's statement of the Molitor Report, "legislation or practices hamper the unity of the Community market" (European Commission, 1995, pp. 2–7). Regarding environmental regulation, the report stated that industry "should have flexibility to choose the means of implementations". A "market based [sic] approach" should be used whenever possible, while departure from it should always be separately justified (*ibid.*, p. 27).

The goal of the Commission was to seek the least costly solutions in the framework of simplification of regulation. Both the Molitor Report and the Commission also demanded that, if these voluntary market-based instruments would succeed, better monitoring of the private sector and "full transparency" was needed (*ibid.*, p. 25). In reality, all this would soon come to mean the formation of new market-friendly environmental instruments for voluntary regulation, such as eco-labels and transparent information for consumers, compared to earlier regulation of strict environmental demands, such as pollution control and chimney filters for factories, directed at producers rather than consumers (Knill and Liefferink, 2007).

Ute Collier (1998), who has studied this development in the EU, points out that these formulations were based on the notion of *sustainable development*, giving the concept a very different meaning than the Brundtland Commission had done. The idea was that, through growing green consumption, environmental problems could be solved without hurting economic productivity or industry competitiveness if only the state provided instruments for the markets, such as eco-labels or subsidies to develop ecological technology. Instead of basing environmental responsibility on the ecological effects on the well-being of ecosystems, the responsibility for the environment was thrust on the individual consumer—that is, only at the end spectrum of the production chain (Martell, 1994; Hinton and Goodman, 2010; Akenji,

2019; Olsen, 2019). The recommendations were also objected: Some saw markets as an ineffective tool from an environmental perspective, while one dissident member of the Molitor think tank publicly objected to the outcome of the Molitor Report—and thus the European Commission's recommendations—for perceiving actual environmental protection as a mere obstacle to economic growth that needed to be somehow bypassed in environmental politics (Collier, 1998; Knill and Liefferink, 2007). This controversy, however, was mostly overlooked, as the EU Commission wholeheartedly supported the report.

According to Knill and Liefferink, these recommendations soon caused a "race to the bottom" that emerged in the regulative practices of member countries of the Union. In an open market area, "different environmental regulations in the member states had a direct impact on the economic competitiveness of a country" (Knill and Liefferink, 2007, p. 103). Strict environmental standards caused bigger costs for production, which meant disadvantages in economic competition against countries with looser standards. This threw member states of the open market area into regulatory competition with each other to create favourable competitive conditions. The pressure this situation created for national governments and politicians was immense. As conceptual historian Niklas Olsen (2019) pointed out, even social democrats adapted to the demands of increased consumer responsibility in the 1990s, making consumeristic deregulatory politics a new hegemony. Individual countries started understanding industry competitiveness (measured through economic productivity) as a prerequisite for well-being, placing it at the centre of politics (Kananen, 2008).

This global development strongly affected the Finnish and German Green Parties, studied here as national-level examples of this development. Both Green parties felt tremendous pressure to adapt to the changing situation. In their programmes, both parties criticized the Western way of understanding well-being in an individualistic, materialistic, and economically competitive setting, in which material growth and the consequential extortion of natural resources was a defining feature of well-being. Instead, they promoted a conceptualization of well-being that aimed at a holistic understanding of humans as part of their communities and their natural surroundings. Both warned of the dangers of a centralized and globalized economy that caused irreversible environmental destruction and destroyed possibilities for human well-being as well. Early Green Party programmes thus reveal that the Greens started out extremely critical towards a growth-oriented understanding of well-being based on short-term material gain for the human individual; instead, they promoted holistic models that aimed to understand well-being in more ecocentric ways (Die Grünen, 1980; Vihreä Liitto, 1988, 1990).[3]

This has all changed as a consequence of this global development. The Finnish Greens, for example, emphasized affecting "millions of consumers' product choices" with market-friendly measures in their 1994 programme, something they had scorned before (Vihreä Liitto, 1994, p. 3). The German Greens also thrust environmental responsibility and green growth on "consumer power" in their 2002

programme, although a shift to green growth ideology had already happened in 1991 (Die Grünen, 2002, p. 28). The discussion to radically re-conceptualize the anthropocentric and growth-oriented understanding of well-being disappeared from party programmes, as the focus turned back on an economically oriented understanding of well-being. Finnish Greens were explicitly afraid of losing competitiveness if green technology was not to be developed for exportation (Vihreä Liitto, 1994), using environmental politics as tools for the economy.

The explicit reasons for the turn were notably unideological in nature in Green argumentation: There was a pragmatic need to adapt to a system that demanded certain preconditions to be taken as granted in order to access power. The Finnish Greens felt this harshly in the 1991 government negotiations: During an era of depression, they had no possibilities for governmental cooperation with a growth-critical programme (Isotalo, 2007a). As statements from leading Green politicians reveal, many Green actors were focused on maintaining political influence, which was perceived as a prerequisite to act efficiently in the new paradigm. In Finland, Green environmental minister Pekka Haavisto pointed out how nothing would have been accomplished with the attitude of the NGOs after NGO criticism started to build up towards the Greens' government participation (Isotalo, 2007b); in Germany, *realo* Green Hubert Kleinert was explicitly afraid of the party dying out entirely if they would fail to find "efficient" means to participate in politics (Kleinert, 1991, p. 35). These quotes provide just a few of the many examples in which Green actors thus felt compelled to adapt to the presuppositions of the surrounding discourses in order to become more efficient in the political field.

"Race to the bottom" in a nutshell

In order to understand these development patterns as path-dependent, their outcome would have had to be somewhat predictable, since stepping away from the path would have become increasingly costly. This is precisely the case here. As an initial step, European politicians started demanding the surpassing of state-led industry regulation policies (and other obstacles to economic productivity), with demands of re-allocating responsibility to the consumer. Second, as one country created favourable competitive conditions, others felt compelled to follow, causing a "race to the bottom" that became increasingly difficult to stop. Finally, as Green parties wanted to participate in national-level decision-making, they found themselves in situations in which efficient means to participate in politics were already tied to a path-dependent repetition of promoting industry competitiveness. Thus, the representative political system did not allow decision power to those who drifted too far away from the cultural normalcy of sociocentric premises, causing the focus to shift from ecological to economic perspectives.

The example of what happened to Green parties in the 1990s in the pressure of new market-friendly environmentalism demonstrates the kind of path dependencies that tend to draw radical thinking back towards a state of normalcy when

entering the realm of politics. As Mahoney pointed out, changing a system at any given time is more costly than returning to the path-dependent sequences already in use that provide immediate benefits. This is a prime example of a situation where "actors rationally choose to reproduce institutions […] because any potential benefits of transformation are outweighed by the costs" (Mahoney, 2000, pp. 507–512). Re-allocating responsibility to the individual consumer was the most predictable outcome also among other parties participating in this "race to the bottom". Political actors in individual countries felt compelled to adapt to this changing paradigm (Olsen, 2019). Here, Green parties are examples of the same hegemonic nature of market-oriented thinking in Western political culture[4] that was in the process of strengthening in other parties during the 1980s and 1990s due to the globalization of the economy.

When addressing this development, it is worth noting that these path dependencies are not entirely deterministic, as they take place in the form of "expectations", as mentioned above (Mahoney, 2000). Expectations, however, are thoroughly subjective and discursively constructed. Economist Mariana Mazzucato has claimed that the deregulatory framework associating competitiveness with complete freedom of the markets is based on a "discursive battle", with political incentives driving the discourse that is eventually taken for granted once it has achieved a hegemonic status. These discourses "reproduce stereotypes and images which serve only ideological ends", she claims, as presumed market punishments that supposedly follow market interventions are not true in any empirical sense but merely discursively assumed (Mazzucato, 2014, pp. 1–13). Beliefs play a major role in such discursive games: As John Dryzek (2005a) has pointed out, it has been the *belief* of sustaining investor confidence in fear of market punishments that has driven politicians to emphasize competitiveness over other values that they might personally endorse. Breaking free from such fear-based path dependencies is thus not a question of political realities but of political will.

Conceptually, the emphasis on economic competitiveness has led to a consumerist change in the meanings given to *sustainable development*, as discussed above. Jeremy Caradonna (2018, pp. 154–158) pointed out that even the sustainable development discourse started out as "a radical departure from the status quo of industrial growth", an attempt to reconcile a compromise between the needs of human and nonhuman well-being. When the concept of *sustainable consumption* was developed in political language in the early 1990s, the *sustainable development* discourse had already turned into an attempt to stand by the materialistically understood conception of well-being, although with the add-on of not jeopardizing the needs of future (human) generations (Akenji, 2019). The compromise to start using the concept in a more market-compliant manner linked the whole concept with an anthropocentric and materialistic understanding of well-being, thus turning the focus away from new ideals to the market-oriented framework of growth and competitiveness (Dryzek, 2005b). Furthermore, this compromise created a contradiction between the stated goals and the means used to get there, as environmental

responsibility was simultaneously re-allocated to individual consumers in order to enhance industry competitiveness. Based on this development, Lewis Akenji (2019, p. 14) pointed out how green consumerism "lays the responsibility on consumers to undertake the function of maintaining economic growth while simultaneously, contradictorily and with limited agency, bearing the burden to drive the socio-economic system towards ecological sustainability".

Our social conceptualizations of well-being are also connected to entanglements with nature. However, as these conceptualizations are drawn back to anthropocentrism, they tend to blind us from the needs of Earth systems, on which all human well-being is nevertheless still based. This seems to be precisely what occurred in environmental politics in the 1990s. As the social *zeitgeist* of the decade promoted globalization (Kananen, 2008), the needs of the Earth's systems, as well as the threats caused by advancing climate change, desertification, and biodiversity loss, mattered little (Caradonna, 2018). Instead of labelling these decisions "greenwashing", as some scholars (*e.g. ibid.*) have done, we find it more constructive to understand these turns as path dependencies that can be carefully analyzed and understood as rational drawbacks, caused by the understandable need to be effective in the field of politics, and that can be avoided once detected. As politicians are making decisions based on short-term expectations of economic and political benefits, the pressure to adapt to our cultural needs is immensely strong, which is why radical visions of well-being have tended to fall back to a state of sociocentric normalcy. Once these expectations are understood as part of discursive and ideological development, they can be questioned and potentially abandoned. This would require enough political courage and imagination to abandon the everyday presuppositions that have so far guided political decision-making.

Conclusion

Looking at environmental political ideas and concepts from the perspective of entangled history opens up new research questions. There is an increasing need to understand the reasons behind the beliefs and ideas that guide political thinking back to a state of sociocentric normalcy. We have mapped some key elements that affect how well-being is conceptualized in politics and to whom well-being is attributed. As environmental political goals are moving in a more moderate direction while species extinction, desertification, ocean acidity, and climate change, among other issues, are rapidly advancing, we conclude that the key incentives for this development have not lied in ecological needs but rather in economic, human-oriented needs, based on political, social, and economic path dependencies.

The case of sustainable development and its effects on Green parties is merely one example of a much larger phenomenon that environmental history can make visible: Our understanding of well-being being driven back towards a state of anthropocentric normalcy in order to act efficiently within social structures. From the perspective of entanglements, the danger of feeling compelled to return to

normalcy in political decision-making is closely connected with the well-being of the nonhuman nature, as the positive effects of political action on the environment can diminish. Therefore, it is of vital importance to detect and analyze the causes of these drawbacks in order to start developing effective strategies on how to manifest *planetary well-being* without losing its paradigm-shifting nature in contexts of action, such as politics.

Approaching the issue this way opens up another, perhaps more important question: How can we break free from these path dependencies? In other words, how can we break free from the deterministic perception of politics that resorts to short-term calculations as a mandatory must in a globalizing world? How can we not let an economic tail wag an ecological dog? The first step in this direction would be to understand that the presumably unavoidable perspectives to politics are, in fact, always discursively constructed and forged to seem as if there are no alternatives to them. In our examples, such assumptions have been taken for granted, causing a drawback in ideas that attempt to escape the *status quo* in the field of politics.

We are reminded of how easily a new set of ideas, no matter how beneficial and innovative, gets drawn back when it is put to use in contexts of action, such as politics, in which effective action is path-dependent on older models of conduct and thought. Stepping out of these models requires stepping out of a sociocentric understanding of well-being. This requires political will, courage, and imagination to look outside the self-created box. Meanwhile, historical research itself can do its part in challenging old ways of thinking by developing a theory embedded in *entangled humanism* rather than in purely anthropocentric grounds.

Notes

1 The term is used somewhat interchangeably with "anthropocentrism", but is also laden with social values, such as the economic measurement of well-being.
2 The Molitor report proposals are directly quoted in the Commission's commentary.
3 This idea was examined more thoroughly in the upcoming dissertation of Risto-Matti Matero (2023) currently in review.
4 Meaning here primarily Western liberal democracies.

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