

Why environmental politics is at an impasse

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Daniel Hausknost (Institute of Social Ecology) has analysed the structural constraints contributing to the deadlock in environmental politics.

The current challenges posed by [climate change](#) and dwindling fossil fuel sources call for immediate action, if researchers are to be believed. However, the real situation does not adequately reflect the gravity of the problem. "So far it seems that instead of having achieved the required 'absolute de-coupling' of [environmental impact](#) from economic activity, what has in fact 'de-coupled' in past years is the scale of the problem from our means to solve it", Daniel Hausknost (Institute of Social Ecology) recently wrote in an article. The established models of environmental politics appear to fail in the face of the need to implement rapid and decisive transformation.

In order to analyse the deadlock, Hausknost approached the topic on an abstract level. In his view, 'decision', 'choice' and 'solution' are modes of agency or 'operators' that are logically and functionally distinct, and that impact reality in different ways. The political scientist and philosopher Hausknost has conducted a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms of action of these three operators and concludes that liberal democratic systems tend to act in a way that results in half-hearted restructuring ('choice', 'solution'). According to Hausknost, "the potential for transformation lies above all in the 'decision' factor". "It is highest here, because decisions have the power to eliminate other options." 'Choice' on the other hand, which refers to individual market behaviour, does not result in sufficiently decisive restructuring, as it does not eliminate any

options but leads to further differentiation and niche markets. The 'solution' factor has weak transformative power as it tends to reproduce a rationality, which is, in fact, responsible for the configuration of the problems that need to be addressed.

Hausknost explains further: "For politics, decisions represent the most uncomfortable factor. It is difficult to justify them to the public, as they force one to choose a position among diverse political rationalities or worldviews. Each decision simultaneously produces losers. This result is frequently feared in the political arena." Solutions, however, are easy to communicate, as they relate to problems that appear to have an objective definition and that occur within the dominant 'rational' context. Choice, finally, is convenient for politicians as it disperses agency and responsibility to myriad individuals whose aggregate behaviour is then referred to as 'the market'. Furthermore, democratic governments are systematically geared towards granting the system's short-term stability greater priority than its long-term existence. Risky decisions are therefore shunned.

"It is now one of our most vital tasks to develop new democratic instruments and mechanisms of political decision-making", Hausknost emphasises. Great importance might be attached to direct democratic instruments in combination with other forms of 'radical' participation, as these are well suited to overriding the practical constraints of the representative system. As Hausknost explains: "Non-decisions have the same effect as decisions, in that they eliminate the options we did not select." As climate change advances, the number of options diminishes. Thus, it is necessary to act quickly.

More information: "Decision, choice, solution: 'agentic deadlock' in environmental politics." *Environmental Politics*, 23:3, 357-375.
[dx.doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2013.874138](https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2013.874138)

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