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## SHAPING PROVISIONING SYSTEMS FOR AN ECO-SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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## ABSTRACT

This paper introduces ‘provisioning’ as a promising concept for those looking for alternatives to mainstream economics. As an object of study, provisioning systems constitute intermediaries between biophysical resource use and human wellbeing. As a concept to study, it is conducive to investigating actually existing economic formations, embedded in a biophysical reality. In this regard, two relevant approaches will be discussed: the ‘Social Provisioning Perspective’ and ‘System of Provision approach’. Based on that, we turn to the challenge of transforming provisioning systems for an eco-social transformation and argue that plausible accounts of transformative action are characterised by three aspects: desirability, effectiveness, and feasibility. After introducing each of these elements, we explore contemporary spaces of manoeuvre for desirable, effective, and feasible eco-social action.

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# Shaping Provisioning Systems for an Eco-Social Transformation

Richard Bärnthaler<sup>1</sup>, Margaret Haderer<sup>2</sup>, Andreas Novy<sup>3</sup>, Colleen Schneider<sup>4</sup>

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTUALIZING PROVISIONING

As currently no country meets citizens' needs at a sustainable level of resource use (Vogel et al. 2021, O'Neill et al. 2018), it is urgent to explore the conditions for a good life for all within planetary boundaries (e.g. Millward-Hopkins et al. 2020, Raworth 2018, Brand-Correa & Steinberger 2017, LiLi project). While needs, e.g. being healthy, are finite, satiable, and universal, strategies for satisfying them, e.g. health and care services, are diverse across place and time (Doyal & Gough 1991). These context-specific need satisfiers – which provide goods, services, and infrastructures – are assembled in provisioning systems, e.g. the healthcare or food system; understanding them is crucial as it is those need satisfiers, that is, the ways needs are satisfied, that are open for intervention in transformation processes.

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Provisioning has become a key concept for those looking for alternatives to mainstream economics, offering an integrative perspective on the economy, society, and nature (Jo & Todorova 2017). Mainstream economics, strongly influenced by neoclassical economics, has scarcity as its nodal point and focuses on investigating insatiable wants that markets satisfy efficiently. Until today, even environmental and climate problems are predominantly framed as market failures, while solutions are being justified by its monetised co-benefits. In contrast, theories of provisioning are concerned with human flourishing and prioritise the context-sensible satisfaction of limited human needs over satisfying unlimited wants if those two endeavours conflict or if resources are scarce (Gough 2017). While being marginalised for decades, provisioning discourses have been widely adopted during the pandemic by prioritising ‘essential’ workers and ‘critical’ sectors, imposing a hierarchy on economic activities during lockdowns.

As an object of study, provisioning systems constitute intermediaries between biophysical resource use and human wellbeing (O’Neill et al. 2018; see illustration below). Fanning et al. (2020, p. 3) define these systems as “a set of related elements that work together in the transformation of resources to satisfy a foreseen human need”. This definition, however, assumes that human needs guide contemporary decision making in provisioning systems. But more often than not, the opposite is true: unlimited and insatiable consumer preferences rather than limited and satiable human needs dominate concrete provisioning processes. While wants, conceptualised as preferences in neoclassical economics, are subjective – e.g. the choice between Coke and Pepsi –, needs are objective, such as the need for shelter or food, even if these needs are always satisfied in context-specific ways. In a world of limited resources, the current domination of subjective preferences over objective needs constitutes a major cause of planetary overshoot and social-ecological crises (Gough 2017). In contrast to Fanning et al., we therefore suggest a less normative definition to *describe* provisioning systems. As such, they can be defined as a set of related elements (e.g. ecological, technological, institutional, social) that work together in the transformation of resources to produce economic outputs and social outcomes.

In line with this definition, provisioning systems are constituted by both physical and social elements.<sup>5</sup> Physical elements include infrastructures and technologies; social and cultural aspects include norms, economic institutions such as market logics, and socio-political institutions such as the role of the state (Brand-Correa & Steinberger 2017, p. 49). In a similar way, Schaffartzik et al. (2021, p. 1405) describe

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<sup>5</sup> See also the concept of “infrastructural configurations, i.e. context-dependent material infrastructures and their multi-scalar political-economic regulations” (Bärnthaler et al. 2020, 1).

provisioning systems as featuring integrated socio-metabolic and political-economic dimensions: “In socio-metabolic terms, material stocks – buildings, infrastructures, and machines, for example – are key components of provisioning systems and transform flows of energy and materials into goods and services. In political-economic terms, provisioning systems are formed by actors, institutions, and capital” (see also Plank et al. 2021). Provisioning systems are thus neither apolitical nor merely technical.

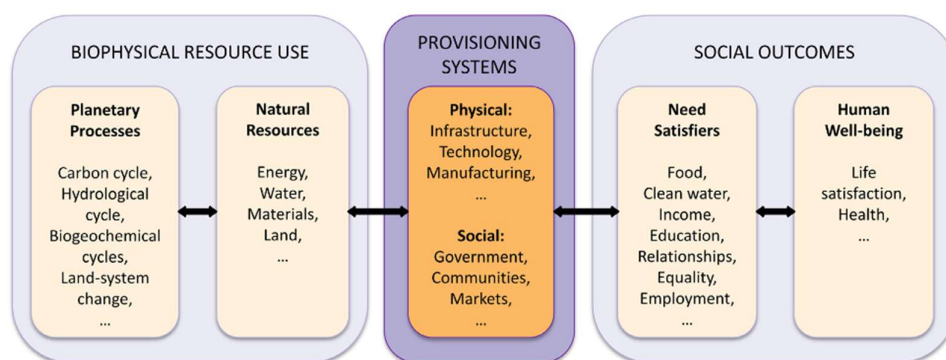


Figure 1. Analytic framework showing the links between planetary boundary processes and human well-being. Provisioning systems are seen to mediate the relationships between biophysical resource use and social outcomes. Source: Adapted from O'Neill et al. (2018).

There exists a range of different perspectives that apply the concept of provisioning and/or analyse provisioning systems as an object of study. Two relevant approaches that we will outline here are the **Social Provisioning Perspective (SPP)** and a **System of Provision approach (SoP)**. Both are rooted in political economy and heterodox-economic traditions, thus rejecting notions of preference neutrality as well as the ideas “that social outcomes are caused by the sum of individual actions and that economies tend towards equilibrium” (Fanning et al. 2020, p. 5). Further, both share a commitment to political economy, a substantivist approach to economic analysis, an understanding of socio-economic systems as embedded in a biophysical reality, and the normative goal to ensure wellbeing without destroying the livelihoods of others and future generations. SPP tends to be more abstract in scope, offering a particular way of thinking of contemporary economies and thereby expanding our view on the economy by turning to what’s actually there – a mixed economy. SoP, on the other hand, focuses on concrete phenomena, identifying a particular ‘thing’ (e.g. sector, commodity/service), exploring its unique political economy, and potentially identifying context-specific leverage points for transformation.

Among others, **SPP** has its roots in institutional economics (Gruchy 1987), ecological economics (Boulding 1986; see also Spash 2020), and feminist economics (Nelson 1993). It redefines economics as the science of social provisioning – “the study of how the provisioning of goods and services in a society is structured in accordance with existing social relations” (Fanning et al. 2020, p. 4), and/or as the investigation of societies’ “organisation of livelihood” (Polanyi 1977). As such, it differs from formalist (neoclassical) approaches to economic analysis that focus on optimising the allocation of scarce resources and reduce the economy to monetary relations in a market economy. Instead, SPP builds upon a substantivist approach, engaging with *actually existing* economic formations and their heterogeneous provisioning combinations, including market exchange, redistribution, reciprocity, and householding (Polanyi 2001). These (often hybrid) combinations “establish the basis for the organization of (re)productive and (re)distributive capacities in different societies, which reflect and normalize patterns of belief and behavior, and which are stabilized through processes of institutionalization. In tandem (and really only in tandem), they govern the ways in which real economies work, as combinatory sites of multiple rationalities, interests, and values, rather than as spaces governed by singular and invariant economic laws” (Peck 2013, p. 1555). This also reflects “Polanyi’s plenary claim that all economies are ‘more than capitalist’ economies” (ibid., p. 1556). This redefinition no longer places the study of exchange at the core of economics, nor does it give equal priority to all forms of provisioning. As Nelson (1993, p. 32) argues:

Issues of the organization of production, of power and poverty, of unemployment and economic duress, of health care and education – in short, the “real economic problems” ... – become the *raison d’être* of the economics profession, not the further elaboration of a particular axiomatic theory of human behavior.

From this broad perspective, the provisioning of goods and services is a collectively organised social and political process rather than one of isolated rational decision-making and optimisation. SPP thus aims at providing a “deeper understanding of how provisioning of goods and services of a society is organized in accordance with existing values and social structures – including, but not limited to, class, gender, culture, power, politics, and environment” (Jo 2011, p. 1095).

In this vein, SPP also rejects the orthodox economic understanding of “market failure due to non-market ‘externalities’ because economic activity is always embedded within and dependent upon, a non-market social and ecological context” (Fanning et al. 2020, p. 5). This links to feminist debates on social provisioning (e.g. Nelson 1993, Power 2004), which highlight those non-monetary, non-market,

unpriced, and unpaid aspects of life that are essential to making the economic system work in the first place (see also Dengler & Strunk 2022; Jochimsen & Knobloch 1997), thereby broadening the focus of provisioning to include what is non-monetised. Corinna Dengler and Christina Plank (forthcoming) further argue that a feminist economics approach brings the additional element of an intersectional analysis (e.g. considering racism, gender, etc.) to the framework of provisioning systems that is otherwise lacking.

The **SoP** approach, developed by Ben Fine and colleagues from the 1990s onward (e.g. Fine 1994, Bayliss and Fine 2020), shares SPP's aspiration to redefine economics via a substantivist approach and to understand contemporary provisioning processes as organised by existing social relations and capitalist dynamics. More than SPP, however, it has been developed as an approach to aid *concrete* research; to explore "how each commodity or service has its own unique political economy that includes everything from resource extraction and distribution to the cultural meanings of consumption" (Fanning et al. 2020, p. 4). Focusing on specific aspects of everyday life, such as food, water, schools, shelter, and health services, SoP aims to provide answers to "who has what, how and why" (Bayliss & Fine 2020, p. v). As attention is paid to the relations between consumption and production, as well as to the ways in which provisioning is historically contingent (Mattioli et al. 2020, p. 3), SoP is particularly useful to understand "how resource use is impacted by a very specific system of provision in each place and time" (Fanning et al. 2020, p. 5).

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## 2. TRANSFORMING PROVISIONING SYSTEMS

Today, various transformations are taking place, from geopolitics to climate change and biodiversity loss. They occur simultaneously, but not always uniformly. In line with Polanyi (2001), we understand transformations as evolutionary and continuous but also disruptive processes that have the potential to be shaped (Novy 2022). The latest IPCC report highlights that "solutions" must entail "*effective, feasible, and just* means of reducing climate risk, increasing resilience, and pursuing other climate-related societal goals" (IPCC 2022 AR6 WGII, p. 48). Inspired by these insights, we propose that *plausible* accounts of transformative action, of 'solutions', are characterised by the following three aspects. First, they are clear about the goal of transformation, i.e. about **desired** provisioning processes and outcomes. Second, they identify **effective** actions, that is, actions that tackle causes, not symptoms, of contemporary problems. Finally, they take into account specific social and political conjunctures, that is, windows of opportunity for and barriers to given actions in given contexts, to identify **feasible** strategies. In other words: "*Desirability* refers to collectively self-defined goals; be it



in a neighbourhood or by the international community. *Effectiveness* implies that certain actions or means have the potential to achieve these desirable goals, while simultaneously contributing to more sustainable society-nature relations. *Feasibility*, finally, means that these potentials can be actualised here and now, in a concrete context and conjuncture, given social and political realities” (Bärnthaler forthcoming).

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## 2.1. DESIRABILITY

We frame the goal of what is desired through transformation as a *good life for all within planetary boundaries* (see also O’Neill et al. 2018). This ambitious objective implies two prerequisites: the acceptance of planetary boundaries and the acceptance of universal equality as a norm. The pursuit of a good life for all within planetary boundaries is largely uncontested in environmental discourses that conceive of themselves as indebted to critical social theory. It is also rhetorically shared by all nations committed to both the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Planetary boundaries are, of course, not to be mistaken as ‘hard facts’ to be lived by, but as boundaries that are part of complex and interconnected systems, informed by scientific knowledge *and* shaped by political negotiations (Brand et al. 2021; Rockström et al. 2009; Steffen & Morgan 2021). As research linking environmental degradation, notably greenhouse-gas emissions, to economic growth indicates that “green growth” is not feasible at the speed or scale necessary to meet existing climate and environmental commitments, a shift towards post-growth<sup>6</sup> economies and societies is often considered a necessary goal of eco-social transformation (Haberl et al. 2020; Hickel & Kallis 2020; Parrique et al. 2019).

Despite this normative position on what is desirable, disagreements with and ignorance towards the normative goal of a good life for all within planetary boundaries exist in politics and everyday life. These may stem from the prioritisation of short-term or competing goals, notably from resistance to or fear of a transition away from a growth economy and the implications for a given status quo among broad sections of the population (Martínez-Alier et al. 2010; Schmelzer 2022; Lessenich 2010). It may also stem from an insistence on sustaining one's own way of life at all costs, even outrightly rejecting the ideal of equality (be it with respect to class, gender, race, ethnicity or nations) (Biehl & Staudenmaier 2011; Moore & Roberts 2022).

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<sup>6</sup> This implies a downscaling of *aggregate* production and consumption, while certain sectors, e.g. renewable energy and care, may grow.

We naturalise neither the unsustainable status quo nor the barriers to a shift towards materially reductive economies and societies. However, it is essential to understand the gap between what should be and what is, and to engage with the status quo and resultant barriers to change. It strikes us as important for scientific analyses to engage not only with the normative ideal of a good life for all within planetary boundaries, and with those who are already committed to this outlook, but also with perspectives that are critical of a transition to such materially reductive economies or a good life for all within planetary boundaries. This is indispensable for plausible accounts of transformative action as defined above.

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## 2.2. EFFECTIVENESS

As we aim to shape transformations, research must identify leverage points in provisioning systems that effectively contribute to the desired transformation. That means *inter alia* that certain action actually reduce emissions and resource use, avoid rebound effects, and provide appropriate need satisfiers for all. Neither improvements in energy efficiency by technological innovation nor policies that nudge individual behaviour with market instruments will suffice to stay within planetary boundaries (Haberl et al. 2020; Shove 2018). A crucial component of an effective eco-social transformation that enables living well within limits is sufficiency – a *societal* commitment to ‘having enough’ (Frankfurt 1987). Sufficiency is demarcated by minimum and maximum standards that allow all people to satisfy their needs to pursue a good life. Realising sufficiency hinges on ending unsustainable practices, including ecologically and socially harmful provisioning processes. It implies the setting of *limits* with a view to materially intensive forms of life oriented toward endless growth.

Limits, some argue, are an integral feature of *any* society – hence limit-setting to make possible a good life for all within planetary boundaries is not outlandish (Di Giulio & Fuchs 2014). A current example can be found in the housing sector, where primary residences (a kind of "minimum") are often legally treated differently than secondary residences (a kind of "luxury"). And during the drought emergency in Italy in the summer of 2022, minima and maxima were implemented: among others, private car washing and filling private swimming pools were prohibited to ensure water use for the most necessary services. Others, by contrast, are less optimistic and cast doubt on the very capability of modern societies for more systematic forms of material self-limitation (Blühdorn 2022) given their history of material expansion (McNeill 2001). Reflecting on current answers to the energy crisis, one focus has been notably absent: total energy reduction. An example is the non-implementation of speed limits as a simple and effective measure. Shifting energy sources towards renewables as well as further

improving energy efficiency continues to be prioritised over avoiding emissions, although – as mentioned above – improvements in energy efficiency and the switch to lower-carbon services in various sectors have been largely offset by increased consumption and production (Lamb et al. 2021). This impedes sufficiency-oriented measures and, relatedly, reductions in total energy use, which are moved to the backdrop given that ‘talking limits’ is readily framed as an unacceptable infringement on individual preferences and liberties.

In any case, research on potentially *effective* transformations cannot do without research on *feasible* transformations, which necessitates close attention to social context and specific conjunctures. Leverage points for transformations are particularly plausible if they manage to closely link research on desirable and effective transformations to research on feasible transformations.

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### 2.3. FEASIBILITY

Feasible transformations actualise the potentials of a specific historical moment, i.e. they operate under specific structural conditions and in specific conjunctures. Comprehending the very nature of and being able to capitalise on these conjunctures is key to transformation. They can be defined as “a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape” (Hall & Massey 2010, p. 37–46). It is a “moment of condensation: an accumulation of tendencies, forces, antagonisms and contradictions” that represents a period of both uncertainty and possibility (Clarke 2010, p. 341). Crises can thus be understood as ‘critical conjunctures’ (Blühdorn 2022; Novy et al. 2022) that “hold the greatest potential for a systemic reconfiguration” (Eckersley 2021, p. 254).

Two exemplary features (among many others), shape our current political-economic conjuncture. First, decades of hyper-financialised capitalism resulted in the dominance of finance capital and transnational corporations. It has led to the emergence of “appropriating systems” as specific parasitic elements in provisioning systems based on rent extraction, inhibiting the satisfaction of human needs (Fanning et al. 2020, p. 9). “Value takers” exploit “value makers” (Mazzucato 2018), getting “revenues for having rather than for doing” (Collins 2022, p. 97), often by exploring different forms of monopolies. By extracting rather than creating value, these appropriating systems are at the heart of what David Harvey (2017, p. 75) refers to as “the cutting edge of accumulation by dispossession in recent times”. Second, recent crises – from the Covid-19 pandemic to the Russo-Ukrainian war – have generated new insecurities and uncertainties across Europe and beyond. This political-economic conjuncture occurs

alongside accelerating ecological crises. Right-wing populist movements, in particular, have fed on these uncertainties to mobilise against effective climate action, essentially advocating for a good life for some at the expense of others (Forchtner 2020; Krange et al. 2021; Moore & Roberts 2022).

Hence, in the current conjuncture “climate-only” policies – i.e. potentially effective climate actions that fail to explicitly address demands for social security – are doomed to fail. What complicates the matter further is that sufficiency strategies tend to be unpopular. Some oppose them as unacceptable interference with individual freedom, others condemn them as a threat to social progress to which material expansion, e.g. fossil-fuelled economic growth and the colonisation of nature, were key (McNeill 2001; Mitchell 2011). Put differently, while a sufficiency-guided, post-growth society may be regarded as ‘*the way to go*’ in light of social-ecological crises by some, including us, realising such a society may mean breaking with modernity as we (especially in the Global North) have come to know it. Such a break with or transformation of what has become taken-for-granted is highly likely to and already *does* trigger fierce resistance, societal cleavages, and conflicts; the Yellow Vest protests are a case in point. The current energy crisis and the outperforming of calls for caps on prices vis-à-vis calls for caps on use is another emblematic example. In light of this, plausible research on transformation needs to focus not only on effectiveness, but also on feasibility.

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### 3. CONTEMPORARY SPACES OF MANOEUVRE FOR DESIRABLE, EFFECTIVE, AND FEASIBLE ACTION

In this section, we explore spaces of manoeuvre for desirable, effective, and feasible action reflecting on three topics that we consider crucial for an eco-social transformation *in the current conjuncture*. These reflections are inspired by a series of three webinars on “[Shaping Provisioning Systems for Social-Ecological Transformation](#)”, hosted by the International Karl Polanyi Society (IKPS) in 2022. First, based on webinar 1 “Synergies between ecological and social provisioning outcomes”,<sup>7</sup> we argue that linking effectiveness, notably sufficiency, with feasibility requires eco-social policies. Second, based on webinar 2 “Democratising provision systems for an eco-social transformation”,<sup>8</sup> we contend that – in light of the dwindling trust in democracy and state institutions and the open embrace of more authoritarian forms of organising political life (Lütjen 2022; Blühdorn 2022; Swyngedouw 2022) – our definition of desirability hinges on defending and developing liberal democracy. Third, based on webinar 3 “Intervention strategies for an eco-social transformation in diverse provisioning systems”,<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Speakers: Katharina Bohnenberger, Halliki Kreinin, Luca Calafati; Facilitation: Colleen Schneider

<sup>8</sup> Speakers: Margaret Haderer, Matthew Noah Smith, Viviana Asara; Facilitation: Richard Bärnthaler

<sup>9</sup> Speakers: Corinna Dengler, Christina Plank, Julia Froud; Facilitation: Andreas Novy

we emphasise the multi-level character of provisioning systems and with it the need to appropriate multiple policy spaces.

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### 3.1. FROM CLIMATE-ONLY TO ECO-SOCIAL POLICIES IN TIMES OF INSECURITY

Above we have argued that in the current conjuncture – a conjuncture marked by heightened insecurities, from a pandemic to the current cost of living crisis – ‘climate-only’-strategies no longer work (see also Bärnthaler forthcoming). Framing the climate crisis as a crisis of provisioning enables linking concerns for trespassing biophysical limits to concerns for social outcomes. In terms of eco-social transformation, exploring these connections strengthens the case for ‘eco-social policies’, which promote ecologically sound changes (e.g. energy reduction or transition policies) *conjointly* with the promotion of social welfare (Hirvilammi & Helne 2014). Eco-social policies have the potential to approach strategies aimed at living within planetary boundaries and those aimed at achieving human flourishing synergistically. Linking social and ecological perspectives on current crises helps to tackle practical problems related to feasibility outlined above. It can bring benefits for diverse socioeconomic groups that may otherwise not share common cause on climate or environmental issues alone. This builds on the idea of synergies between various needs satisfiers (Max-Neef et al. 1991) and has the potential to overcome the “environmental paradox” of progressive politics (Bailey 2015, p. 793) whereby (social) emancipation is closely linked to the (destructive) colonization of nature (see also Charbonnier 2021). Speakers in webinar 1 focused on eco-social synergies to be actively fostered, and on the importance of aligning otherwise disparate groups, such as climate action-based social movements and trade unions.

Katharina Bohnenberger (see also Bohnenberger 2020, 2022), for instance, argued that a transformative strategy on the eco-social policy front would have to include strengthening *Universal Basic Services* (UBS), distributing *vouchers*, implementing *income transfers*, and offering an *eco-social job guarantee*. Based on that, speakers of webinar 1 highlighted several examples that were enacted in response to the recent energy crisis driven by the Russo-Ukrainian War – an unexpected (and tragic) ‘event’ that opened up rooms for manoeuvre. These examples include direct stimulus payments such as the subsidised provision of electricity in Austria, and subsidies to public transit user costs such as the nine-euro transit ticket in Germany.<sup>10</sup> Having a strong welfare state in place is key to counteracting

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<sup>10</sup> With a view to the introduction of reduced public transit costs in Germany, one socio-spatial lesson in particular is to be learned for future eco-social policies: reducing public transit costs may be a transformative policy in urban areas already well connected by public-transit networks, but other measures are likely required in rural areas with dispersed settlement structures and underdeveloped mobility infrastructures.

social inequalities with a view to the affectedness by climate change (Bailey 2015). In addition, relative social equality is known to have a positive effect on climate change mitigation (Islam & Winkel 2017). In this sense, the welfare state is key to mediating the relationship between the environmental and the social (Bailey 2015; Gough 2017; Koch 2022). Extending UBS would mean transforming the normative claim to a good life for all into a legal claim that would be followed by material claims. Yet, from an eco-social perspective, turning the idea of UBS into a *universal* right would necessitate independence from resource-intensive and climate unfriendly economic growth – the *current* financial basis of welfare systems. As pointed out by Bohnenberger, the role of the welfare state is a contradictory one. It is both a key institution in sustainability transitions, with the capacity to implement eco-social policies, and a key driver of unsustainability, due to its growth dependence (see also Aglietta 1979). Max Koch (2022, p. 455) puts the challenge as follows:

a move from existing towards sustainable welfare states would, irrespective of institutional point of departure and welfare regime affiliation, require a fundamental transformation from the expansionary logic that characterised Western welfare provision since the post-war period to one that seriously considers environmental and social limits (here considered as ‘safe operating space’).

Hitherto existing, growth-dependent social welfare systems are *exclusive* systems as there are not enough material stocks (and sinks) to reproduce them at a global scale. In other words, UBS as currently provided are neither truly universal nor universalisable (Bailey 2015). Welfare systems that provide UBS *independent* of economic growth do not yet exist, they still have to be invented (Corlet-Walker et al. 2021).

What would such an invention entail? Among others, a welfare system in a non-growing economy would require the introduction of upper limits with a view to how needs are satisfied, such as limits to housing size, if the provision of housing is a part of UBS (Cohen 2021). It would also imply more radical forms of redistribution – of income, wealth, and access to infrastructures – and a proactive and coordinated fiscal as well as monetary policy, alongside progressive eco-social taxes. While some eco-social taxes have been introduced as of late (e.g. the SUV tax in Germany), the introduction of taxes or tax-increases (even if only for high emitters) and discussions about ‘luxury goods’ are readily and often successfully framed as unacceptable politicisation of and interference with (seemingly) private choices and liberties (Perkins 2017; Moore & Roberts 2022) – be it of individuals, households or businesses. This is a challenge that proponents of eco-social policies have to confront.

### 3.2. REVISITING AND REDEFINING DEMOCRACY IN INCREASINGLY ILLIBERAL TIMES

In webinar 2, both Margaret Haderer and Matthew Noah Smith problematise the hope, widespread amongst environmental activists and strands of academic research (such as the degrowth strand), that democratisation in the form of an empowerment of civil society and ‘the people’ (often framed as opposition to the state) is a key feature of eco-social transformation. In line with Humphrey (2004), they argue that there is no *non-contingent* link between democratisation understood as the rule of the people and an eco-social transformation in the name of a good life for all within planetary boundaries, not least because democratisation can always be both inclusive (and respectful of equality) and exclusive (and ignorant of equality). Right-wing populist takes on democracy are an example of the latter; takes according to which the ‘rule of the people’ is – in contrast to liberal democratic takes – not forcibly reined in by a constitutional commitment to universal human equality. That appeals to the rule of the people may not only be socially exclusive, but also adversarial to climate mitigation was illustrated by Smith. He reflected on the concrete case of a democratically legitimised *rejection* of an eco-social transformation of local energy systems in the US and thereby underlined that democracy and eco-social goals can turn out to be antithetical. Against this backdrop, he raises the question of whether staying within ecological limits may in some cases actually necessitate and even justify the remaking or even unhinging of democratic procedures, especially if the latter serve primarily the preservation of individual (negative) freedoms as is often the case in *liberal* democracies.

Critical of unhinging democratic procedures, Haderer (forthcoming) makes the case for revamping democratic procedures not only by empowering the people via grassroots democracy, but by also revisiting and re-defining “governing *also* by government”. Exploring ways to do so is particularly warranted because the current conjuncture has been shaped by a *de facto* ‘return of the state’ (e.g. in light of the Covid-crisis), a return that begs the question of which state we do want to return in light of the task of transforming systems of provision into more sustainable ones.

One possible resource to tap for answering this question are the writings by Hans Kelsen (1925) who underlined that, in contrast to framings of liberal democracy as being infused by negative liberty only, also liberal democracy is equipped with the possibility to navigate the field of tension between freedom and equality, rights and duties. These skills of navigation are indispensable to realising a good life for all within planetary boundaries. Kelsen’s specific take on democracy is based on the ancient idea of positive freedom as an opportunity to live in and shape a society together. In his vision of democracy, including liberal democracy, freedom is *not* reduced to negative freedom and to the absence of coercion, as is the case in current liberal democracies. In contrast, from his perspective,

binding rules that apply to everyone are needed to enable a form of coexistence in which freedom is not the privilege of a few but the right of many (see also Polanyi 2001, p. 262ff). This is a precondition for the acceptance of universal equality as a norm and, thus, for desirability as defined in section 2.1. Democracy thus understood features an incessant and unavoidable tension between the urges of different groups and individuals to enforce their often conflicting partial interests and to restrict them through necessary decisions that are binding for everyone. Sovereignty and autonomy in determining one's own life can come into conflict with the sovereign right of democratic states to set rules for living together.

Democracies from a Kelsian perspective, therefore, combine elements of political liberalism and republicanism. In political liberalism, the value of individual (negative) freedom takes centre stage, e.g. in the form of fundamental rights, which protect the individual from the tyranny of majorities. In contrast, republicanism recalls the importance of the common good for the – always territorially delimited – polity, which legitimises the restriction of unlimited individual freedoms. Over the past few decades, however, paralleled by the rise of a form of hyper-individualism, the take on individual rights has expanded far beyond what is commonly conceived of as civic-rights perspective, thereby increasingly subordinating republican values. This has made it more difficult to limit individual freedom in the interest of the common good. In view of the massive collective challenges ahead, there is a need for a ‘pendulum-swing’ back to a stronger acknowledgment of republican principles, conceptualising people less as independent individuals and more as interdependent beings, as beings embedded in a polity and in nature (see e.g. Nussbaum 2007, Sandel 2020).

In addition, Kelson underlined that democracy always also entails a form of domination (which proponents of grassroots democracy tend seek to undo), albeit one less repressive than others (see also Bärnthaler et al. 2021). Unrestrained individual freedom may be regarded as incompatible with liberal democracies, at least with liberal democracies as envisaged by Kelson and with those based on “liberal solidarity” (Hodgson 2021). What such democracies offer is to enable the greatest possible social freedom, i.e. to open up opportunities for individuals to shape the framework conditions of their lives together with others. In this vein, the latest APCC Special Report on “Structures for Climate-Friendly Living” (2023) highlights that shaping the framework conditions *within* which individual behaviour takes place is crucial for effective action; it is significantly more important than individual behavioural changes. Hence, reconfiguring the very meaning of liberal democracy (as opposed to giving up on it as those who are, for good reasons, highly critical of the transformative thrust of the liberal state) may indeed be key to effective measures.



One important reconfiguration may be effort to strengthen the links between representative and deliberative democratic institutions. The former is the *most universal* form of top-down coercion, i.e. of political rule-setting by legitimised representatives; the latter provides *specific* platforms for bottom-up consensus building and for processes of meaning-making (Bärnthaler forthcoming). Recent experiences with deliberative experiments, such as the Austrian *Klimarat* and the French *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat*, highlight the potential of such formats to contribute to a democratically legitimised compromise on quite radical eco-social policies. Whereas there is certainly no guarantee that all deliberative democratic processes will yield such desirable outcomes, recent experiences show their potential to do so, particularly *if* they are organised along the lines of a “dual strategy” (Gough 2017), combining input to consensual decision-making by experts and citizens, expert knowledge with experiential knowledge. Although certainly no silver bullet, such processes can link the advantages of representative with those of deliberative democratic institutions as well as scientific authority with democratic authority (Novy et al. forthcoming). The role of public decision-makers then is to implement civil society proposals, developed in exchange with experts, *in a politically mediated form*. Two – quite substantial – prerequisites for such a reconfiguration must, however, be recognised: “the confrontation of economic elites and vested interests in representative and deliberative democratic institutions; the rebuilding of administrative state capacities (on multiple levels) to plan, organise, and execute decisions, which has been undermined by decades of neoliberalism” (Bärnthaler forthcoming).

Finally, we deem it important to note that in pluralist societies, composed of members with diverging values and interests, a rational consensus on concrete issues is rare and conflict is to be expected (and to be dealt with). The illusion of aspiring a society “in which power and compulsion are absent” (Polanyi, 2001, p. 266) is widespread, although effective transformative measures require rules that affect individual choices. Resultant conflicts can be solved peacefully only via compromise. Although a key insight of Kelsen (1925) and a pillar of all liberal democracies, such compromise is currently all too often perceived as “dirty” and a “betrayal” of values. This leads to illusionary assumptions that democracy has to focus on like-minded communities willing to find consensus. This, however, impedes strategic agency to build cross-class and cross-milieu alliances for feasible transformative measures.

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### 3.3. APPROPRIATING POLICY SPACES ON MULTIPLE LEVELS TO TRANSFORM PROVISIONING SYSTEMS

Both Julie Froud (in webinar 3) and Luca Calafati (in webinar 1) discussed their work on the Welsh food provisioning system, addressing what has shaped the existing system and efforts to make it both more



socially equitable and environmentally sustainable, with a focus on the types of politics and policies capable of producing progressive interventions in the system. Here, in line with SoP (see section 1), the concrete example of a specific provisioning system serves to highlight the various barriers to enacting eco-social policies. They argue that there exists at the national level a gap between attractive "front office" policies (e.g. political promises, courageous transition plans) and the "back office" reality of implementing what those policies promise.

For example, Wales has a distinctive geography that delimits its agricultural capacity, with policy responsibility falling at a combination of the national and supranational level (being a part of both the UK and European systems of food processing and distribution). This complexity of multi-level governance can be seen as a barrier in transforming provisioning systems, notably with limited leverage at the local scale. However, as transformative actions must work with what's there, the challenge is to pragmatically harness policy spaces at all levels to actualise what's possible. In this context, the discussants addressed the importance of strategic alliances for change, as the state is no homogenous entity, but comprised of, shaped by, and pulled upon by multiple, often conflicting, forces.

The discussion closely links to the previous International Karl Polanyi Society webinar series that took place in 2021 and focused on multi-level governance and a critique of the 'globalisation versus deglobalisation' framing (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). Already long before discourses on the climate crisis, there have been fierce debates about the respective effectiveness of bottom-up and top-down policies (e.g. Stöhr & Taylor 1981). Multi-level governance investigates the interplay of different policy levels, ranging from local to regional, national and EU (Hooze & Marks 2010; Stephenson 2013). Building on the learnings from the Polanyi-webinar series in 2021, Eder and Novy (2021, p. 7) noted that "there is no moral primacy of any spatial level, as every spatial level has its advantages and disadvantages", proposing instead a "multi-level strategy based on a multi-scalar analysis." The resultant key questions concerning the emphasis on different levels is, "In how far do they serve the objective to empower certain economic zones and to regulate, convert and shrink others?" (ibid, p. 16). Today, there is indeed broad agreement in favour of as-well-as-strategies with respect to multi-level governance. This is also due to the observation that, so far, neither international bodies like the IPCC or supranational ones like the EU, nor bottom-up prefigurative movements like the Occupy-movement have converted unsustainable production, consumption, and distribution patterns (Mathai et al. 2021). Shaping eco-social policies needs actions at different levels, aware of their distinct strengths and weaknesses (Eder & Novy 2021; Jessop 2004).

Discussants in the 2022 series picked up and built upon these themes as well, with a focus on intervention points for reshaping provisioning systems. At the local level, policies have to avoid the localist trap, acknowledging that the local alone cannot solve the problem (Kazepov et al. 2019; Purcell & Brown 2005). That said, civil society – including grassroots initiatives and movements – *may* be central drivers for not only creating alternative systems of provisioning, but also for remaking existing state-based systems of public services (Asara & Kallis 2022) by, e.g., displacing *public-private* partnerships with *public-communitarian* partnerships. The latter aim to pressure the state to fulfil its obligations regarding public services, filling spaces that are lacking in the meantime and strengthening social cohesion. Furthermore, local industrial policy could strengthen the foundational economy as well as community wealth building that supports local basic provisioning. At the national level, diverse policies to strengthen basic provisioning are possible, from public procurement and innovation policies to monetary and fiscal policies. The EU could be decisive for eco-social policies, if it overcomes the still dominant primacy of the common market and the resultant bias towards markets solution, most recently in the gas crisis.

Transformative eco-social policies need cooperation and coordination across levels. This privileges articulating agency and linking levels. On the one hand, local actors can overcome the localist trap with bottom-linked agency. It is place-based, but networks at other scales and promotes changes at multiple levels (Moulaert 2022). On the other hand, central administration, policy makers, and politicians can avoid the top-down trap that assumes that a masterplan fits all contexts. Central planning has failed. Top-linked agency, however, uses the potential of central coordination for planning and redistribution. From the top, this type of agency can implement universal policies by centrally-induced means of regulation and planning. It can avoid, or at least minimise, dangers of centralisation by integrating multiple stakeholders in the elaboration of plans and the implementation of specific policies (Novy et al. forthcoming).

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#### 4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we discussed ‘provisioning’ as a key concept of heterodox economics. As an *object of study*, ‘provisioning systems’ constitute intermediaries between biophysical resource use and human wellbeing. We thus defined them as a set of related elements (e.g. ecological, technological, institutional, social) that work together in the transformation of resources to produce economic

outputs and social outcomes. As a *concept to study*, ‘provisioning’ enables investigating actually existing economic formations. Here, two approaches were introduced: the ‘Social Provisioning Perspective’ (SPP) and ‘System of Provision approach’ (SoP). They share key principles, e.g. a commitment to substantivist approach and the rejection of preference neutrality. However, while SPP tends to be more abstract, redefining economics as the study of societies’ “organisation of livelihood” (Polanyi 1977), SoP enables concrete and context-specific analyses, e.g. by investigating specific sectors or commodities.

Based on this conceptual groundwork, we turned to the challenge of transforming provisioning systems for an eco-social transformation, exploring contemporary spaces of manoeuvre. Here, we argued that plausible accounts of transformative action must not only appropriate policy spaces on multiple levels but must also meet three criteria: desirability (based on collectively self-defined goals), effectiveness (tackling causes, not symptoms), and feasibility (having the potential to be actualised in a specific context and conjuncture). We framed desirability as a *good life for all within planetary boundaries*, but highlighted that this goal is anything but shared by all. It is thus indispensable for plausible accounts of transformative action and related scientific analyses to engage also with those, who do not share our normative perspective. With regard to effectiveness, we argued for the need to focus on sufficiency strategies, that is, the setting of limits, notably of floors and ceilings. Today, however, ‘talking limits’ is often and readily framed as an unacceptable infringement on individual preferences, an interference with (seemingly) private choices and liberties – be it of individuals, households, or businesses. This constraint for effective action needs to be overcome, in particular by reconfiguring the very meaning of liberal democracy, as opposed to giving up on it. Finally, feasibility means harnessing critical conjunctures, whereby the emergence of new insecurities and uncertainties doom ‘climate-only’ policies to fail. In the current conjuncture, potentially effective climate actions must explicitly address demands for social security. This provides a strong case for eco-social policies.

In conclusion, we deem it useful to explicate, once more, how the research programme outlined here – a programme that seeks to understand and shape provisioning systems for an eco-social transformation – is deeply entrenched in a Polanyian tradition. First, it draws on Polanyi with a view to understanding the economy from a substantivist perspective. This is key to all heterodox provisioning approaches. Second, it draws on Polanyi’s understanding of transformations as evolutionary and continuous but also disruptive processes that have the potential to be shaped. Polanyi (2001) compares transformation to a metamorphosis, *a change in forms*, like that of a caterpillar into a butterfly: although they remain the same animal, the caterpillar and butterfly differ

fundamentally in appearance and agent capacity. A butterfly does not come into existence out of thin air; rather it is the transformed caterpillar. This resonates with the philosophy of critical realism, which emphasises that in a pre-structured world, actors reproduce and/or transform structures, but never create them *ex nihilo* (Bhaskar 1998). Since people are born and socialised into an already existing world, into existing framework conditions and provisioning systems, structure always precedes agency. Such understanding emphasises that transformative action can and does occur from *within* given institutions, if it aims at transforming rather than reproducing structures. Transformative agency thus requires an understanding of causal mechanisms: transformation means actualising *different* causal mechanisms in specific contexts rather than persistently actualising the same causal mechanisms in new ways, e.g. as ‘green’ capital accumulation or the electrification of pre-existent mobility structures (Bärnthaler and Dengler 2022). Hence, the art of transformative action entails linking the pre-existent with the fundamentally new, reform with revolution, transition with transformation, incremental with radical change. Notions such as “concrete utopias” (Bloch 1985 [1959]), “non-reformist reforms” (Gorz 1967), “revolutionary realpolitik” (Luxemburg 2006 [1899]) and “transformative realism” (Novy et al. 2022) can provide inspiration for this vital task.

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