

THINKING POLITICALLY ABOUT THE 'CLIMATE CRISIS': A PRAGMATIST INQUIRY INTO DEMOCRACY TODAY

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ABSTRACT: Crisis narratives are omnipresent in current society. The term “climate crisis” has become ubiquitous. But what exactly does the diagnosis of “climate crisis” mean? And what is a crisis, anyway? This article aims to contribute to answering these questions. Based on a pragmatist theory of meaning and action, it will develop a definition of the concept of crisis that enables us to conceptualize the political and transformative potential of social crisis diagnoses. In a first step, drawing on current discourses on the “climate crisis,” the implications of crisis as a concept are analyzed, showing that this concept can be used for both authoritarian and democratic politics. However, a definition of crisis is required to systematize these implications and to distinguish crises from related phenomena such as emergencies, breakdowns, or disasters. Therefore, in a second step, this definition is developed based on a pragmatist theory of action. It is proposed that crises are to be understood as *systemic blockades of political problem-solving processes* that have *(self-)destructive consequences* and that pose *existential problems* for the subjects involved. This definition enables the third step of the argument, demonstrating that the climate crisis can be considered a crisis of liberal democracy. Resultingly, when understood politically in accordance with pragmatism, the diagnosis of a climate crisis possesses inherent socio-ecological *and* democratic transformation potential.

Keywords: crisis, climate crisis, critique of liberalism, ecological democratization, John Dewey, Charles S. Peirce

The main topic of this special issue has the catchphrase “Climate Crisis” in its title. This may seem unremarkable as the term “climate crisis” has been omnipresent for several years now. In view of the dramatic consequences of climate change and of the enormous political, economic, and cultural challenges that this “super wicked problem” (Levin et al. 2012) poses to our societies, the drama conveyed by the term “crisis” does not appear to be exaggerated. At the same time, despite its eloquence, it remains strangely unclear what is meant by the term of crisis in general and the term of climate crisis in par-

ticular. What is it that is actually in crisis in the climate crisis? The climate? Nature? The lives of people? Or a certain social or political way of life? How can crises be distinguished from other serious problems such as disasters, emergencies, or breakdowns? Is crisis as a concept exclusively a political term of struggle or also a scholarly instrument of analysis? Do problems have to be experienced as crises in order to be crises? And who is competent and legitimized to declare a crisis? Politicians? Activists, social or natural scientists, philosophers? These questions already indicate that the diagnosis of a “climate crisis” and the meaning of the term “crisis” in general are not quite as self-explanatory as their widespread use would suggest.

The following article aims to help clarify these terms. Such a contribution seems important to me because crisis is not a neutral or ‘innocent’ term: It is part of the repertoire of the semantics of escalation that can always be used politically to impose extraordinary measures in an authoritarian way (Agamben 2013; Berlant 2007: 760–761; Roitman 2012). Even the environmental movement and current climate debates are not free of authoritarian tendencies (Honnacker 2020).¹ Accordingly, it seems problematic to me to transfer crisis as a concept, or even a specific crisis diagnosis, from social discourse into academic language without further examination or explanation. This not only introduces ambiguity and a lack of clarity into scholarly inquiry. It can also reproduce and reinforce social power effects that result from the use of the concept of crisis (Folkers/Lim 2014; Roitman 2012).² It is therefore the task of critical scholarship to recon-

¹ Though this is often also used as a false accusation to delegitimize political demands, as Honnacker (2020) emphasizes as well.

² Andreas Folkers and Il-Tschung Lim observe that within the social sciences, “crisis semantics” is often “used like diagnostic plain language—as if it were completely undisputed that what is labelled a crisis is also a crisis” (Folkers/Lim 2014: 62, transl. DK). In this context, Janet Roitman speaks of crisis as a “moment of truth” (Roitman 2012): Whoever proclaims a crisis seems to have the truth on their side and appears to have been relieved of further justification. This makes talk of crises a powerful tool. However: “Why should crisis, as a category, be so self-evident?” (Roitman 2012).

struct and critique contemporary social concepts, and “crisis” is certainly one such concept.³ However, the notion of crisis itself also represents a scholarly and philosophical category for the elucidation of social conditions. This is evidenced by an examination of the history of the term (Koselleck 2006). In ancient Greece, it was not yet different from the concept of critique and it has had a decidedly socio-diagnostic function since the end of the eighteenth century. This function is still evident today.

The objective of this article is to utilize the diagnostic and critical potential of the concept of crisis to facilitate a critique of climate policy. To this end, I will draw on the classical pragmatism of Charles S. Peirce and John Dewey. Although neither Peirce nor Dewey explicitly develop crisis as a concept, and ecological aspects play a minimal role in their thought, their philosophy of pragmatism appears particularly well-suited to addressing this task. Firstly, based on social discourse and concrete uses of the term, applying Peirce’s *Pragmatic Maxims* (1992b), it is possible to develop important dimensions of meaning and pragmatic functions of the term “climate crisis.” Secondly, the pragmatic notion of problem and action, as outlined by Dewey (1922/1988; 1938/1988; 1973), enables the systematization of those meanings and the formulation of a definition of crisis. Thirdly, building on this definition, following Dewey’s *political philosophy* (1916/2008; 1927/1989; 1935/1991; 1973), the political implications of the diagnosis of a climate crisis can be worked out and reflected upon from a democratic theory perspective. Moreover, this article employs a methodology that draws upon the tenets of Peirce’s idea of “abduction” (Peirce 1992c): According to

this understanding, concepts and theories have the status of hypotheses that must be able to prove themselves in practice. The concept of crisis is also not an isolated object of the mind; rather, it is in a dialectical relationship with social practice, from which the concept is to be developed recursively. Therefore, the following article does not begin by introducing a theory of crisis, but rather by examining the current social practices of crisis talk and action.

The article contributes to three fields of research: firstly, to the field of democratic theory and climate change, drawing on literature from green political theory (Barry 2014), particularly on literature on eco-authoritarianism (Shearman/Smith 2007; DiPaola/Jamieson 2013; Honnacker 2020) and on climate movements (Serrano-Zamora/Herzog 2020; Fladvad 2021; Celikates 2022; Kersting 2023a). Secondly, this article will provide a clarification of the concept of crisis, for which pragmatism will be brought into dialogue with the history of this concept (Koselleck 2006) and contributions from critical theory (Habermas 1976; Milstein 2015; Jaeggi 2017; 2018), among others. Thirdly and finally, this article’s claim is the development of a critical perspective on a liberalist understanding of democracy, picking up on debates over the crisis of democracy in general (Crouch 2020; Blühdorn 2019) and on critiques of liberalism in particular (Dewey 1935/1991; Heidenreich 2023).

In line with these objectives, my argument is organized as follows: First, I examine the pragmatics of the concept of crisis (1) as well as its authoritarian (2) and democratizing effects (3). I will then propose a pragmatist definition of crisis (4) and finally, on this basis, outline my thesis, according to which the climate crisis is to be understood as a crisis of liberal democracy (5). Resultingly, I show that the diagnosis of a climate crisis, if we understand it politically in accordance with pragmatism, has an inherent political potential for socio-ecological *and* democratic transformation (6).

³ “Crisis is an omnipresent sign in almost all forms of narrative today; it is mobilised as the defining category of our contemporary situation. The recent bibliography in the social sciences and popular press is vast; crisis texts are a veritable industry” (Roitman 2012). However, this omnipresence is not a new phenomenon. According to Reinhart Koselleck, “crisis” has been “a structural signature of modernity” since the end of the eighteenth century (Koselleck 2006: 372).

1. On the Pragmatics of the Concept of Crisis

In accordance with Peirce's *pragmatic maxim*, the meaning of a term consists of the effects that its object produces in practice, or—in terms of the philosophy of language—of the specific ways in which it is used. In order to determine more precisely what 'crisis' means, it is necessary to ask: "What are we doing when we say there is a crisis? What function does the concept have? What assumptions are we putting into play when we use the term crisis?" (Milstein 2015: 142). One example: In May 2019, the editors of the British newspaper *The Guardian* updated their style guides and recommended replacing the term "climate change" with "climate crisis" (or instead: "climate emergency or breakdown"). "The phrase 'climate change,'" explained editor-in-chief Katharine Viner, "sounds rather passive and gentle when what scientists are talking about is a catastrophe for humanity" (Carrington 2019).

The term "crisis"—as this example shows—has a signaling effect: It can be used to emphasize that phenomena such as climate change are extraordinary and particularly threatening. The editor-in-chief also explained the *Guardian's* decision by arguing that the change in editorial language rules was intended to communicate the urgency of the topic to readers, in line with current scientific knowledge. Apparently, the assumption brought into play here was that the term "crisis," in contrast to mere "change," evokes existential threats and indicates acute pressure to act. "To call something a 'crisis' denotes a plea for action—an urgency—which, if unheeded, would lead to something catastrophic" (Milstein 2015: 146). Talk of crises has an appellative character and is capable of mobilizing decisive action.

This pragmatic dimension of the term is also reflected in its etymology. As the conceptual historian Reinhard Koselleck explains, the term 'crisis' (Greek: *krisis*) comes from the Greek verb *krinein*, meaning "to 'separate' (part, divorce), to 'choose,' to 'judge,' to 'decide'; as a means of 'measuring oneself,' to 'quarrel,' or to 'fight'" (Koselleck

2006: 358). Originating in ancient jurisprudence and theology, the term for a long time was used primarily in the context of medicine and is still used today: The condition of an organism is considered 'critical' if it has not yet been decided whether it will survive or die, i.e., if both outcomes are still possible. "At all times the concept is applied to life-deciding alternatives meant to answer questions about what is just or unjust, what contributes to salvation or damnation, what furthers health or brings death" (Koselleck 2006: 361).

These etymological meanings are still reflected in contemporary social and political language, as is evident from the semantics of "climate crisis." Climate groups such as *Extinction Rebellion* or *Letzte Generation* (*Last Generation*) utilize the binary logic of crisis semantics—"right or wrong, salvation or damnation, life or death" (Koselleck 2006: 358)—even in the choice of their own names. In the context of the climate crisis, this is to suggest that there are only two possible outcomes: Extinction or rebellion—an alternative that is, of course, meant to imply an obvious choice. Since hardly anyone wants to become extinct, the only way to overcome the crisis is to rebel. And in the speeches of many activists and politicians, apocalyptic connotations are cropping up again and again: "So please, treat the climate crisis like the acute crisis it is and give us a future. Our lives are in your hands" (Thunberg 2018). The dramatizing effects of crisis semantics are perhaps nowhere more visible than in the angry face of Greta Thunberg, whose "I want you to panic!"⁴ makes it quite explicit that crises must not only be recognized but also *felt* in order to develop a motivating force for action (Slaby 2023).

2. "Crisis" and Authoritarian Sentiments

Against this backdrop, it is understandable why crisis as a concept is so popular, especially in times of social up-

⁴ The quote is from a speech that Greta Thunberg gave at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 25 January 2019.

heaval and uncertainty, and why climate change is also being 'framed'—or rather 'reframed'⁵—as a crisis. At the same time, the pragmatic implications of the term indicate that it has the capacity to be employed to proclaim the "state of exception" (Agamben 2005). In general, the lack of alternatives that crisis narratives suggest seems to be in tension with the concept of the political, at least if one shares Hannah Arendt's view that the very meaning of politics is freedom (Arendt 1993) and that the invocation of necessity always runs the risk of "rid[ding] [one] self of politics" (Rancière 1999: xii).

As evidenced by various contemporary environmentalist movements and ideologies, ecological crisis narratives can also have the effects of depoliticization and of the promotion of antidemocratic and authoritarian tendencies. Some supporters of *deep ecology* claim that environmental crises can only be resolved by radically overthrowing the prevailing social and political conditions. And *anarcho-primitivists* posit that the very notion of civilization, based on cultivation and mechanization, presents an obstacle to the resolution of social and ecological issues and must therefore be overcome (Humphrey 2007: 31-39; Aaltola 2010). These approaches are controversial less in the sense that they propagate a profound socio-ecological transformation to solve the crisis, but rather in "how this demand for change is realised, and how far-reaching it is" (Honnacker 2020: 4). While certain variants of *deep ecology* are perfectly compatible with achieving their goals in a democratic manner, "[t]he revolutionary impetus of anarcho-primitivism thus [...] is not only anti-civilizational, but anti-democratic and finally anti-political at its core" (Honnacker 2020: 5).

However, antidemocratic convictions and attitudes can also be found among environmentalist positions that are more sympathetic to the achievements of civilization,

above all, eco-authoritarianism. This position is based on the view that democracies are fundamentally incapable of overcoming the climate crisis: Democratic action is too short-sighted, too slow, too arbitrary (DiPaulo/Jamieson 2018). Eco-authoritarians therefore argue that, at least in the context of climate-related matters, the authority to make political decisions should be vested in the hands of scientists, and that democratic procedures should be replaced with more efficient government techniques (Giddens 2011; Lovelock/Hickman 2010; DiPaulo/Jamieson 2018). Others argue even more radically, lauding the resilience of authoritarian structures and suggest learning from the *modus operandi* of the Catholic Church: According to them, what is needed is a government modeled on a green aristocracy, a "green pope" (Shearman/Smith 2007: 135). They call for the formation of "a new type of person who will be wise and fit to serve and to rule": "fighters for life and survival," "ecowarriors" (Shearman/Smith 2007: 133 f.). Even if by no means all representatives of eco-authoritarianism are in favor of the formation of a new type of person, they all agree in pleas for a greater concentration of political power in the hands of ecological elites. What unites them theoretically is the far-reaching conceptual shift in the normative grammar of the political: from "freedom" and "equality" to "life" or "survival," which has also earned this movement the name of "survivalists" (Dryzek 2021: 27-50).

It is not necessary to discuss these positions in more detail here;⁶ I am only mentioning them to show that crisis semantics, especially in the context of climate change, can play into doomsday scenarios that make antidemocratic and authoritarian solutions appear necessary and rational. Nevertheless, the pragmatic implications of the concept of crisis can also be employed to enhance democratic practices. A case in point is the climate justice movement, whose members do not typically identify as advocates of an eco-dictatorship. Rather, they repeated-

⁵ The term "climate change" is also the result of political intervention. The Republican US government under George Bush introduced it in 2002 on the recommendation of its chief strategist at the time, Frank Luntz, because it sounded more neutral than the then-common term of "global warming," which instead signaled a problem in need of regulation (Luntz 2002).

⁶ For a more detailed critique, see Shahar (2015) and Gehrmann/Niederberger (2020).

ly link their efforts to combat the “climate crisis” with a demand for “more democracy.”

3. Semantics of Crises as a Means of Democratization

For several years now, climate groups such as *Extinction Rebellion* and *Fridays for Future* have been bringing attention to the “climate crisis” through a variety of methods, including spectacular protest actions, emotional speeches, large-scale demonstrations, and school strikes. They have highlighted the discrepancy between promises of leading industrial nations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and a lack of tangible action to date. The crisis rhetoric employed by these groups is not limited to the numerous socio-ecological issues caused by climate change. It also encompasses the political action that could be expected to resolve these problems at the local, national, or international level. These groups do not merely observe a significant discrepancy between aspiration and reality, knowledge and action. They seek to identify the specific political causes that systematically impede the implementation of effective climate policy. *Extinction Rebellion* and *Last Generation*, for instance, highlight a lack of citizen participation in democratic bodies and explicitly advocate for “more democracy,” for example, in the form of citizens’ councils. Others view the causes of the “climate crisis” as being rooted in a capitalist and exploitative economic system, which they are fighting to overcome.

What these different diagnoses of crisis have in common is that they address the “climate crisis” not primarily as an ecological but as a societal and political crisis. In doing so, they explicitly or performatively assert a claim to codetermine climate policy that is denied to them in the existing political system. Hundreds of thousands of people who, as minors, are not even allowed to vote have become involved in climate policy through *Fridays for the Future*. And thanks to the international networking of the climate movement, non-European voices that are not

formally entitled to exert political influence are increasingly being included in the climate discourse in Europe: Among other things, they draw attention to the link between colonialism and climate change (Ituen/Aikins 2019) and remind us that people in the global South have been resisting the destruction of their livelihoods for decades because, as Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate writes, their house has long been on fire (Nakate 2021). The actors of the climate movement are thus claiming for themselves the public role which, according to Dewey, is not the privilege of elected “officials” (Dewey 1927/1989: 246) but belongs to everyone, provided that they act politically, i.e., that they assert a public interest and not merely a private one in public. While the dominant public sphere and its institutions unilaterally relegate them to the passive role of suffering the indirect consequences of social transactions, without being able to articulate them publicly and help shape social associations, the diverse forms of climate protest generate new “publics” (Dewey 1927/1989: 265) and “counterpublics” (Fraser 1990: 67). These counterpublics articulate hitherto excluded perspectives, experiences, concerns, and demands, and can thus, to some extent, also change public discourse and public opinion.

In these contexts, the concept of crisis functions as a “public concept” (Milstein 2015: 150) that actors use to politicize experiences of suffering and fears about the future which professional politicians have shown little interest in over a very long period of time. Such processes of political “articulation” are—as Justo Serrano Zamora (2017; 2022) shows, following Dewey—complex and pre-suppositional. “Problems” do not simply exist but must be developed from an initially “indeterminate situation” (Dewey 1938/1988: 109). Practical consequences must first be perceived, assessed as problematic, and understood as being shared experiences before they can be publicly problematized. This process cannot be understood in individualistic terms. As Brian Milstein emphasizes, it requires the creation of communities of expe-

rience and discourse—"crisis communities" (Milstein 2015: 152)—in which the participants develop a shared understanding of what they perceive as a crisis and mutually reinforce each other's belief that they have a legitimate claim to participate in overcoming the crisis.

The political struggles for climate justice thus provide an example of how the concept of crisis does not necessarily serve to reinforce authoritarian attitudes and moods but can also have a democratizing effect (Celikates 2016; 2022; Fladvad 2021 Kersting 2023a). This concept does not serve here as an "instrument of rule" (Agamben 2013) for the authoritarian enforcement of ecological goals. Instead, it is a political means of expanding democratic public spheres and intensifying political participation.

However, the rhetorical function of the term does not fully capture its meaning. For it is clear that "a society does not plunge into crisis when, and only when, its members so identify the situation" (Habermas 1976: 4). This is also evident from the aforementioned examples, in which actors not only articulate the *subjective* experience of suffering of a particular group by declaring a crisis but also make an epistemic and normative judgment about the *objective* nature of the situation. But how are the subjective and objective dimensions connected? And what criteria or procedures can be used to verify the claim to truth and right that is so vehemently asserted in crisis rhetoric in order to distinguish mere rhetoric and "crisis ideologies" from "valid experiences of crisis" (Habermas, 1976: 4)? In order to answer these questions, a more systematic examination of the *concept* of crisis is needed, and pragmatism can also make a helpful contribution here.

4. A Pragmatist Conception of Crisis

So far, pragmatism has been used as a *method* of clarifying concepts. However, a recourse to pragmatism is also useful for defining the concept of crisis because this con-

cept itself is a central one in pragmatism or, more precisely, in a pragmatist *theory of action*. In terms of action theory, "crises" represent profound upheavals of behavioral routines or "habits" (Peirce, 1992b: 129) that arouse a "real and living doubt" (Peirce, 1992a: 115) towards the beliefs that guide our actions. The term "habit" should not be understood in terms of individual psychology. The practices of social groups, institutions, or ways of life can also be reconstructed as functions of habits (Dewey 1927/1989: 334–335) and scrutinized for the rules (beliefs, concepts, regulations, customs, or traditions) that are effective in them. They too can get into a crisis if their *habits* are permanently blocked.

This interpretation is based on a pragmatist model of action, the standard version of which is as follows: First and foremost, our perception of the world and all our actions in it are anchored in a network of unreflected convictions and corresponding habits. When we encounter evidence that challenges or even contradicts the underlying beliefs and expectations associated with our individual, collective, or institutional practice, our actions are disrupted and the flow of our actions is impeded. This experience of the discrepancy between belief and the world is the source of a "real and living doubt" (Peirce 1992b: 114) or the root of a "problem" (Dewey 1938/1988: 111). Doubt may be applied to either experienced facts or to one's own beliefs. In either case, it must be overcome, as it is not possible to act upon it. This implies at least some form of thinking, which in the best case reorients action and gives rise to new ways of acting, which in turn stabilize and become new habits of behavior.

The point of a pragmatist interpretation of the concept of crisis now is to understand "crisis" as analogous to Peirce's concept of doubt or as a certain kind of problem in the sense of Dewey, and thus to locate this conception within our individual and social *practice*. For pragmatists, "doubts" and "problems" are the linchpin of human life practice. Because they are the only reason to reflect upon oneself, one's own actions, and one's own

habits, pragmatists view problems and the doubts they raise not only negatively as disruptions of a functional context or of an order but also, positively, as facilitators of self-knowledge, change, and progress. At the same time, as mentioned above, problems do not simply exist in the world but must be developed, produced, and articulated as such. Problems, as Rahel Jaeggi states following Dewey, “are both—at once given and made” (Jaeggi 2018: 140).

The recognition of crises as problems enables the consideration of the experiences of individuals and groups in crises, both directly and indirectly, in the formulation of crisis diagnoses. It is crucial to acknowledge that crises are perceived and experienced in diverse ways, with varying degrees of mediation. Although droughts and floods are perceived and suffered from in the lifeworld, they can only be experienced as consequences of climate change through the application of climate science, its physical measurements, calculations, and models. It was interdisciplinary climate research that, over the course of decades, articulated and thus produced the problem that we now call climate change (often against considerable political resistance). The findings of this research have become so well established that we can take this problem for granted or view it as “given” today.

Conversely, purely scientific facts remain practically meaningless if they are not connected to or analyzed in regard to their consequences for social life. In other words, they need to become translated into facts that can be experienced in the lifeworld. The report of Working Group II of the IPCC’s Sixth Assessment Report, for example, translates physical data into concrete medical, social, or economic risks (IPCC 2022). In the field of politics, it is climate activists who are now pursuing a kind of “catastrophe visualisation” (von Redecker 2020: 101) with their protests. Through specific practices of translation from the cognitive to the affective, they aim to make possible the experience of something that is almost impossible to grasp in terms of its multiple future

consequences. Such performative acts aim to interrupt everyday routines—shopping in the city or commuting to work—in order to sow “doubt” and to create an awareness of the problem or to produce “crisis consciousness” (Milstein 2015: 153-156).

The reference to problems, however, covers only one aspect of crisis since, of course, we do not characterize every problem of action as a crisis. In light of the pragmatic implications and etymology of the concept of crisis as previously outlined, talking about crises also implies decision-making in the face of uncertainty: “It indicates that point in time in which a decision is due but has not yet been rendered” (Koselleck 2006: 361). This reference to judgment, decision-making, and uncertainty indicates that object and subject references are closely intertwined in the concept of crisis: Although it is the situation or a particular circumstance that appears problematic, the fact that it appears as such to us is due to the fact that it pushes our ability to judge and to decide to a limit. This distinguishes crises from other existential situations such as disasters or accidents. They do not involve the same degree of uncertainty about how they can be resolved and how control of the situation can be regained.

If we take this view, then the term “crisis” does not only or primarily refer to problems that a person, a group, or an institution experiences or is confronted with (first-order problems), but it refers rather to problems that arise in coping with or solving such problems (second-order problems). The peculiarity of this secondary or reflexive level is that it now concerns problems that the subject or problem-solving instance has with itself: It no longer gets its problems solved, perhaps not even adequately articulated. Crises are not mere problems like accidents or disasters, they are—to borrow Jaeggi’s concept of life-form problems—*problem-solving problems*.⁷

⁷ On the distinction between first-order and second-order problems, see: Jaeggi (2018: 163–172). For a more explicit consideration of the concept of crisis, see Jaeggi (2017). Although my proposal on the concept of crisis developed here is strongly inspired by Jaeggi’s work on life-form problems, it differs from it in at least three ways: First, Jaeggi does not elaborate criteria

The conviction that crises are not merely problems but problem-solving problems is also expressed in the various diagnoses of a “climate crisis.” When eco-authoritarians criticize prevailing climate policy for being too short-sighted, slow, and ineffective due to its democratic procedures, in their diagnoses of the crisis, they are referring to the problem-solving processes of climate policy in the same problematizing way as left-wing climate activists who accuse prevailing policy of not being democratic enough and merely serving the interests of fossil capital. Even if the diagnoses of its causes could not be more different—according to some there is too much democracy, according to others there is too little—both camps point in their diagnoses of the crisis not only to the many problems people are suffering in the face of climate change but also to the political process, which they believe is inadequate to deal with these problems. And even the diagnoses of the anarcho-primitivists, who blame civilization as a whole for today’s problems, express the belief that it is the type of our collective problem-solving actions (above all invasive techniques of mastering nature) that is unsuited to curing the ills of our civilization. All of these diagnoses—in one way or another—reflect on those instances that are said to be in crisis, and it is precisely this *problematizing* function that constitutes the *reflexive* and *critical* dimension of the concept of crisis.

However, it would again be rash to characterize all problem-solving problems as crises. Just like mere action problems, problem-solving problems can also be solved more or less easily and not every unsolved or seemingly unsolvable problem immediately plunges its subject into a crisis. (A problem-solving problem also occurs when I

try to open a jar of jam with greasy hands—and there are various simple ways to solve it: I can wash my hands, use a towel, use a tool...). Rather, crises seem to represent a specific type of problem-solving problem, for which four features seem characteristic to me, which, taken together, result in a definition of the concept of crisis:⁸

We can speak of social and political crises when problem-solving processes (1) are *permanently disrupted* or *blocked* and thus (2) generate *(self-)destructive consequences* that sooner or later threaten the functioning of the primary context of action, undermine its normative preconditions, and (3) are *experienced* as existential problems by the subjects affected. These problem-solving problems (4) must not arise by chance; rather, they must prove to be the result of a *structural limitation of the problem-solving and learning capacity* of the relevant instances from which the solution of the problems could be expected—in other words, they must be *immanently caused* or *systemically conditioned*.

These four characteristics can be used as criteria with which crises can be distinguished from simple problems of action (such as accidents or disasters) as well as from simple or other problem-solving problems (such as challenges or difficulties). The criteria also help to sharpen the diagnostic potential of the concept of crisis because they provide a heuristic for criticizing political and social action.

Although these four criteria may appear somewhat technical in the above formulation, they do not represent aspects that are alien to political and social practice itself or that are imposed on it from the outside. Rather, it is the participants of the practice themselves who apply the above criteria in their different diagnoses of a climate crisis. The most significant differences arise, above all, in regard to the fourth criterion, that of systemic condi-

by which crises can be distinguished from other problem-solving problems, leaving her conception analytically vague. Secondly, her conception of crisis relies on “a very strong notion of objectively existing practical contradictions” (von Redecker 2018: 30, transl. DK), which in my view prematurely narrows the analysis of structural problem-solving blocks. Thirdly, her conception of crisis, at least in her book *Critique of Forms of Life*, is strongly oriented towards an epistemic understanding of politics that hardly takes into account the conflictual nature of political disputes—as emphasized by radical democratic authors (cf. Laclau/Mouffe 2014; Rancière 1999, for example).

⁸ Whether the concept of crisis proposed here can be applied to all crisis phenomena—including psychological crises, for example—would require a more detailed discussion and must be left open at this point. In the following, I will only use the term to refer to social and political crises. For an application of the term to the discourse on the crisis of democracy and post-democracy, see: Kersting (2023b).

tions. As we have seen, some argue that the lack of problem-solving resources is due to the inefficiencies inherent in the democratic system. Others posit that the undemocratic and capitalist nature of the economic system systematically impedes the implementation of a policy of sustainability. Of course, there are also those who doubt that there are any structural limits to the problem-solving capacity of capitalist and liberal-democratic societies in relation to prevailing climate policies. They point to technological progress (e.g., geoengineering), "green" growth potential (e.g., renewable energies), and the market (e.g., emissions trading), which would sooner or later bring about or at least facilitate the ecological turnaround.

As far as the first three criteria are concerned, the representatives of these different positions can certainly agree that climate policy in recent decades has been *blocked* in many ways and has had *destructive* and even *self-destructive* consequences, which have indeed been *experienced* as crises by those affected. What is disputed is the *systemic* nature of this misguided climate policy, and thus the question of whether climate change can be described as a crisis at all or whether it is merely a problem of action that is extremely challenging but could in principle be tackled within the given framework of the existing economic and political system. In the following section, I would like to present my own position in this debate and make a proposal on how we should understand the systemic nature of the climate crisis.

5. Climate Change as a Crisis of Liberal Democracy

Environmentalists often justify the skeptical thesis that democracies are fundamentally incapable of dealing adequately with sustainability problems, such as climate change, by referring to the democratic principle: Democracies are characterized by the fact that citizens are involved in legislation and that political action takes their will into account. However, if citizens prioritize short-term preferences over long-term ecological goals, a dem-

ocratic government that wants to be reelected will not be motivated to pursue a resolute climate policy. Based on this consideration, some scholars have concluded, as shown above, that expertocratic autocracies are better suited to solving problems than democracies. In this discussion, the climate crisis is thus interpreted as a crisis of democracy and eco-authoritarianism is presented as the solution to the crisis.

I would like to propose a reformulation of this diagnosis, which, however, leads to a very different perspective on a possible solution to the climate crisis. The overarching thesis is that we should understand climate change not as a crisis of democracy in general, but of specifically *liberal* democracy. In what follows, I use the term "liberal" as a placeholder for a bundle of characteristics that are more or less closely associated with the tradition of liberalism: (a) a negative conception of freedom, (b) an atomistic understanding of individuality, (c) a rigid distinction between the public and the private, and (d) a weak or thin understanding of the democratic process.

To avoid misunderstandings: I am not arguing that liberalism as such or some of its theories are fixed to one or the other understanding of these terms, or that they are incapable of solving the problems that might arise from these terms. Rather, my thesis is that the more a society or democratic politics is shaped by these characteristics, the more likely it is to undermine itself in the pursuit of its climate policies and thus exacerbate the 'climate crisis' instead of solving it. This is clear when we pragmatically ask what the socio-ecological consequences would be if we were to organize our social practice on the basis of these conceptions.

(a) *Negative freedom* refers to "the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?" (Berlin 2002: 169).⁹ In

⁹ See already Locke (1963: II.2). Following Philip Pettit, liberal freedom can therefore also be defined as *non-interference* (Pettit 1997: 51-79).

liberal states, this understanding of freedom is institutionalized through a set of civil liberties, such as the right to personal liberty or the right to property. As subjective rights, they protect individuals from state interference and give them the legal power to assert their legitimate interests. We do not need to deny the emancipatory function that this understanding of freedom has historically had, initially for the bourgeoisie and then for a large number of oppressed and marginalized groups. Nevertheless, from the outset, this understanding has had social effects that are at odds with its original emancipatory intent, as demonstrated by numerous scholars, including Dewey (1935/1991) in the tradition of Hegel (2001) and Marx (1844/2008): The protection of individual freedom has historically been employed as a rationale for opposing the redistribution of social wealth or rejecting the regulation of the fossil fuel economy by the state. Even the introduction of a speed limit on motorways is perceived by many as an unacceptable encroachment on citizens' freedom and is currently being successfully prevented by the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP) in Germany through precisely this argument. Negative freedom, as Berlin says, also includes the "freedom to do what is irrational, or stupid, or wrong" (Berlin 2002: 194). John Rawls (2001) defended this liberal claim with the argument that individuals pursue diverse ethical conceptions of the good life and that a political theory needs to take into account "the fact of reasonable pluralism" (Rawls, 2001: 3). However, climate change demonstrates that there are notions of the 'good life' whose realization has such destructive consequences that they are diametrically opposed to the developmental opportunities of the majority of people living today and even more so of future generations.

Of course, liberalism's conception of freedom has never been unconditional. It has always been subject to the restrictive condition that everyone should be able to invoke an *equal* claim to freedom and that no one should be harmed (see e.g. Mill, 1982; Rawls, 2001: 111-115). Nevertheless, the universalist ideal of *equal* freedom ap-

pears to be relatively powerless in the face of the substantial global social inequalities that are created and maintained in the name of individual freedom. This becomes more evident when we consider the other three aspects.

(b) Negative freedom corresponds, in Dewey's words, with the idea of *individuality* "as something ready-made, already possessed, and needing only the removal of certain legal restrictions to come into full play" (Dewey, 1935/1991: 30). However, this idea is obviously misleading. On the one hand, the individual and its preferences themselves always already have a social form: Which way of life an individual chooses and can choose for itself is, in Foucault's (2005) words, dependent on the modes of subjectivation through which it is produced. From this perspective, the preferences of citizens are not merely "given" to politics; rather, they are socially generated and can be politically shaped. On the other hand, the developmental opportunities of individuals are not their "possession," but depend in many ways on social and ecological conditions that individuals cannot create and maintain alone but only in community with others. While the release of the individual from socio-ecological responsibility may appear to be an increase in freedom, it undermines the conditions under which freedom and individuality can fundamentally develop in the long run.

(c) The reifying and atomistic notion of individuality corresponds with a rigid distinction between *the public* and *the private*. For if individuality is understood as something already possessed, then it seems to be able to decide pre-politically what belongs in the realm of private affairs and what should be under public control. But this kind of distinction obscures the fact that any demarcation between the private and the public is the result of political action and often of political struggle. *Who* is the subject of the public sphere and *what* becomes the object of political negotiation is historically contingent and cannot be separated from the experiences of those who suffer the indirect consequences of social transactions (Dewey 1927/1989: 243–246). Whether and to what extent the de-

cision on the sustainability of individual or social ways of living is a private or a public matter is therefore a genuinely political question. Its answer, as Dewey says, “has to be discovered experimentally”—and this requires “room for dispute” (Dewey 1927/1989: 275) between different social groups and their experiences, concerns, and perspectives.

(d) Finally, this raises the question of the form of the political process in which such disputes could be productively conducted. In an understanding of politics characterized by a primarily negative and individualistic idea of freedom, individuality and privacy only seem to allow such disputes to a very limited extent. This is because these ideas correspond with a merely “thin” form of political decision-making and democratic self-government (Barber 1984). This is evident, for example, from the fact that in the liberal political model, primarily voting is regarded as the political function of citizens. Although citizens are supposed to contribute their preferences to the democratic process, their representation and political processing is primarily reserved for professional politicians or the government. “In the liberal tradition, politics means, above all, governmental activity and institutions” (Held 2006: 77). This model undoubtedly has a relieving function: It “makes it possible for the individual,” as Hannah Arendt notes, to be “unmolested by politics” (Arendt 2005: 115). However, this ‘relief’ from politics comes at a steep price: It means that individual preferences are merely aggregated in the process of political decision-making, but are not themselves reflected upon, modified, or transformed. This removes precisely what the ‘democracy-skeptical’ objection identifies as a problem—the short-term preferences of citizens that contradict long-term ecological public welfare interests—from the political process and thus naturalizes these preferences. Moreover, to the extent that a political community prioritizes the protection of individual freedoms, it becomes challenging for the political community to impose strong sustainability demands on its citizens, at least if they run counter to their individual preferences.

In light of these considerations, it is evident that the preference of citizens for short-term private interests over long-term public interests and the inability to adequately regulate unsustainable social lifestyles are no longer viewed as inherent flaws of democracy. Rather, these issues emerge in the context of a democracy that is defined and shaped by a negative and individualistic understanding of freedom, an atomistic conception of individuality, a rigid and thus apolitical distinction between the public and private spheres, and a weak understanding of political self-government. For it is these characteristics that favor particular political decisions, institutions, modes of subjectivation, and ways of life that have contributed to climate change and that continue to block effective climate protection policy. But then the democracy-skeptical thesis, according to which democracy and sustainability are *per se* in contradiction or at least in tension with each other, also proves to be too generalizing. It is more appropriate to speak of *liberal* democracy, whose problem-solving capacities reach a limit to the extent that it exhibits the above-mentioned characteristics. However, if it is not ‘democracy’ in general, but rather a specifically liberalistic *self-limitation* of democracy that has brought about and maintains the climate crisis, then it would be expected that this limitation could in principle also be remedied with the means of democracy. From this perspective, not less—as eco-authoritarians believe—but, on the contrary, “more democracy” would be “the cure for the ills of democracy” (Dewey 1927/1989: 324).

6. Towards a Green *and* Democratic Transformation

Within current research on green democratic theory, there already is a lively discussion on how democracy should be understood and practiced to shape our social practice in an ecologically sustainable *and* democratic way. Proposals range from republican (Heidenreich 2023) and deliberative (Niemeyer 2013) to radical democratic (Machin 2013) approaches, and pragmatism has also pro-

vided a significant impetus to this debate in recent years (Fesmire 2021; Honnacker 2020; Thompson/Piso 2019). However, approaches to such an ecological democratization of democracy can not only be found in theory but can also be observed among the diverse socio-ecological practices and struggles for a more sustainable, just, and more democratic world. We encounter them in peasant and indigenous movements in the Global South, in local initiatives for alternative agriculture, and in global struggles for climate justice. Under the banner of the “climate crisis,” these various groups not only criticize the overexploitation of nature and the diverse structures of inequality that make us humans vulnerable to the consequences of climate change to such varying degrees. They also discuss proposals for an alternative world and try to realize them to some extent in the here and now. In the course of their political practice, they form new communities and public spheres—“crisis communities” (Milstein 2015: 154)—that “rest on principles of solidarity and justice and on the democratic self-organisation of commonly shared resources” (Fladvad 2021: 237).

These principles and practices express a different understanding of freedom, individuality, privacy, and political action than the “liberal” understanding of these terms outlined above: The negative conception of individual freedom is juxtaposed here with a positive conception of socio-ecological freedom. By demanding that politicians enact collectively binding laws to phase out fossil fuels and to self-restrict non-sustainable lifestyles, climate activists demonstrate that “social agreements” are not only “external limitations” on individual freedom but can also be experienced as “positive forces” for shaping life together (Dewey 1935/1991: 30). Rather than viewing the individual in opposition to society and understanding the assumption of socio-ecological responsibility primarily as a restriction of individual freedoms, practices of solidarity and the collective self-organisation of shared resources recognize the constitutive dependency of the individual on social and ecological conditions that are eroding in the

context of the climate crisis. Their protest practices shift the boundaries between the private and the public, problematizing the global and intergenerational consequences of supposedly private lifestyles and demanding that they have to be “systematically cared for” (Dewey 1927/1989: 245–246). Thus, the political practices of the climate movement also express a different understanding of politics and the democratic process: By organizing themselves in solidarity-based economic units and networks and experimenting with more participatory forms of communication and decision-making, the actors involved in the practice not only invent and test more intensive forms of political self-government. In their actions, they also *prefiguratively* anticipate part of the society that they hope to live in one day. In doing so, they practice a type of politics for which Dewey once used the term “planning society” (Dewey 1933/1986: 76). In contrast to the “planned society,” which is designed by experts on a drawing board, only to be implemented “top down” by politicians, the *planning society* is a society that develops proposals for solutions based on concrete practical problems and tests them by anticipating their practical consequences or their practical implementation. In other words, it adopts the *method of inquiry* (Dewey 1938/1988; Peirce 1992b) in its political action and this is precisely where its superiority over autocracies and expertocracies lies (Fesmire 2021). It makes it possible to learn from the experience of concrete problems, to sharpen political judgment, and to develop new and better methods of problem-solving by taking past mistakes and errors into account. And because in a democracy—at least according to its *idea*—everyone is in a position to “enquire about, criticize, and perhaps even reject reasons for the actions or inactions of institutions” (Gehrmann/Niederberger, 2020: 235, trans. DK), it can be assumed that democratic procedures guarantee more sustainably that scientific insights are also taken into account in the political process.

Such a practice, characterized by a socio-ecological understanding of freedom and individuality, an exper-

imental understanding of the public sphere, and a participatory conception of politics, should contribute to a democratization of liberal democracy that makes it more likely to break through the problem-solving blockades in climate policy and to fight climate change sustainably.

Conclusion

In this article, I have proposed a definition of crisis as a concept based on current discourses on the climate crisis that makes it possible to critically analyze these discourses and to systematically discuss diagnoses of crises. My contribution to this discussion was to use a critique of liberalism to reformulate the green, democracy-skeptical thesis in such a way that democracy rather than authoritarianism can be understood as a 'solution' to the crisis. This demonstrates that the conception of the "climate crisis," beyond its diagnostic and critical value, also opens up a constructive perspective on a socio-ecological and democratic transformation. To achieve such a transformation, democracy must be understood not only in liberal terms as a form of government but also and primarily as a way of life. Whether or to what extent the manifest problem-solving blockades of today's climate policy can be resolved will then at least depend on whether we succeed in realizing more democratic forms of life.

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