Conference Report

Social Contracts and Democracy in Times of the Anthropocene. Thinking Beyond Crisis

Convenor: Claudia Wiesner

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The conference on *Democracy in Times of the Anthropocene. Thinking Beyond Crisis* brought together researchers from different backgrounds to discuss perspectives on social contracts and its roles in democracies and in the Anthropocene.

Opening: CO3 Roundtable "Social Contracts in Times of the Anthropocene - Thinking beyond Crisis"

The conference *Social Contracts and Democracy in Times of the Anthropocene. Thinking Beyond Crisis* opened with a roundtable discussing *Social contracts in times of the Anthropocene*. Participating in the discussion were Rui F. Carvalho (University of Coimbra), *Emilia Palonen* (University of Helsinki), Anna Björk (Demos Helsinki), Pınar Uyan-Semerci (İstanbul Bilgi University) and Ana Matan (Zagreb University). The roundtable was chaired by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences). Discussed topics were the loss of trust in institutions, crisis as both danger and opportunity, the limits and re-working of (liberal) democratic social contracts, and the need to integrate ecology, technology and generational perspectives into new or "eco-social" contracts.

Ana Matan described a "crisis of public trust" in Croatia. She noted a striking contrast between low trust in domestic institutions and relatively higher trust in the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), which has exposed high-level corruption and receives many citizen complaints.

Pınar Uyan-Semerci asked who is included in the social contract and who remains excluded. She argued that many citizens – especially thos belonging younger generations – no longer feel that the social contract guarantees basic security and future prospects, and that this produced fear, anxiety and a sense that "there is no contract". She noted that the current migration and ecological crises reveal that citizenship is both indispensable (for minimal protections) and insufficient, as many people remain outside of, or only partially inside, the protective circle of the social contract.

Anna Björk warned that the constant “crisis rhetoric”, combined with digital platforms and algorithms, produces an impression of competing urgencies that can overload people’s political judgement and narrow or ease the future horizon, especially for younger generations.
Meanwhile, Emilia Palonen showed how far-right actors re-describe democracy as “illiberal democracy”, normalize racist and misogynistic discourse, and contest a welfare-state-based social contract that had linked democracy to socio-economic security.
Lastly, *Rui F. Carvalho* closed the roundtable by proposing to distinguish descriptive forms of normative understandings of crises. He suggested treating crises as objects of pragmatic, empirical analysis rather than assuming they are inherently bad. He emphasised that crises can break rigid orthodoxies, expose hidden mechanisms of power and open space for new or marginalized groups and ideas, turning them into moments of democratic struggle and potential renewal.

Panel 1 – Conceptualising the Anthropocene

The first panel of the conference was titled *Conceptualising the Anthropocene* and was chaired by Pol Bargués (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs).
In her presentation *Christiane Kuller* (University of Erfurt) asked whether the Anthropocene “has a history” and what this means for historical sciences/scholarship. Drawing on Sandra Maß’s book *Future Pasts. Writing History in the Anthropocene* (Zukünftige Vergangenheiten. Geschichte schreiben im Anthropozän), she presented the idea of “contaminated history” as a model: all historical research is affected by Anthropocene conditions and must recognize global interconnections and non-human actors, even in micro- or local histories.
Matthias Klemm (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) interpreted the Anthropocene debate itself as a phenomenon of social organisations: a global discourse produced by scientists, politicians and technocratic bodies that acts as a form of societal self-reflection and autocorrection. He pointed to epistemic shifts where social sciences act as “David” helping the “Goliath” of climate discourse, sometimes reviving old critiques of capitalism or idealising “indigenous” or “noble savage” figures. He linked this critique back to the core social contract question: Why do people accept and “play along” with highly alienated social orders, and at what point might they withdraw consent if democratic control is lost?
Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) then criticised “polycrisis” talk (i.e. the idea that sovereign debt, pandemic, war in Ukraine, migrationas a depoliticising narrative in which crises “happen to us” at the sime time by chance) (especially “us” Europeans), instead of being related to global, structural and planetary entanglements. Reframing the facets of polycrisis as a symptom of a deeper crisis of modernity and Anthropocene conditions, she argued that key assumptions underpinning liberal modernity – about knowledge, human

agency and the nature-culture separation – are fundamentally challenged today, which in turn calls into question the conceptual foundations of liberal representative democracy.

In his presentation *No Outside Left: Modernity, Externalities, and the Anthropocene*, *Jamal Ali Bashir* (Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg) argued that decolonisation politically incorporated populations that had long absorbed modernity's costs into the same legitimacy regime built on the promises of progress and development. He demonstrated how development and growth became articulated as rights, and governments all around the world came to be judged by their capacity to deliver all of these. As these claims scaled globally, spatial "outsides" shrank, to the extent that there is no more unused atmosphere and no external colony to absorb harm. According to Bashir, postcolonial states pursue modernisation in a world where ecological and geopolitical room is already heavily used, turning the frontier inward via internal colonialism that sacrifices rural regions, indigenous lands and urban margins for national development

Panel 2 – Politics in the Anthropocene

The second panel was dedicated to *Politics in the Anthropocene* and was chaired by Anna Björk (Demos Helsinki).

Christina Fischer and Matthias Klemm (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) argued that events like the January 6th storming of the US Capitol, usually framed as a symptom of a "crisis of liberal democracy" or an "attack on democracy", should also be read on the micro level as sites where democratic norms are actively negotiated in practice rather than simply denied. With their notion of "democracy eluding democracy", they suggested that crisis talk and definitions of democracy are themselves part of a democratic struggle: Claims about the "crisis of democracy" are produced not only by elites and scholars but also by ordinary actors, and should be understood as negotiations within democracy rather than as evidence of democracy's collapse from the outside.

Andrea Klinger (Friedrich Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg) then analysed Marine Le Pen's important "Déclaration du Louvre" campaign speech delivered during the 2022 presidential campaign. She showed how Le Pen used emotionally charged narratives to organize collective emotions, stabilize identities and deepen affective polarization. She concluded that such sentimental populist storytelling not only polarises political camps but also reconfigures democratic meaning in the Anthropocene: According to Klinger, it offers emotionally powerful but simplified orientations and promises of stability, yet sharpens value conflicts instead of negotiating them, raising the unresolved question of how democracies can foster solidarity while maintaining pluralism and avoiding exclusionary, polarizing logics.

Emilia Palonen (University of Helsinki) presented results from the CO3 (https://www.co3socialcontract.eu/) project's work package 4, that analysed short videos on social media (TikTok, Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts) during the 2024 European Parliament elections in ten countries, using synthetic profiles (centre right, far right and red-green) plus organic profiles to see how algorithms create "rabbit holes" around different party families and visions of Europe and the social contract. Different political forces from the red-green to the centre-right to the far right constructed their visions of Europe and their own nation-states in Europe in drastically different terms, prioritising different sets of values to be defended through the vote. In the analysed material, the social contract is explicitly named only rarely (notably in Hungary), but is implicitly at stake in debates about climate, agriculture, welfare, gender and rights. The research team made a multimodal, iterative analysis pipeline where videos are split into scenes, transcribed, translated, frame- analysed by an LLM (Large Language Model), summarized, cleaned up by researchers, and visualised on a dashboard covering about 20.000 politically themed videos across Europe. Using this human-machine workflow, they explored how social contracts and populist narratives appear in online content, showing that research itself becomes a post-anthropocentric, layered interpretation process where machines and humans jointly construct meaning.

Pınar Uyan-Semerci (İstanbul Bilgi University) argued that "information disorders" (misinformation, disinformation and malinformation) constitute a top global risk that undermines democracy and the efficacy of the social contract by making it difficult to agree on basic facts, thereby blocking meaningful dialogue about shared problems. She contended that information disorder should be seen as a violation of human rights, a threat to human security and a constraint on capabilities, because it deprives people of the conditions needed to make informed choices about voting, health, participation and the living lives they value. Uyan-Semerci concluded that while individuals need skills to recognise information disorders, the problem is fundamentally collective: Only coordinated interventions at multiple levels can sustain the factual minimum and shared concepts required for ongoing democratic dialogue and any rethinking of social contracts.

In the final presentation of this Panel, *Aris Agoglossakis Foley* (Amsterdam University and Leiden University) examined the Silicon Valley inspired idea of the "network state" as a speculative political utopia in the neutral sense of a "no place", arguing that it is both a product and a symptom of the breakdown of liberal progress and modernity in the Anthropocene. He understood the network state as 'a highly aligned online community with a capacity for collective action that crowdfunds territory around the world and eventually gains diplomatic recognition from pre-existing states'. Combining the Anthropocene lense with the one of "Technocene", he framed the network state as emerging from the entanglement of human and technological agency in producing current crises. He concluded that unrestrained capitalist

“progress” has today looped back into corporate feudalism, with corporatocracy enabling tech elites to leverage unchecked power, turning the network state into a dystopian sign of democratic nation-states’ erosion rather that a benign innovation in governance.

Panel 3 – Governing the Anthropocene

The third panel on *Governing the Anthropocene* was chaired by David Chandler., In his opening, *Pol Bargués* (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs) outlined a never-ending process of critique and co-optation in international peace missions: academic critiques pushed policy shifts towards bottom-up, long-term, indirect interventions, including ideas of local ownership, resilience, civil society, gender mainstreaming and perpetual peace. Yet critics argue that in practice, missions largely failed to change. In the Anthropocene, these interventions generate pervasive side effects that cannot be fully controlled, including corrupt or inefficient institutions, alienation between societies and governments, long-term dependence on external aid and supervision, and growing scepticism towards European values. Bargués provocatively suggested that other actors such as authoritarian regimes, right-wing populists and powerful states, imposing top-down, business-like ceasefires, often produce stability, development and popular support more effectively than liberal peace interventions and warns that if critical peace concepts no longer resonate with post-conflict societies’ experiences, then prevailing ideas of peace must be rethought.

Igor Rogelja (University College London) used the notion of the “Anthropocene lag” to describe the temporal gap between actions and their unevenly distributed harms and benefits, arguing that what he termed “green geopolitics” create sacrificial zones where peripheral populations (such as communities resisting a lithium mine in Serbia’s Jadar Valley) are asked to absorb irreversible damage now for a promised green future elsewhere, often Western Europe. He showed how this dynamic produces ethno-nationalist, morally charged mobilizations (“Serbia is not Europe’s mining colony”) that frame local communities as sacrificial victims of EU-centred decarbonisation. In conclusion, he suggested that peripheral democracies at the EU’s “doorstep” are key sites where fractures in liberal democracy, social contracts and green transition strategies become visible.

Petteri Repo (University of Helsinki) then explored whether large language models could contribute to tackling Anthropocene problems like climate change and war by processing large qualitative datasets extremely fast. He showed that while LLM-based analyses can look useful and overlap with human findings, their internal reasoning as well as the connection from data to results remain opaque, sometimes even inventing themes that were not present in the material. Additionally, he warned that because LLMs are efficient, they also are conservative “cultural repetition” machines that fit capitalist demands for productivity while discouraging

deep thinking. Hence, their widespread use will likely grant them a form of non-human agency in knowledge production, yet without transparent links between data and output. In conclusion, he argued that they cannot reliably solve big Anthropocene problems.

Theresa Reinold (EDHEC Business School Nice) argued that multinational tech corporations like Google, Starlink and TikTok increasingly exercise quasi-sovereign power, shaping borders through privatised digital cartography, enabling warfare via outsourced communication infrastructure, and influencing information sovereignty, thereby quietly rewriting core norms of territorial integrity, non-interference and self-defence that underpin the social contract between states and citizens. She contended that this renegotiation of the social contract by unelected private actors creates a tension between output legitimacy (for example the Ukrainian army's survival thanks to Starlink) and deeply unresolved questions of input legitimacy, accountability, transparency and democracy. She concluded that in the age of the Anthropocene, the original social contract between individuals and the Leviathan is being amended without the consent of the contracting parties.

Roundtable "Adaptive Governance in the Anthropocene"

The first day of the conference ended with a roundtable on *Adaptive Governance in the Anthropocene*, chaired by Tom Scheunemann. The main talking points were that adaptive governance emerges as the key response to Anthropocene conditions, a world of uncontrollable feedback loops, side effects and entangled human-non-human relations that render linear, control-based modernist governance obsolete. The speakers connected this shift to crises of legitimacy, democracy and reason, urging bottom-up, experimental contingency-embracing approaches over top-down solutions.

Pol Bargués (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs) defined the Anthropocene world (via Latour) as a world where "the Earth is moved", and as a complex web of uncontrollable feedback loops and side effects where nothing can be linearly controlled or contained. He positioned adaptive governance as governing without aspiring to final settlements or social contracts.

David Chandler (University of Westminster) continued by asking: What is the consequence of everything being here all at once and why does that create a legitimacy regime crisis? He answered this question by saying that modernity's legitimacy relied on separations of time and space . The Anthropocene causes these separations to collapse, making reason, science and universal democracy impossible in a flat, all-at-once world of unintended consequences. He also argued that adaptive governance simply means adapting to this reality, abandoning imposed plans for responsive adaptation to side effects, ending the illusion of protection from colonial and extractive consequences.

Jessica Schmidt (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) described adaptive governance as incremental, small-scale, experimental interventions (try this, wait and see, adjust) that replace failed one-shot modernist solutions, acting as both an apology for power and a resonance with contemporary philosophy on human-non-human embeddedness. She highlighted the ontological, not merely ethical or political, critique that comes with this approach: external human interventions are wrong because humans cannot extract themselves from their environment, driving a constant quest to align ever closer to reality.

Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) closed the roundtable and framed adaptive governance as rejecting linear cause-effect government for complex, multi causal polycrisis problems requiring bottom-up, contingency-embracing models at all levels. She saw adaptive governance as essential for the survival of democracy, because it enables to embrace uncertainty and lett go of control. This, she said, would be difficult, but necessary for future legitimacy and effective governance.

Keynote Lecture – Elisa Randazzo (University College London) "Beyond Hope: Temporality and Hope at the End of the World"

The second day of the conference began with a keynote lecture by *Elisa Randazzo* (University College London) titled *Beyond Hope: Temporality and Hope at the End of the World*. Randazzo began her keynote lecture by describing the present as bearing a "crisis of meaning", an age where globalisation and technology expand human reach, but hollow out our sense of agency and responsibility. She argued that the Anthropocene signals not just the environmental breakdown, but the death of the modernist belief in progress, mastery and human exceptionalism, i.e. the central promises of the Enlightenment. Therefore, the Anthropocene is both a meta-level rupture and a network of smaller fractures, in relationships, governance and worldviews, that reveal the collapse of old certainties about agency and progress. The lecture explored how widespread feelings of hopelessness reflect the limits of modern frameworks and how critical theories, from posthumanism to decolonial thinking and Afro-pessimism, question this sense of ontological loss. Randazzo traced how the concept of hope has become central to Anthropocene discourse, yet it remains burdened by its liberal humanist legacy. The binaries of hope, hope vs. hopelessness and affirmation vs. negation, risk reproducing the very structures they seek to critique. Drawing on Black and queer theory, the lecture proposed that the core struggle lies in how the violence of modernity, particularly anti-Blackness, constructs the very subject that hopes, rendering some unable to hope at all. Turning to theorists like Timothy Morton, the lecture suggested that temporality, the experience of large-scale, "hyperobject" time, offers a more productive lens for exploring how we "hold in mind" possible futures beyond mere ontological despair. She highlightes recent "possibility studies" for

examining how non-linear temporalities, including Afrofuturist and decolonial perspectives, reimagine futures without recentering modernity or reducing agency to reactive resistance. Randazzo finally proposed the concept of “wonder” as an alternative to hope - not as escapism or re-enchantment, but as a critical, time-conscious and relational mode or world-making that resists binaries while enabling political imagination. The lecture concluded with the statement that the value of wonder lies in its capacity to engage critically and affirmatively with uncertainty, to reimagine agency and possibility amid the “ruins of the Anthropocene”, pushing us to think about what is at stake when we declare the end of one world and the possibility or the impossibility of other ways of being and thinking.

Panel 4 – Thinking Democracy in the Anthropocene

The Panel *Thinking Democracy in the Anthropocene* was chaired by Ana Matan. In the beginning, *Jessica Schmidt* (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) analysed the literature on the crisis of democracy as separated in two branches: “liberal awakening” discovers illusions of institutional safeguards, consolidation permanence and elections as conflict managers (e.g., backsliding, deconsolidation, polarisation reveal a “more human” unpredictable world). The second strand of “critical redemption” sees right-wing populism as a symptom of liberalism’s prior failures (non-majoritarian institutions, financialization), yet struggles when the “wrong” populism arrives, as it is seen as leading to disavowal. This starnd accordingly blames “populists” for further undoing an already hollowed democracy. Additionally, Schmidt argued that democracy crisis scholarship reveals not a democracy crisis per se, but the discovery of the present’s indecipherability and the epistemological/normative emptiness around what democracy “is”. Yet this very lived, unprincipled present carries a promise of reality over idealized truths, offering a key for navigating Anthropocene complexity beyond externalising threats like populism.

David Chandler (University of Westminster) examined the rethinking of democracy in the Anthropocene, describing it as both impossible and necessary. He argued that traditional modern approaches, which attempt to “add” new perspectives like nature or race into existing frameworks, fail to address the deeper need for an ontological shift in how politics and community are understood. Instead, democracy should be viewed as a continuous, relational process of becoming, an open-ended co-creation between humans, non-humans and the environment. Drawing on thinkers such as Dewey, Serres, Negri and Escobar, he highlighted the move from finished institutions and social contracts to more fluid, adaptive and self-organising forms of governance. According to Chandler, democracy is less a static political structure than an evolving practice of mutual responsiveness. Ultimately, he suggested that such an approach might stretch the very meaning of democracy beyond its modern limits.

Julia Feine (Stockholm University) used the frameworks of critical fantasy studies and political discourse theory to analyse Anthropocene responses, discussing three fantasies addressing a decline of democratic imagination: an eco-authoritarian one (sacrificing democracy for strong authority's promised protection), a technocratic one (implicitly depoliticizing via neutral expertise and innovation), and a post-apocalyptic one (accepting ongoing unequal crises for authentic human-nature reconnection. According to Feine, the analysis of eco-political fantasies reveals how hope and fear shape responses to the democratic crisis in the Anthropocene. She warned that eco-authoritarian and technocratic imaginaries risk deepening democratic erosion by depoliticising the ecological crisis and inequality, while post-apocalyptic environmentalism can open contingent spaces for democratic rearticulation by insisting on confronting collapse. Feine ended her presentation by arguing that Democracy in Anthropocene must become reflexive, experimental, and justice-oriented, rework democratic engagement across scales, and transform ecological grief into situated, collective practices that reconfigure how communities live and act within planetary limits.

Caroline van Taysen (University of Westminster) challenged relational and vitalist ontologies that are promoted as solutions for thinking democracy in the Anthropocene because they decenter humans and dissolve binaries into flux, local self-reflexivity. She, argued that such new ontologies fail to escape the violence of modernity: they re-centre human responsibility (contra neoliberal self-optimizing critiques), create new binaries (modernity vs. complexity), and ontologically force coerced relationality that repeats anti-Black and queer exclusions by universalizing Western "life" over colonial others. She argued that while complexity-informed theory and its practice of ungovernance succeed in veiling modernist structures behind a mask of self-organised horizontal entanglements, they still seem to be trapped within core modernist positions. According to van Taysen, this ends up repeating modernity's acts of structural violence against those deemed "others".

Kari Palonen (University of Jyväskylä) interpreted the Anthropocene as language – as opposed to regarding the Anthropocene as a philosophy of history or an all-compassing vision of the contemporary world. He argued that such views imply a totalising, if not totalitarian, Hegelian-style thinking, against which he opposed a Weberian and rhetorical view on the value of opposed perspectives. Palonen thus argued for a thoroughly politicised, contingent human condition. He rejected essentialist traps (Occidentalist Europe, eco-dictatorship, technocratic planning) and mainstream inertia, advocating for "sensual democracy" and parliamentary games of contingency (elections as Fortuna, debate as possibility-thinking opposites) in liberal democracy, where politics plays with chances rather than predetermined plans. Against this backdrop, he discussed three post-WWII politization agendas still active: Europe vs. nation-state, environment vs. nature-as-non-political, gender/queer vs. naturalised identities.

Panel 5 – New Conceptions of Democracy in the Anthropocene

Chaired by Alexandra Kemmerer, the panel on *New Conceptions of Democracy in the Anthropocene* began with a presentation by *Nathanaël Colin-Jaeger* (Université Catholique de Lille), who addressed the social contract paradox between impartiality-focused theories and continuous bargaining models (Buchanan, Gauthier). While the former rely on the idea of aveil of ignorance and fixed fair agreements that risk normative overdetermination, the latter replicate past inequalities via unequal starting points and power asymmetries that enable exploitation despite Pareto superior agreements. Colin-Jaeger proposed a fair bargaining baseline for dynamic contracts, ensuring no exploitation, exit options, status parity, equal voice and access, constructed via structural baselines (per Woodin's structural injustices: positional rules and norms replicating disadvantages without individual blame), superior to rectification (informational, non-existence problems) for ongoing legitimacy.

Hagen Schölzel (University of Erfurt) argued that democracy in the Anthropocene requires a major conceptual shift, comparable to the late-18th-century invention of modern democracy: politics now spans planetary scales, centuries, technological side-effects and human-non-human entanglements, so traditional concepts that ground liberal democracy nation-state, election cycles, property-based peoplehood) no longer fit the Anthropocene reality. Schölzel proposed "gardening" as a methodologyfor research on democracy: researchers should identify and nurture emerging democratic practices drawn from artistic creativity, technological innovation, practices of crisis government, or indigenous or local regional expertise etc.. This includes using a minimal concept of democracy (articulation of the people's will guided by freedom and equality) and co-developing new concepts that both analyse and support democratic innovation in the Anthropocene.

Manish Dutta (University of Bremen) critiqued both the colonial roots of liberal representative democracy (elite governance legitimising a colonial logic assuming that the "masses cannot govern") and Anthropocene narratives that focus on resilience and preservation. He argued that experiences vary by geography and epistemic position, while questioning "who appears as the public" in issue-based democratic practices (per Flatow and Dewey: publics form organically around concerns like climate, balancing interests via debate and listening). Dutta proposed decolonised everyday democratic practices that actively incorporate marginalised knowledges (Global South, BIPOC, queer, migrants), continuous self-reflection on power and biases, dynamic social contract-making, and inclusive politics embracing the non-human world, transforming democracy into ongoing community processes beyond institutions, rooted in colonial awareness.

Ana Matan (Zagreb University) evaluated democratic innovations like participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies as alternatives to liberal democracy. According to Matan, democratic innovations have more weaknesses than strengths: people that engage in democratic

innovations are usually citizens that are already politically involved, the new procedures lack independent power and agenda control, they depend on elite mandates, risk cynicism when recommendations are ignored, and sometimes boost austerity. Matan then presented two case studies: The Karlovac citizens' assembly that attracted vocal insiders and repelled others because of formality, yielding unimplemented recommendations; and the small Croatian town of Pazin, where each communal unit gets to decide how to spend 10,000 €. This resulted ina high degree of implementation and solidarity, but at the same time, there wis minimal horizontal deliberation, which involved the same middle-aged male leaders. Matan ended her presentation underlining the Anthropocene strengths of democratic innovations, stating that they suit adaptive governance via local knowledge, are flexible and non-hierarchical, are able to react to problems without command structures, and are potentially valuable if integrated into Anthropocene-suited practices, despite general democratic shortcomings.

Jan Groos (Kiel University) proposed "alternative governmentality" as a positive framework beyond neoliberal critique for desirable democratic futures, analysing power triads in which governmentality is a power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument. Groos formed the hypothesis that an alternative governmentality might rely on political ecology as its major form of knowledge if it was focused on the quality of relations, instead of the control of populations, and makes use of a very different freedom and security nexus than liberal governmentality, namely one that employs political technologies like unconditional universal basic services and public luxury as technologies of existential security on the basis of which collective forms of freedom can thrive. According to Groos, contrary to liberalism, this would be a form of governing through freedom without the production of unnecessary fear. He argued that liberalism needs to govern through insecurity as an essential element of liberal freedoms. Instead he advocated for democratic planning over profit-driven markets as Anthropocene organisational rationale, requiring democratic investment control to repair metabolic rifts within planetary bounds (contra capital strike and capital fight). He criticised the linear assumptions of modernist planning, calling for post-sovereign ecological planning attentive to subjectivation and nature-culture divides. Groos found inspiration in environmentality (Foucault: governing environments, "rules of the game" not subjects), and asked whether it would be possible to develop a notion of alternative environmentality that takes up on certain forms of attentiveness and inclusion that we find within environmentality, without reproducing the notion of nature as a resource to be exploited and without treating nature as capital, urging a shift from a government of things to a government through things.

Panel 6 – From Social Contracts to Eco-social Contracts

Chair: Emilia Palonen

In the last Panel of the conference, *Nandor Knust* (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and *Rosamunde Elise Van Brakel* (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) connected the concept of the eco-social contract with the crime of ecocide. They described various ways of how the “eco-social contract momentum”can become a legal push to integrate environmental protections into governance: via making ecocide a potential fifth crime at the International Criminal Court, green courts, the idea of Pachamama as a legal personality, and EU environmental crime directives They criticised however the human-centric symbolic accountability that excludes nature itself from the contr act andadvocated for a more-than-human approach via a more-than-human framework that is inspired by science and technology studies and feminist new materialism. To conclude, they claimed a shift from top-down anthropocentric criminal law to bottom-up relational governance and mutual care across humans, animals, ecosystems and technologies, requiring new methodologies to give a fair voice to non-human agencies and achieve mutual understanding before any true eco-social contract.

Elvis Ng’andwe (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) continued with his presentation titled *Recasting Social Contracts in Motion: Regional Integration, Refugee Protection, and Democratic Governance in the Anthropocene (The East African Community as a Lens)*, arguing that in East Africa the Anthropocene manifests in regional governance failure with regard to global public goods like climate stability. This failure is evident in the extractive degradation of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), i.e. cobalt and lithium mining contaminating waters which leads to migration to Uganda, and creates cycles of deforestation and refugee pressure. In these,state-centric responses externalise costs while privatising benefits. He proposed redefining the eco-social contract regionally via East African Community institutions like the East African Court of Justice, the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights. Ngandwe cited the Ogiek and Maasai “our land is our life” victories that linked indigenous survival to ecological integrity. He also emphasised a bottom-up “East Africanisation” through shared Swahili culture and ancestry, and finally he required multiculturalism and solidarity against external actors.

Tom Scheunemann (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) argued that we have come to understand the forest as a figure and model for democracy in the Anthropocene: forests are non-hierarchical, resilient, relational and resistant to fascism, technocracy and human-centred control. They are also grounded in recognizable forms of death and sovereign subjectivity that allow us to reconnect with the world and its more than human potentialities. Drawing on forestry practice, he showed how large-scale forest death (e.g. plantations destroyed by pests) is often seen not as collapse but a resurgence of a new life. This, he argued, exposes how modern conceptual languages rely on a redemptive death. To make sense of the Anthropocene, death is always thought of as the event of a new beginning, a new round of democratic inclusion or

resurgence of power through life. By saturating forests with political meaning, he stated, we simultaneously make them disappear as genuinely other, this points to a form of death outside the life/death binary and calls into question whether our existing conceptual languages can still make sense of planetary life in the Anthropocene.

Cornelia Frings (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz) addressed the Anthropocene water crisis: man-made freshwater scarcity (groundwater depletion, drying soils) fuells allocation conflicts. She argued that political theory must develop concepts of normative distributive justice to guide reforms, since priority schemes and contested decisions currently lack explicit justification. Frings proposed a sufficiency-based pluralistic theory that is justified by a wide scope of justice and is both inter-species and intergenerational justice. This theory is applied practically through minimum thresholds and maximum thresholds. The minimum thresholds are based on basic needs, via the idea of sufficiency and priority for vulnerable groups, while maximum thresholds are based on precautionary anti-depletion, efficiency and the polluter/beneficiary-pays).

In the last contribution of the conference, *Rui F. Carvalho* (University of Coimbra) traced the evolution of the concept of eco-social contract through the aspects of the so-called polycrisis (mutually reinforcing crises like Eurozone debt, wars, migration, climate change): this lead to a conceptual development from an ecocentric “nature contract” to the Green New Deal-era that coupledecology with human rights, equality and reparations (late 2010s), to the recent communitarian 2.1 version of an ecosocial contract that emphasises local communities over abstract national and EU frames and criticises development metaphors. He demonstrated that a policy analysis of 50+ reports from 2009 to 2024 from the EU, the UN and ILO shows that the usage of the concept ecosocial contract is rare but growing (post-Green New Deal, especially in Europe), with policies leading theory towards eco-social pacts. He recommended avoiding methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism, prioritizing communities and peripheries, and empirical multi-method testing of models for resilient contracts beyond nature-society divides.

The particular highlights of the conference were the way the speakers spontaneously referred to each other in their contributions, the way they adapted their presentations to new ideas that came up in discussions and contributions, and how inspired they were by the mutual exchange. This demonstrates how important it is to address the role of the social contract and democracy in the Anthropocene and how essential it is to examine these issues in academic debates.