

# Sustaining the Unsustainable: Symbolic Politics and the Politics of Simulation

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## Abstract

Stirred by the contradiction between the mainstreamed castigation of *merely symbolic* eco-politics and the firm resolve of advanced consumer democracies to defend the core principles of democratic consumer capitalism, this article undertakes a meta-critique of the paradigm of symbolic politics. A tentative typology of different varieties of symbolic politics maps the terrain for a detailed analysis of symbolic politics in the popular understanding. A comprehensive cultural shift conceptualised as the *post-ecologist turn* is held responsible not only for a fundamental transformation of the ways in which late-modern societies frame and process their environmental problems, but also for the exhaustion of *authentic* eco-politics which, by implication, renders the critique of merely symbolic politics questionable. The concept of *simulative politics* is suggested as a more appropriate conceptualisation of late-modern eco-politics. Practices of simulative politics are presented as a key strategy which help late-modern societies to sustain what is known to be unsustainable.

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## 1. Too little – too late: Calls for effective action

Hurricane Katrina, environmental refugees, melting ice caps, the breath-taking resource consumption of the buzzing Chinese and Indian economies; issues like these have generated a new sense of eco-political urgency. The finiteness of resources, the limits to growth and the unsustainability of the western model of democratic consumer capitalism are becoming painfully evident. Repackaged into the discourse of *environmental security* (e.g. Dalby 2002; Manwaring 2002; Lacy 2005) eco-political issues have become a key concern at the very centres of global politics. The firm institutionalisation of eco-political actors, the unprecedented accumulation of eco-political knowledge, and the implementation of a wide range of environmental policy instruments have brought about significant improvements in many areas of

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eco-politics. Yet, whatever has been undertaken and achieved so far has at best tackled symptoms but never addressed the root causes of environmental decline. Even in the richest and technologically most advanced countries, the strategies of ecological modernisation and environmental management have been unable to halt, let alone reverse, the trajectory of environmental consumption and destruction. Technological progress has not brought about sufficiently *intelligent* solutions. Environmental economics has an at best erratic record of quantifying and internalising the massive costs which traditional economics routinely externalises. Environmental policy measures perpetually appear as half-hearted. What they accomplish is invariably too little and too late.

But undoubtedly, sustainability and *future-fitness* (Blühdorn 2004a, 2006a) have never figured more prominently in the discourse of policy makers from local city councils up to the WTO – and not just in the ecological sense. Throughout the industrialised world, there are serious concerns about the unsustainability of pensions systems, health care systems, transport systems, the system of representative democracy, and so forth. Accordingly, welfare reform, democratic renewal, economic reform etc. are as high on the agenda as ecological reform. In all of these policy areas there is a sense of acute crisis and much talk about ‘radical shake-ups’, ‘tough decisions’ and ‘hard policy roads’. There is a striking consensus between political elites and general electorates that it is time to stop *talking* about things and take *decisive action*: Cut through the rhetoric! Get down to the issues! But how serious and effective is this declaratory commitment to decisive action? Lip-service, spin doctoring, political show business are terms commonly used to express dissatisfaction with political and economic elites who are not genuinely committed to the values they are advertising, who always deliver less than they are promising, who are deceiving democratic electorates and credulous consumers. *Symbolic politics* is the term that captures both the criticism of insufficient policies and the criticism of those who make them.

The phenomenon of symbolic politics is as old as politics itself, yet in late-modern societies<sup>1</sup> it has gained unprecedented significance, and its quality and function have, this article will argue, fundamentally changed. Its rise has been facilitated by a range of factors including, inter alia, the ever growing complexity of political issues and interest constellations, the relocation of political discourse and competition into the realm of the mass media, and the crisis of legitimacy in contemporary politics. But symbolic politics, it is widely believed, only reaches so far. The new sense of urgency, not only in the field of eco-politics, derives from fundamental ‘doubts whether an autonomous politics of performance’, i.e. ‘the priority of presentation over content can be sustained in the long term’ (Nullmeier 2005:201). Surely there must be limits to the capacity of glossy rhetoric and political marketing to compensate for the progressive degeneration of politics in terms of its substance and its moral quality. There must be a point when *the chickens come home to roost*, when ‘the social crisis can no longer be concealed by symbolic activity’ (Meyer 1994:143). In the eco-political literature this has often been described as the point when *nature strikes back* and *takes revenge*. And as this point is feared to be nigh, there is wide spread demand, not only in eco-politics, for a more serious and effective politics that places less emphasis on rhetoric and presentation and more emphasis on the substantive issues and substantive policy making. But there are good reasons to believe that, in eco-

politics and elsewhere, this new discourse of seriousness and effectiveness does not really *abandon* symbolic politics but merely adds an *additional layer* of performance: the ‘performance of seriousness’ (Nullmeier 2005:202).<sup>ii</sup> Most importantly, this suspicion is nurtured by the unprecedented consensus of defence that protects the ‘blessed way of life’ (Fleischer 2001) in advanced modern societies, that secures the continuation of the system of democratic consumer capitalism, and that resolutely obstructs the exploration of any socio-economic alternatives.

Stirred by the contradiction between the mainstreamed castigation of *merely symbolic* politics and this consensus of defence, this article will suggest that the paradigm of *symbolic politics* is a rather one-dimensional explanation of eco-political insufficiency, and a very unsatisfactory conceptualisation of late-modern society’s eco-politics. Indeed this article will argue that the paradigm of symbolic politics, which had once been launched as a critical weapon against the ideological superstructure that protects an exploitative and enslaving system, has itself become an ideological tool that helps to sustain what it apparently criticises. For this purpose, i.e. for the meta-critique of the paradigm of symbolic politics and the narratives it implies, this article develops the concept of *simulative politics* which challenges a series of assumptions that are implicit in the notion of symbolic politics. The main argument to be elaborated is that despite their vociferous critique of *merely symbolic politics* and their declaratory resolve to take effective action, late-modern societies have neither the will nor the ability to *get serious*. Their *performance of seriousness*, however, is an effective response to certain challenges which are particular to the late-modern condition, and the discourses of symbolic politics are an important part of that performance. They are an integral part of the *politics of simulation*<sup>iii</sup> by means of which late-modern society manages to sustain – at least for the time being – what is known to be unsustainable.

This argument will be developed in four stages: In order to facilitate a differentiated understanding of the complex phenomena which tend to be conflated into the concept of symbolic politics, the next section distinguishes several different and interlocking dimensions of symbolic politics. Section three narrows the perspective to the understanding of symbolic politics that Murray Edelman (1964, 1971) once established and popularised, and explores the narrative of *authentic politics* which this concept always implies. Focusing on eco-politics, in particular, section four then elaborates how the *post-ecologist turn* has undermined the foundations of both the popular critique of symbolic politics and its supposedly more authentic counterparts. On this basis section five investigates the specifically late-modern quality and function of symbolic politics and reinterprets, drawing on Baudrillard’s concept of simulation, the contemporary critique of symbolic politics as a form of *simulative politics*. The concluding section raises some questions about the validity and applicability of the model of simulative politics.

## **2. Dimensions of symbolic politics**

‘There is no doubt about the necessity of the use of symbols in politics – and thus also in environmental politics’ (Hansjürgens 2000:146). The term symbolic politics is used in a variety of different ways, and although in political practice the different

phenomena to which it may refer are often closely interlinked, it is useful to try some analytical distinctions. In particular, a more differentiated approach can help to illustrate that any generalised condemnation of symbolic politics is inappropriate and that the common distinction between symbolic politics that is staged for the media and real politics that brokers hard interests behind closed doors is too simplistic. As the tentative typology set out in figure 4.1 illustrates, there is, firstly, an important difference between symbolic politics understood simply as the use of symbols in political communication (type A), and symbolic politics understood as ineffective replacement action for policies which would be genuinely effective in achieving their declared purpose (type B). Symbolic politics in the first sense, i.e. the use of symbols as tools employed by political actors when communicating – verbally or non-verbally – with each other or with the wider public is indispensable for political actors of any provenance. Symbols extend the significance of a statement or action beyond the directly articulated meaning or immediate purpose. They are ‘vehicles for the imagination of objects’ (Sarcinelli 1989a:295); they ‘help the mind to see the potentialities in a situation’ (Edelman 2001:13); they ‘do not reflect but transcend the day-to-day reality’ (Sarcinelli 1989a:295). Symbols refer to a body of social values, knowledge and practices which offer guidance for interpreting, processing and coping with specific issues or situations. Whilst allowing for a variety of interpretations, symbols mobilise pre-existing cognitive patterns and trigger ritualised forms of behaviour or action. As a tool of political integration and mobilisation (type AI), i.e. a tool for creating a sense of unity and community among a group of people and for providing them with a shared narrative about their current situation, their political goals and their collective political agency, ‘political symbolism’ (Sarcinelli) is therefore equally essential for anti-democratic authoritarians (type AI.1) aiming to control and instrumentalise credulous crowds, and for emancipative and democratic social movements (type AI.2) whose ‘symbolic politics from below’ (Nullmeier 2005:213, referring to Meyer 1992) anticipates the liberated alternative to the *status quo*.<sup>iv</sup>

*(figure 4.1 about here)*

Beyond its function as a tool for integration and mobilisation, the political use of symbols is, furthermore, also a strategy of complexity reduction (type AII). In highly differentiated societies where politics is rarely based on direct contact between decision makers and those who are affected by these decisions, where political discourse often centres on issues which are well beyond the citizens’ world of personal experience or even imagination, and where the management of these issues by far outstretches anyone’s intellectual and moral capabilities, this second function of symbolism in politics is particularly important. In this understanding, symbolic politics is the condensation or compression of complex and remote issues into readily understandable, preferably visual, symbols. Sarcinelli (1987, 1989a and b, 1998), Sartor (2000) and many others have explained the increasing significance of symbolic politics in this sense as a response firstly to the imperatives of the media industry (type AII.1), and secondly to the desire at the grass roots of society for simplicity, orientation and meaning (AII.2) (Dörner 1996:25). For political actors, this kind of symbolic politics is a strategy for reducing the risks which come with the ever rising complexity of political issues and the increasing density of information and discourse in the media society. It is also a strategy of media management, whereby political acts

are carefully choreographed in order to maximise the chance that journalists and media makers take them up, and minimise the transformation of the intended message in the *mediation* process. In so far as complexity reduction is always a matter of selectively highlighting certain dimensions at the expense of eclipsing others; and in so far as the symbolic images arranged for the mass media, rather than ‘speaking for themselves’ release, first and foremost, the political messages which have been packaged into them, symbolic politics in this understanding always entails the strategic construction of realities and manipulation of mass audiences. Nevertheless, symbolic politics as a means of complexity reduction is neither intrinsically immoral nor necessarily a cause of ineffective policies. In advanced modern societies it is just as indispensable as symbolic politics in the sense discussed before. It has become a categorical imperative of political communication.

The political use of symbols as discussed so far (A-types) needs to be clearly distinguished from symbolic politics in the sense of *substitute* or *placebo* politics (B-types). Symbolic politics in this second sense implies political action that does not achieve its apparent purpose because the respective policies ‘do not have teeth’. This does not mean to say that such political action is in every respect ineffective – they may be very effective politically – but from the perspective of the declared purpose it certainly is, and it may therefore be described as *replacement action* and *action replacement*. Once again two varieties of this surrogate politics need to be distinguished: It may either result from a political dilemma which does not leave any viable alternatives (type BI), or it may be a strategic choice that consciously avoids alternative forms of action (type BII). A political dilemma that does not leave any viable alternatives may, for example, arise if a polity, whilst agreeing in general terms on the urgency of a problem, fails to achieve consensus about the specific policy goals and appropriate means of accomplishing them (type BI.1). If agreement is then reached it is often a compromise that gives rise to soft, watered down policy approaches which, whilst fulfilling the demand that *action ought to be taken immediately*, make only a marginal contribution to resolving the problem that was supposed to be addressed. A political dilemma of a slightly different nature may arise if imperatives of *political* effectiveness, i.e. to generate and stabilise power, are in conflict with imperatives of *other forms of* effectiveness (type BI.2). Whilst in the previous scenario the dilemma arises from the diversity of interests which the political system is supposed to take into account and represent, this slightly different dilemma can be traced back to incompatibilities between the priorities of the *political* system and those of *other* societal function systems.<sup>v</sup>

If surrogate politics is a matter of strategic choice rather than inescapable pressures, i.e. if it is the intentional avoidance of theoretically available, more effective alternatives (type BII), this may either simply be a matter of convenience, i.e. the attempt to avoid – or at least postpone – uncomfortable implications of a policy measure that is in principle accepted to be necessary and appropriate (type BII.1); or it may be a cunning and sinister strategic instrument used by power elites to deceive the public into believing that its concerns are being heard and addressed, whilst the elites are secretly pursuing their own interests which probably conflict with those of the public (type BII.2). An important difference of this variety of symbolic politics in comparison to the BI-varieties, is that in the latter the political class, rather than cunningly abusing their power for deceiving the masses, appeared themselves as

victims of unfavourable conditions which are beyond their control. The distinctive feature of symbolic politics in the present sense (type BII.2), however, is the malicious deception of the unsuspecting and vulnerable public. This type of symbolic politics is geared towards generating false impressions under the cover of which political elites may pursue their own agendas.

It is worth reiterating that in political practice the different forms of symbolic politics which are analytically distinguished in this tentative typology, often cannot be neatly separated from each other. Political action has several interlocking layers and levels, and features of different analytical types of symbolic politics blend into each other. Nevertheless, this typology is useful because it illustrates that symbolic politics is a highly complex phenomenon that requires differentiated analytical approaches and sensitive criteria of assessment. The typology demonstrates that generalising assertions like that ‘symbolic politics is based on strategic action of political elites, who are interested in the in-transparency of the *true* and *underlying* processes of politics’ (Nullmeier 2005:199; original emphases) are simplistic and unhelpful. It also sheds doubts on the popular idea of the ‘duplication of the political’ (Offe 1976/2005:x) according to which ‘politics breaks down into two realities: that of polished façades which is relayed to the citizens primarily through the media, and the politics of interests which is secretly conducted behind closed doors’ (Nullmeier 2005:199).<sup>vi</sup>

### **3. A narrative of deception, repression and authentic (eco-)politics**

As regards the insufficiency of environmental policy, much of this can be explained on the basis of symbolic politics types BI.1, BI.2, BII.1, or a combination of parameters which are analytically distinguished in these types. Yet, the common rhetoric of and complaint about *merely symbolic* environmental policies insinuates the prevalence of type BII.2. This is the meaning which Murray Edelman (1964, 1971) implied when he introduced the term symbolic politics, and today ‘we are making implicit reference to the basic argument of his book, whenever we describe politics or a policy as symbolic’ (Nullmeier 2005:199). For Edelman symbolic politics was clearly a matter of political elites making strategic use of symbols, myths and rituals in order to deceive and control the mass public and in order to maximise their own interests. Symbolic politics in this sense is subject to at least four kinds of criticism:

- a) it is mere performance, illusion, appearance;
- b) it is inadequate with regard to the concrete issues which politics is supposed to address;
- c) it is morally rotten because it aims to distort political realities, deceive righteous citizens and conceal hidden agendas;
- d) it is politically damaging in that it undermines public trust in political institutions, replaces free rational public deliberation with the dark power of psychological manipulation and emotional mobilisation, and impairs the ability of citizens to make effective use of their democratic rights.

The first of these criticisms regards the inferior *ontological quality* of BII.2-type symbolic politics. The second criticism concerns its *effectiveness* or problem solving

capacity. The third concerns the *ethical predisposition* of political actors adopting strategies of symbolic politics. And the last aspect focuses on the *effect on the democratic culture*. Together, these four dimensions of insufficiency define the respects in which (eco-)politics supposedly ‘can and ought to be different’ (Hansjürgens and Lübke-Wolff 2000:12). If *authentic politics* is an appropriate term for this supposedly better alternative, it may be described as politics that is genuinely committed to responding to the citizens concerns and to effectively addressing the ‘real issues’. Figure 4.2 summarises the expectations which are implied in the notion of authentic politics and contrasts them with the characteristics of symbolic politics.

(figure 4.2 about here)

In a more general sense, authentic politics is the form of politics that is committed to the emancipatory ideals of European Enlightenment and pursues the Habermasian *project of modernity*.<sup>vii</sup> In so far as authentic politics is the ideal of politics which has never been realised but has always been a political vision for the mobilisation, integration and motivation of emancipatory movements; in so far as this ideal of authentic politics is expected to reconcile the deficient and alienated political reality of the present with the emancipative and empowering visions of the future, the notion of authentic politics is highly charged with symbolic value.<sup>viii</sup> It may seem ironic that in popular language the term symbolic politics is used to describe the opposite of authentic politics which at best *pretends* to be committed to the values and ideals of the enlightenment tradition. Yet in the sense that symbolic politics always presents itself as, stands for, and refers to its authentic counterpart it is indeed symbolic. And the popular discourse *about* symbolic politics always implies a story of deception and authenticity, of self-interested elites and disempowered masses, of domination and liberation and so forth. It evokes the image of committed, righteous, democratic citizens which, rather than being victimised by self-interested and malicious elites and their strategies of deception and manipulation, ought to be allowed to take political affairs into their own hands. This popular discourse of symbolic politics produces a societal self-description in which society portrays itself as being able and willing to do things differently – to genuinely ecologise.

In a number of respects, however, this very modernist story of symbolic politics and its counterpart provides a rather inadequate account of late-modern society and the ways in which it frames and manages its eco-political problems. For in the late-modern condition, the notion of authentic politics – be it in an ecological or any other sense – has, arguably, become *symbolically exhausted* and by implication its counterpart (symbolic politics) has become *symbolically empty*. In late-modern societies ‘the other, to which’ symbolic politics ‘seems to refer [...] exists exclusively as an appearance emerging in the perception of the symbolic act itself’ (Meyer 1994:139f). Whilst the belief in authentic (eco-)politics has evaporated, symbolic politics is, Meyer suggests, ‘more than anything [...] an intuitively meaningful performance whereby the context of reference to which it seems to refer does not actually exist other than as a deceptive illusion’ (Meyer 1992:54). ‘A symbol, however’, Meyer continues, ‘which speaks only for itself is not a symbol’, and what the popular discourse critically refers to as merely symbolic politics ‘does not contain the very ingredient which is the defining criterion of its form’ (ibid.). In the second half of this article the objective is, therefore, first to explore in more detail what the

exhaustion of authentic (eco-)politics entails, and then to attempt a sociologically more adequate conceptualisation of what can no longer be described as symbolic politics because it is symbolically empty and no longer ‘contains the very ingredient which is the defining criterion of its form’.

#### **4. The *post-ecologist turn* and the exhaustion of authentic (eco-)politics**

In the preface to the 1990 edition of *Politik als Ritual*<sup>x</sup> Edelman himself acknowledged that parts of the analysis which he had developed in the 1960s and early 1970s had become inappropriate. He noted that in contemporary consumer democracies ‘the disempowered are so well socialised’ that genuine challenges to the established system have virtually disappeared, and citizens ‘perceive the tactics of disobedience and disruption as illegal, immoral and risky’ (Edelman 2005:xiii).<sup>x</sup> Edelman recognized that contemporary citizens have positively embraced the constitutive principles of democratic consumer capitalism, yet he continued to refer to them as the ‘disempowered’. Indeed, he described the virtual absence of radical challenges to the prevalence of symbolic politics as ‘a shattering indicator of the degree of alienation suffered by the public, because it illustrates that a significant part of the citizenry no longer really *expects* their interests to be represented by the state’ (Edelman 2005:xviii; my emphasis). Being firmly committed to the tradition of critical theory, Edelman held fast to the categories of alienation and domination, yet he got caught up in a dilemma that he shared with critical theorists like Adorno or Baudrillard: Once what Adorno called the *delusive context* of formally democratic consumer capitalism has become *universal*; once political reality ‘is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference’ (Baudrillard 2001:173), it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine that things could also be different and to desire that they ought to be. Following the ‘autonomisation of the symbolical’ (Nullmeier 2005:201) and the adaptation of identity needs to what the established system provides, categories such as alienation, false consciousness or symbolic politics lose their meaning. The critical project, i.e. the emancipatory struggle for authentic politics and a reconciled and liberated society, then simply runs out of steam.

In the realm of eco-political thought, this exhaustion of the critical paradigm may be conceptualised as the *post-ecologist turn*. It is the result of major cultural shifts including what, making reference to Inglehart (1977), may be called the *silent counter-revolution* (Blühdorn 2002), the transition from Beck’s *risk society* (1992) to the contemporary *opportunity society*, and what I have elsewhere called the *post-democratic revolution* (Blühdorn 2004a, 2006b). In the same sense that what Inglehart described as the *silent revolution*, what Beck called the *risk society*, and what the social movements celebrated as *grassroots democracy* became constitutive elements of ecologist<sup>xi</sup> thinking, their counterparts are constitutive of the *post-ecologist turn*, a paradigm shift that may in general terms be associated with the period since the beginning of the 1990s.

The first of these expressions, i.e. the concept of the silent counter-revolution, aims to capture a revaluation of material interest preferences vis-à-vis Inglehart’s post-

material needs. Inglehart had noted that in the materially affluent industrial societies of the 1970s, the marginal utility of further material accumulation was declining and post-material interest preferences were gaining in relative significance. In late-modern consumer societies, however, this development has arguably reversed. As self-construction, self-expression and self-experience have, to an unprecedented extent, become a matter of product choices and acts of consumption; and as value pluralism, pressures for flexibility, ever accelerated innovation, reduced protection through public welfare systems, and so forth have given rise to a new climate of both material as well as cultural insecurity, the marginal utility of libertarian post-materialism is declining again: in the present climate, neo-material and post-libertarian strategies seem more conducive for the achievement of autonomy and security. The 'political economy of uncertainty' (Baumann 1999) and the permeation of identity by the market have triggered *post*-postmaterialist security reflexes.

The notion of the *opportunity society*, secondly, aims to indicate that the unprecedented technological, environmental, economic and cultural uncertainties which Beck had conceptualised as the non-insurable and unmanageable threats that are characteristic of the *risk society* have successfully been reconceptualised as unprecedented *opportunities* which are to be realised. The new opportunity society is no longer governed by Beck's imperatives of risk avoidance (1997) but instead by technological optimism, aggressive innovation and the pursuit of first mover advantages. Together, the silent counter-revolution and the optimistic outlook of the opportunity society lead to a positive identification with the established system of democratic consumer capitalism: this system offers optimal conditions for the realisation, expression and experience of the consumer-Self. As the consumer identity can be realised only within but not beyond the established system, potential experiences of exclusion and alienation can at best trigger demands for tighter inclusion into the system but not the desire to opt out of consumer capitalism and for abandoning it wholesale. Indeed, as alternative political and economic systems, to the extent that they can at all be imagined, represent a threat to the realisation of the consumer identity, the uncompromising defence of the established system becomes a categorical imperative.

The concept of the *post-democratic revolution*, finally, aims to indicate that the euphoric democratic optimism which had inspired the social movements' demand for civic empowerment and self-organisation has metamorphosed into democratic disillusionment and sclerosis. Contemporary debates about spreading political apathy, cynicism, or even the *end of politics* (e.g. Baumann 1999; Boggs 2000; Gamble 2000; Crouch 2004; Dalton 2004; Furedi 2005) illustrate the decline of the social movements' democratic DIY-enthusiasm. A supposedly more efficient *politics of delegation* (Thatcher and Stone Sweet 2002; Flinders 2004a, 2004b) that empowers scientific experts, charismatic leaders, non-democratic regulatory bodies, or market instruments is expected to deliver top-down what has not been achieved bottom-up. For the social movements of the 1970s and 1980s – and for ecologists and Green Parties in particular – *anti-politics* had been the rebellion against established mainstream politics and the project of replacing this at best symbolic politics by the authentic politics that was supposedly being rehearsed in the societal margins. Yet, following *the third transformation of democracy* (Blühdorn 2006b) anti-politics has fundamentally changed its meaning: it is frustration with politics and complete

withdrawal into the private sphere (political apathy, disengagement); it is *depoliticisation* (delegation) in the sense outlined above; and it is the obsessive pursuit of personal missions covering anything from fox hunting to paedophiles. Whilst the proliferation of itemised protest has become a defining characteristic of contemporary *protest societies* (Pross 1992; Meyer and Tarrow 1998), this political activism has little to do with the struggle for any societal alternatives.<sup>xii</sup>

Together, the neo-materialist counter-revolution, the optimistic perspective of the opportunity society, and the post-democratic revolution have fundamentally changed the way in which advanced European societies frame and manage their environmental problems; they have fundamentally changed the value system on the basis of which environmental problems are formulated and remedial strategies devised.<sup>xiii</sup> Indeed, in the era of post-ecologism, the new social movements' whole project of correcting the trajectory of modernity by tying the process of modernisation to a revised understanding of democracy, efficiency, futurity and identity has comprehensively failed (Blühdorn 2004a, 2006a). Instead, late-modern societies are fully focused on reinforcing at all societal levels their technological and managerial systems of security, surveillance and control which are designed to protect exactly those structures and principles of the established order which are at the very core of the problem of unsustainability.<sup>xiv</sup> Within this context, the ecological virtues which the new social movements once sought to establish as the foundation of a radically different society have themselves turned into a problem. Commitment to minimal disturbance of eco-systems, to long term stability, the deceleration of change, a steady state economy, risk avoidance, decentralisation, low-grade mobility, democratic deliberation, consensual decision making, social justice and redistribution, moderation of consumption, and so forth: in the post-ecologist context these ecological virtues have become symbols of inefficiency and resistance to innovation. Figure 4.3 collates some features which are characteristic of the era of post-ecologism. It supplements what has been said so far with a number of additional points which cannot be further elaborated within the confines of this article. It illustrates how the post-ecologist worldview is very different from the older eco-political narratives of alienation, domination, exploitation and so forth.

(figure 4.3 about here)

The notion of the post-ecologist turn does not imply any claims that radical ecologism has ever been a mainstream ideology, nor does it impose homogeneity onto the differentiated lifestyles and worldviews of late-modern societies. The point is rather to capture a late-modern *Zeitgeist* that is markedly different from the values and visions which had once inspired the new social movements. From a sociological point of view the post-ecologist turn cannot usefully be described in normative terms as cultural *decline* or accelerating *alienation*. Nor is it simply the victory of the neo-liberal ideology which has successfully been imposed by free market strategists. Instead, the post-ecologist turn is a complex cultural transformation in which much more inclusive understandings of eco-politics are superseded by technical and managerial approaches which are symbolically empty, i.e. which deal with short term and narrowly defined problems, but are no longer inspired by any comprehensive ecological alternative to the established socio-economic system. Thus, the notion of authentic (eco-)politics has become symbolically exhausted, and its counterpart, the practice and critique of

symbolic politics, has become symbolically empty: the Other that it claims to represent has neither empirical nor imagined reality. Whilst the hegemony of techno-managerial win-win-win thinking<sup>xv</sup> has not exterminated narratives of alienation and radical change, the belief in authentic politics, i.e. the once popular suggestion that the fulfilment of the *authentic* Self and its *reconciliation* with a *liberated* nature can only lie beyond the confines of the established system of consumer democracy is an idea which late-modern individuals can no longer relate to. By implication, the popular narrative of symbolic politics which had once been launched as a critical weapon against ideological deception has itself become ideological: it tells a dubious story of eco-political oppression and alienation and conceals the post-ecologist resolve to defend the ecologically exploitative and destructive system of democratic consumer capitalism.

## 5. The performance of seriousness

For Edelman the epitome of alienation had been the condition where citizens no longer *seriously expect* (anticipate) that politicians will really represent their interests and implement their demands. This *normalisation* of democratic deficits was the outer limit of what he could think within the critical paradigm. What his model of symbolic politics can not capture is a condition where citizens articulate demands which they do not want to see seriously implemented. Put differently, Edelman's model is not suitable for a condition where citizens expect – in the sense of both *want* and *anticipate* – that the government *does not* seriously implement the demands which they, nevertheless, continue to articulate. This is a seemingly schizophrenic situation where citizens want politics to be no more than symbolic, but still complain about democratic deficits and 'merely symbolic' politics. This form of political communication can be aptly described with Nullmeier's expression 'performance of seriousness'. It is a political game that is, arguably, characteristic of late-modern society, and that is motivated by the characteristic dilemma caused by the post-ecologist turn and the exhaustion of authentic politics.

In their uncompromising commitment to defending the economic and political system that provides the best imaginable framework for the realisation of the late-modern consumer-Self, contemporary societies are confronted with three major challenges: Firstly, there are problems like resource shortages, climate change, species extinction, epidemics and so forth which constantly provide proof of the *ecological unsustainability* of the established system which no technological or managerial ingenuity has so far managed to fix. Secondly, late-modern society and its pattern of identity construction are firmly based on the *principle of exclusion* (Blühdorn 2003) which breeds social conflicts, nationally and internationally, which in the long term no security and surveillance technology can keep under control. These conflicts are a persistent reminder of the *social unsustainability* of democratic consumer capitalism. And thirdly, late-modern societies are severely threatened by what may be described as a *crisis of self-referentiality* which provides evidence of the *normative* or *cultural unsustainability* of the established system. This crisis of self-referentiality surfaces, for example, as the individualised experience of spiritual disorientation and emptiness, but perhaps more seriously, it manifestly threatens the system of democratic politics which seems to centre ever more exclusively on its own

reproduction. Furthermore, this crisis of self-referentiality also has the potential to destabilise the economic system: For its own reproduction, the system of the market depends on the existence of its counterpart, i.e. of something that can be marketed. Not only in material terms, but also in terms of extra-economic *values* that underpin the price of products and services, the economic system requires its non-economic Other which is, however, an increasingly scarce resource.<sup>xvi</sup>

Thus, the system of capitalist consumer democracy is threatened by a triple crisis of unsustainability, and late-modern societies are confronted with a severe problem: In order to address the crisis of unsustainability and ward off the threats of ecological, social and normative collapse, they need to radically change the established system, yet there is no vision of any viable alternatives, nor is there the political will or ability to deviate from the established path. It is the *late-modern dilemma* that following the post-ecologist turn and the exhaustion of authentic (eco-)politics the triple crisis of unsustainability *cannot* be resolved, but neither can it *not be* resolved. Against the background of this dilemma, the key question that guided Edelman's discussion of symbolic politics – How does the ruling class succeed in securing the support and cooperation of those who they aim to dominate, instrumentalise and exploit? – is superseded by the new question: How may the irresolvable problems of ecological, social and normative unsustainability be *managed* and thus the unsustainable sustained? This is a genuinely post-ecologist problem which is categorically different from ecologist problem perceptions. For the analysis of this problem and of the ways in which it is handled the sociological tool-kit of critical theory and symbolic politics is no longer sufficient.

Meyer (1994) provides important pointers as to how late-modern societies manage this problem of sustaining the unsustainable. Focusing on one particular societal subsystem, the system of democratic politics, he highlights the widening discrepancy between rising popular pressures for better justification and legitimation of politics and the diminishing capability of the political system to generate this legitimacy. The depletion of this essential resource, legitimacy, combined with the persistent failure to find new sources of legitimacy, account for the sustainability crisis of contemporary consumer democracies. And in the management of this sustainability crisis, Meyer suggests, symbolic politics is playing a crucial role: the 'symbolic performance of politics' (1994:141) 'offers its services as an effective and versatile gap filler' (ibid.:140). 'Performed show-politics', he argues, closes 'the delegitimising gap' (ibid.). What this 'show politics' performs is that the political class are still offering alternative visions, that electorates are still making a choice between these visions, and that political institutions are still capable of then implementing their decisions. The 'symbolic performance of politics' thus serves the *performative regeneration* of legitimacy, which is a resource on which the system of politics vitally depends but which it finds increasingly difficult to reproduce. Meyer does not make a very clear conceptual distinction between traditional-style *symbolic politics* and the contemporary *symbolic performance of politics*, yet he does point out that in the late-modern context, 'the function' of symbolic politics 'has changed in a fundamental way' (Meyer 1994:139). And his discussion of the performative regeneration of legitimacy clearly illustrates in what way it has supposedly changed: contemporary-style symbolic politics no longer primarily serves the deception, control or domination

of the masses (Edelman), and also not primarily the function of complexity reduction (Sarcinelli), but it is a tool for the stabilisation of destabilised systems.

Thinking along similar lines Nullmeier, too, suggests that in a context where the rituals of democratic politics have ‘no other purpose and no guiding interest’ beyond the stabilisation and reproduction of the political system itself (2005:201), symbolic politics might ‘no longer serve the purpose of deception’ (ibid.:200). He suggests that contemporary ‘calls for a more serious and more substantive rather than aesthetic politics’ may have to be understood not so much as a ‘turn away from symbolic politics’ but instead as ‘a change in the chosen *variety of symbolic politics*’ (2005:202; my emphasis). The expression ‘performance of seriousness’ is his provisional label for this *new variety* of symbolic politics, and what this expression aims to capture is exactly what Meyer calls the ‘symbolic performance of politics’. The analysis of the post-ecologist turn and the exhaustion of authentic politics makes clearly visible how this new variety is very different from its traditional predecessor. Its primary function is no longer simply to conceal the true interests of political elites, but what the ‘performance of seriousness’ and the ‘symbolic performance of politics’ perform is something much larger: it is the vitality and viability of politics itself. It is the performance that the system of democratic politics is at all relevant. Ultimately, what is being performed is that in the context of a system-centred, depoliticised and efficiency-oriented global (late) modernity (Blühdorn 2004a, 2006a), the traditional Habermasian *project of modernity*, i.e. the vision of authentic politics, is still alive. As an anti-dote to the triple crisis of unsustainability, i.e. as a tool for the *management* of the late-modern problem that cannot be *resolved*, this performative regeneration of authentic politics is indispensable. It stabilises the narrative of ecological (and other) sustainability, it pacifies the excluded, and it gives reassurance about the existence of the non-economic Other. And in this performance, the critical discourse which castigates the prevalence of *merely symbolic* politics is playing a lead role: Whatever the perceived and declared intentions of those who are engaging in it, this critical discourse is a prime location for the performative regeneration of authentic politics, and thus a vital tool for sustaining the unsustainable.

Building on Baudrillard’s concept of *simulation*, this new variety of symbolic politics can suitably be referred to as *simulative politics*. Reaching well beyond the narrow realm of eco-politics and the unsustainability of contemporary consumer democracies, Baudrillard conceptualises the loss of authenticity and the exclusive preoccupation with signs, symbols and performances as the central problem of late-modern societies. He describes the desperate attempts to regenerate the belief in the authentic as ‘the characteristic hysteria of our time’ (Baudrillard 2001:183). And the preferred strategy that late-modern societies are using for this purpose, Baudrillard suggests, is the strategy of *simulation*. Simulation on this account is the use of symbols, signs and images which do not *represent* or *refer* to anything that is authentic, but which themselves *produce* or *perform* a reality, and present themselves as evidence for its authenticity. Simulative politics then is, using Meyer’s words, an exercise in which ‘the fusion of presentation (*Darstellung*) and imagination (*Vorstellung*) of politics replaces its production (*Herstellung*)’ (1994:140). It is the ‘artificial revitalisation’ (Baudrillard 2001:184) of the authentic, the ‘simulated generation of difference’ (ibid.:170) by means of which late-modern societies are trying ‘to revive’ the

‘moribund principle’ of authenticity (ibid.:176), by which they ‘rejuvenate [...] the fiction of the real’ (ibid.:172).

Simulative politics thus responds to the symbolic exhaustion of authentic politics and the symbolic emptiness of symbolic politics. As the performance of seriousness, the performance of authentic (eco-)politics, it is the form of political communication that – as was outlined above – articulates demands which are *not supposed* to be taken seriously and implemented, but which are nevertheless constantly rearticulated with politicians being criticised – as part of the performance – for not implementing them. This seemingly non-sensical form of political communication is specifically geared towards the late-modern problem that the belief in, the desire for and the capability of authentic (eco-)politics is exhausted but still indispensable for the stabilisation of the ecologically, socially and normatively unsustainable system of democratic consumer capitalism. The performative regeneration of authentic politics is the key to the post-ecologist problem of sustaining the unsustainable.

(figure 4.4 about here)

Moving beyond the critical paradigm of symbolic politics, the notion of simulative politics thus questions the narrative of manipulation and domination. It challenges the distinction between the good (authentic) public and the bad (malicious) elites. It shifts the emphasis away from the power differential between so-called producers and so-called recipients of symbolic politics; it suggests something like a tacit strategic community between the public and its political elites; it supplements the idea of immoral deception of certain sections of society by other sections by the idea of a practice of *societal self-deception* (Blühdorn 2007); it shifts the emphasis from the activity of *symbolic representation* of the Other to the activity of *simulative regeneration* of the Other; and it counterbalances the focus on myth in the negative sense (superstition, lie, irrationality), by the notion of myth in the positive sense as a story that helps to generate meaning and sustain what would otherwise be unsustainable. These distinctive features of the paradigm of simulative politics are summarised in the figure 4.4 and contrasted with the paradigm of symbolic politics.

## **6. Where are the data? What is the point?**

The objective of this article has been to critically investigate the popular description of contemporary eco-politics as *merely symbolic* politics. It has been argued that from a sociological point of view the paradigm of *symbolic politics* is an unsatisfactory conceptualisation of late-modern society’s eco-politics and late-modern politics more generally. Indeed it has been suggested that this paradigm which had once been launched as a critical weapon against ideological deception has itself become ideological: it tells a dubious story of eco-political oppression and alienation; it conceals the post-ecologist resolve to defend the ecologically exploitative and destructive system of democratic consumer capitalism; and by performing the will and possibility of *authentic* eco-politics, it actually helps to sustain what it apparently criticises. Taking the perspective of eco-political and social theory, the analysis has endeavoured to capture the specific condition of late-modern society which gives rise to a form of political communication through which late-modern society distances

itself from eco-political practices to which it at the same time fully subscribes. The diagnosis of the post-ecologist turn and of the exhaustion of authentic (eco-)politics has prepared the ground for the paradigm of *simulative politics*. This analytical paradigm suggests that the pervasive criticism of *merely symbolic* politics and the ostentatious declaratory commitment to effective action must not be read – in the ecologist sense – as evidence of the political will and ability to address and resolve the problems of unsustainability but instead – in the post-ecologist sense – as a societal strategy for sustaining the unsustainable.

The model of simulative politics is not restricted to the analysis of contemporary eco-politics. Its centre piece is the performative regeneration of the exhausted dualisms of modernity in general, and it can therefore productively be applied wherever the problems inherent to the late-modern condition manifest themselves.<sup>xviii</sup> The suggested theory of simulative politics is to the critical discourse of symbolic politics what the latter is to the political practices which it criticises. In other words, the theory of simulative politics represents an extension of the critical paradigm. As the critical investigation of the societal self-description that is produced in the discourse of symbolic politics, it is the attempt to undertake a form of meta-critique – which is, however, itself disabled by the exhaustion of authentic politics. In conclusion one may ask: But where are the data? Where is the evidence? Can the thesis of the post-ecologist turn and the assertion that the critical discourse of symbolic politics including its more or less explicit demand for authentic politics is no more than the *performance of seriousness* be empirically verified?

With a mixture of admiration and critique commentators once noted that ‘Edelman presents a style of political analysis that self-confidently forsakes the formalised and quantitative techniques of the present-style social sciences’ (Offe 1976/2005:ix). Edelman was praised for reasserting the ‘critical enlightenment capabilities of political science’ which the discipline has by and large lost in the process of its cooptation as a professionalised service provider to the established system (ibid:ix). Yet he was criticised for presenting his analyses ‘in a rather essayistic fashion’ without ‘the required empirical verification and verifiability’ (Nullmeier 2005:214/5). Undoubtedly, this criticism of Edelman’s model of symbolic politics is applicable to the model of simulative politics as well. Yet it is worth calling to mind that it is nonsensical to expect empirical proof for the models of social and political theory. It is the very nature and task of social and political theory to look beyond the restrictions of established worldviews. The empirical methods and standards of verifiability, however, which are expected of the *professional* social sciences, tie social theory into the system and into the role of a service provider. In other words, these methods and standards are applicable only to the extent that social science serves the purpose of stabilising and reproducing the established system. Speaking in Luhmannite terms one might say: Communications must adhere to a system’s code only if they want to contribute to that system’s *autopoiesis*. But surely there is much more to sociological enquiry than addressing the problems which the established system wants to see resolved.

So the question for empirical evidence is misconceived because the whole point is to reach *beyond* established societal self-descriptions whilst anything that is acceptable as empirical evidence would invariably just *reproduce* these societal self-descriptions.

Still, it is entirely legitimate to demand *empirical plausibility*. It therefore seems advisable to anticipate and respond to at least some probable counter-arguments to the approach that has been developed here. One of these might be a point that has briefly been touch upon above, namely that the theorem of the post-ecologist turn does not take account of the plurality of competing and conflicting views which are characteristic of contemporary consumer democracies; that it is plainly wrong to claim that ecologism has ever been more than a marginal social movement ideology; and that it is difficult to overlook that there are still plenty of radical movements and activists who, if interviewed, would most certainly reject any suggestions that they have turned post-ecologist. These points are valid and fully taken. But they are entirely consistent with the observation that late-modern societies are framing and processing their environmental problems primarily in ways (as sketched in figure 4.3) which are radically different from those promoted by the progressive social movements. And if these late-modern practices are measured against the standards of ecologism, they can be described as post-ecologist irrespective of the question of to what extent ecologism ever represented something like a collective movement outlook and identity. And in the same sense it is also entirely plausible and legitimate to explain the evolution of this post-ecologist *Zeitgeist* by making reference to certain shifts in social values, self-perceptions, preferences and practices which can indeed be empirically verified, albeit not within the confines of this article.

It may furthermore be argued that the claim of the exhaustion of authentic politics is evidently wrong because there is plenty of empirical evidence that people still demand it. The assertion that these demands are not genuine and that these people are merely engaging in a *performance of seriousness* seems rather arrogant, and one may also raise the question from what kind of cognitive position and with what kind of intellectual resources such a diagnosis may be made. It is important to note that the practices of simulation and the performance of seriousness which have been discussed in this article cannot be described as conscious strategies which are deliberately adopted by individual or collective actors. The point of the analysis cannot be to question and judge the committedness and integrity of any particular actor. Instead, the objective has been to use the perspective of social theory in order to formulate problems and identify responses which are visible and relevant at the *societal* level. As regards the cognitive position and intellectual tools which are available for this exercise, it is evident that these are not categorically different from those available to any other member of society. And in particular, it is evident that no intellectual tools are available for the meta-critical model of simulative politics which were (or are) not available for the critical model of symbolic politics. Speaking once again in Luhmannite terms, one might say that the sociological paradigm of simulative politics can at best offer a *different* description of society, but not a *more valid* one. It can deliver *different* insights, but not *better* insights.

Thirdly, it may be argued that the theory of simulative politics as a societal *strategy* for the management of the late-modern dilemma is not convincing because highly differentiated and complex late-modern societies neither have the capacity to develop an awareness of problems which affect them as a whole, nor the ability to devise and implement remedial strategies. It was the outstanding contribution of Luhmann's post-critical social theory that it captured these limitations and spelt out their implications not least for the field of eco-politics (Luhmann 1989; Blühdorn 2000). The

conceptualisation of simulative politics as a societal strategy is indeed problematic, and it ought to be seen as a heuristic device. In order to avoid the term *strategy*, it might be preferable to describe simulative politics as something like an instinctive reflex that is triggered by a combination of the human desire for meaning and the imperatives for self-stabilisation and self-reproduction which are inherent to all systems and organisations.

Lastly then one might ask: Does it make a difference? Does it really matter whether we describe contemporary eco-politics as symbolic or as simulative politics? More precisely the question is: Is there any eco-political or other benefit in knowing that – if this could be shown to be true – late-modern societies are engaging in simulative politics, with the critical discourse of symbolic politics being no more than one of the phenotypes of this simulative politics? Critics of Edelman's work once suggested that his critical observation of *symbolic* politics would remain 'the politically irrelevant privilege of a critical social science intelligentsia' (Offe 1976/2005:ix). It might be argued that this will be equally applicable to the critical observation of the *simulative* practices by means of which late-modern societies are trying to sustain the unsustainable. Yet this assessment is unduly pessimistic, and the broad politicisation which symbolic politics has experienced since Edelman first presented his theory has proved his critics wrong. There is certainly a lot of benefit in knowing *that* contrary to its own self-descriptions late-modern society is engaged much more in *reproducing* the principles of unsustainability than in *overcoming* them. And there is also a lot of benefit in identifying *exactly how* it is doing this. Trying to *make sense* of the evident contradiction between late-modern society's acknowledgement that radical and effective change is urgent and inescapable and its adamant resolve to sustain what is known to be unsustainable is a hugely important and difficult task. And making visible how the late-modern condition and the post-ecologist *Zeitgeist* have historically evolved and are therefore essentially contingent creates space for considerable optimism. It is certainly true that the analysis of the post-ecologist constellation and late-modern society's politics of simulation does not easily translate into environmental policy recommendations. Yet the attempt to *understand* the architecture of this constellation and the logic of these practices is one essential precondition of developing the capacity to transcend *break* it.

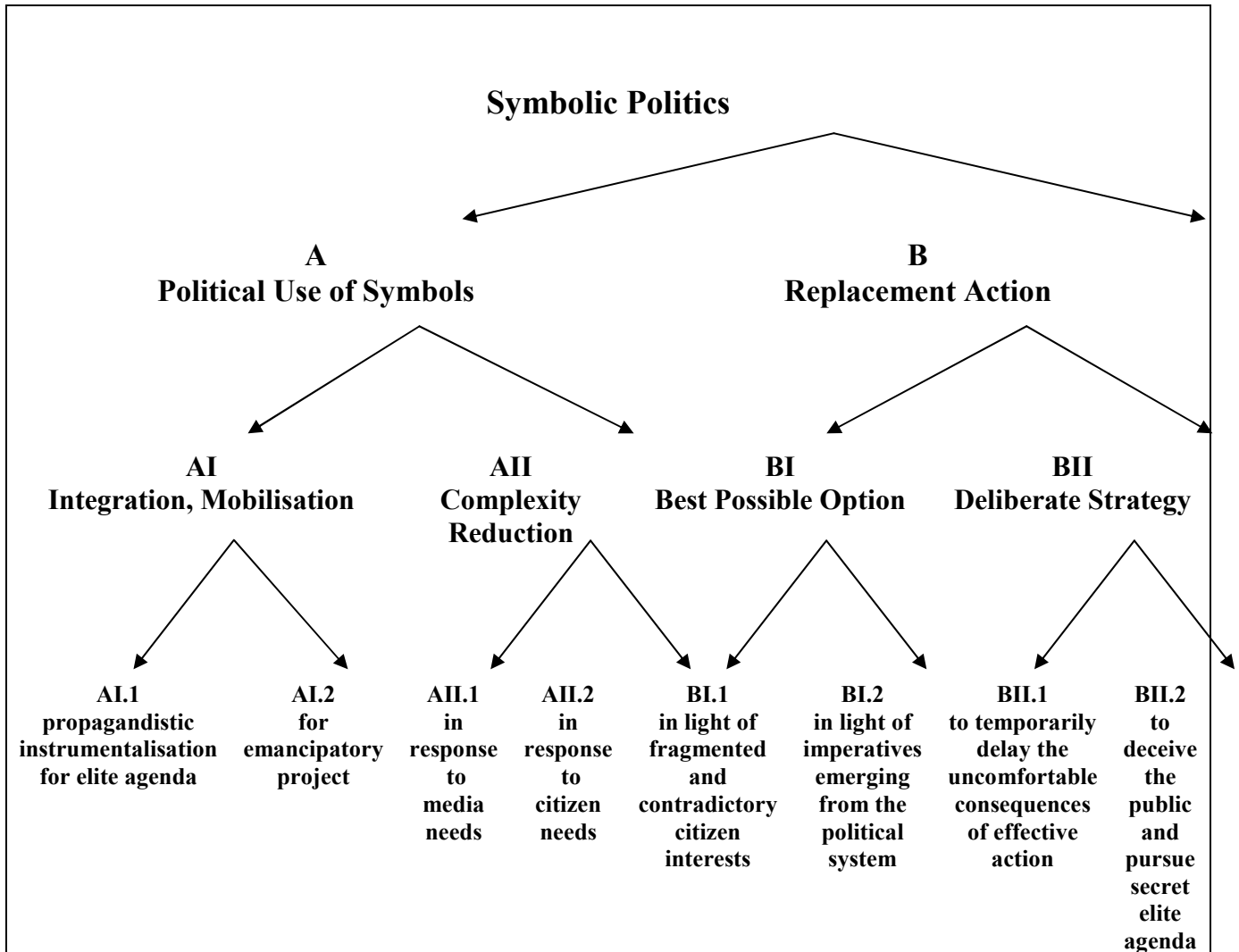
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**Figure 4.1: Understandings of Symbolic Politics**



**Figure 4.2: Authentic Politics versus Symbolic Politics (type BII.2)**

	<b>Authentic Politics</b>	<b>Symbolic Politics</b>
<b>ontological quality</b>	true, original being ( <i>Sein</i> ) production of politics substantive politics	false, forgery appearance ( <i>Schein</i> ) presentation of politics virtual politics
<b>dimension of effectiveness</b>	socially effective: focused on concerns, needs and problem perceptions of the governed	politically effective: focused on concerns, needs and problem perceptions of political elites
<b>ethical quality</b>	honest, genuine straight, inclusive transparent trustworthy	dishonest, deceptive two-faced, exclusive secretive, disguising corrupt
<b>effect on political culture</b>	builds trust in democratic institutions, nurtures rational public deliberation, facilitates engagement and participation	undermines trust in democratic institutions, suffocates rational deliberation, breeds disengagement and apathy

**Figure 4.3: Distinctive features of the post-ecologist condition**<sup>1</sup>

- General and full acceptance of the *in principle* relevance of environmental issues;
- *normalisation* of the environmental crisis and warning that, despite all undeniable seriousness, the crisis must not be overstated;
- subordination of environmental issues under the priorities of economic competitiveness and growth, the security of Northern lifestyles, and the preservation of established global power relations;
- prominence of neo-materialist and consumption-oriented patterns of identity construction, self-expression and self-experience;
- emancipation from restrictive notions of redistribution, equality, justice and solidarity, and confidence in the logic of competitiveness and individual success;
- venturing and entrepreneurial outlook; readiness to experiment and take risks;
- identification with democratic consumer capitalism and end of the vision of and desire for a *radically different* society in the ecologist sense;
- institutionalisation of environmental concerns and delegation to ‘experts’ and ‘professionals’;
- inability to connect to eco-centric frames and narrowing of anthropocentric frames to issues such as consumer rights, health and safety questions and food standards;
- reformulation of ecological problems as scientific, technological, economic or managerial issues;
- prominence of the paradigms of *ecological modernisation* and *environmental economics* which see environmental protection as an opportunity for technological innovation and economic growth;
- cultivation of narratives of technological efficiency revolutions, corporate responsibility, ethical consumption, fair trade, ethical investment, green consumerism etc. which are consistent with the basic principles of productivism, consumerism etc.;
- establishment of green consumerism and the wellness sector as major markets, whereby these formerly *alternative* business sectors now fully replicate the basic principles which ecologists once rejected and no longer understand themselves as the symbolic anticipation of a radically different lifestyle, human-nature relationship, and society;
- disillusionment with the practices and capabilities of grassroots democracy and increasing reliance on supposedly *more efficient* instruments for achieving the common good (experts, markets, political leaders, regulating bodies etc.);
- differentiation and fragmentation of ecological diagnoses and strategies and implicit mobilisation of environmentalism against itself;
- rise of the paradigm of *environmental security* which implicitly accepts the unsustainability of Northern lifestyles as well as the inevitability of resource conflicts and focuses on a) *securing* access for the ‘free and civilised world’ to natural resources; b) *defending* the wealthy countries against environmental refugees; and c) *managing* violent conflicts locally in order to minimize disruption of global markets;
- rejection of ecologist idealism and dogmatic instance on *political realism* or *pragmatism* which asserts that there is no choice but to adapt to the non-negotiable imperatives of economic growth, technological progress, global competition, etc.;
- robust defence against any alternative to the combination of liberal democracy and consumer capitalism including, for example, the stigmatisation of radical ecologists as (potential) eco-terrorists.

<sup>1</sup> This is not meant to be an exhaustive description of post-ecologism. It ought to be read in conjunction with, or within the framework of, my earlier, more theoretical, characterisation of post-ecologism as a post-natural, post-subjective, post-moral and post-problematic *politics without identity* (Blühdorn 2000, pp. 151-159).

**Figure 4.4: The sociological paradigms of simulative versus symbolic politics**

	<b>post-ecologist practice of Simulative Politics</b>	<b>ecologist critique of Symbolic Politics<sup>2</sup></b>
<b>societal condition and social theory</b>	late modernity; post-critical, system-centred and geared towards efficiency in the economic sense	traditional modernity; critical, subject-centred and geared towards efficiency in the social and ecological sense
<b>key objectives</b>	to manage the crisis of unsustainability; to sustain the unsustainable	to resolve the crisis of unsustainability; to reinstate authentic politics
<b>main strategy</b>	regenerates dualism; recreates/replaces Other; performs authenticity	highlights discrepancy; refers to/represents Other; claims and demands authenticity
<b>top/bottom relation</b>	common interest; strategic union; amoral	opposite interests; power differential; corrupt <i>versus</i> sincere

<sup>i</sup> Throughout this article I am using the terms *late-modern society* and *late-modern condition* in a very specific sense, namely to capture the categorical difference between *traditional modernity* which was centred on the idea of the autonomous subject and geared towards its emancipation and a new phase of modernity that has overcome the dualism of the *subject* and the *system* and is centred on abstract notions of efficiency (for a detailed discussion see Blühdorn 2006a).

oriented distinguish the contemporary form of modernity from traditional modernity.

<sup>ii</sup> Note the double meaning of *performance* which can denote both hollow entertaining façadeism and substantive measurable output. I have discussed the late-modern relationship between the two and the ‘performance of performance’ in some detail elsewhere (Blühdorn 2005:38-41; 2006a).

<sup>iii</sup> This article ought to be seen as a further addition to the body of work on the *politics of simulation* that I have done over recent years (see Blühdorn 2002, 2003, 2004b, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2007).

<sup>iv</sup> In this context see Susan Baker’s analysis (in this issue) of the EU’s commitment to the goals of sustainability as an integral part of the Union’s strategy of identity construction.

<sup>v</sup> See Jens Newig’s discussion (in this issue) of German environmental legislation as an example of BI-type symbolic politics.

<sup>vi</sup> Nullmeier’s own analysis reaches well beyond these simplistic views.

<sup>vii</sup> Note that *reconciliation with nature* and the protection of its integrity is an integral part of this *project of modernity* (Blühdorn 2000). In line with the post-Marxist tradition of Critical Theory, the new social movements (or at least their intellectuals) have always seen the realisation of the authentic Self and the liberation of nature as two sides of the same coin.

<sup>viii</sup> Compare the concept of *authentic art* which in his *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno presents as the present anticipation of the reconciled and liberated condition. On *authenticity as a political problem* see Noetzel (1999). For a good example of the popular discussion of ‘authenticity’, the critical rejection of ‘brands, fakes and spin’, and ‘the lust for real life’ see Boyle (2004).

<sup>ix</sup> This volume collates German translations of selected chapters from Edelman’s *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (1964) and *Politics as Symbolic Action, Mass Arousal and Quiescence* (1971). It was first published in 1976 (prefaced by Claus Offe), a second edition with a preface by Murray Edelman was released in 1990. The third edition of 2005 contains an epilogue by Frank Nullmeier.

<sup>x</sup> At the time Edelman did not anticipate the waves of radical action and *autre-mondialisme* which were to emerge a few years later, yet these movements, arguably, did very little to alter the fact that today

<sup>2</sup> Symbolic politics is here understood in the sense of the BII-types specified in figure 4.1.

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radical alternatives to the established system are more difficult to imagine and less in demand than at any time since the launch of the critical project (for a more detailed discussion see Blühdorn 2006c, 2007; for a contrasting assessment see Ian Welsh in this issue).

<sup>xi</sup> In this context, *ecologist* thinking is understood as a comprehensive political ideology as defined in Andrew Dobson's classic *Green Political Thought* (1990).

<sup>xii</sup> This also applies to the waves of radical action since the 1990s which many observers have celebrated with overwhelming neo-democratic optimism. Protests from the by now legendary Battle of Seattle to the campaign against the Iraq War, remained one-off eruptions which did little to revive democratic cultures or inspire the imagination of socio-economic alternatives. For a contrasting assessment see Ian Welsh's contribution in this issue.

<sup>xiii</sup> Bjørn Lomborg's best-selling *The Sceptical Environmentalist* (2001) is an exemplary articulation of the post-ecologist *Zeitgeist*. The enormous success of the book may be explained by Lomborg's intuitive sensitivity to the cultural shifts outlined above. Lomborg supplied a narrative that responded to an implicit public demand.

<sup>xiv</sup> Compare Ian Welsh's analysis of the 'defence of civilisation' in this issue.

<sup>xv</sup> The belief that techno-managerial innovation equals economic growth, social development and environmental improvement.

<sup>xvi</sup> It is no coincidence that the regeneration of what is tellingly referred to as *social capital* has become a prime concern of late-modern societies. Equally striking is attention that is devoted to the reinvention and cultivation of regional identities which are a vital resource for whole industries. A further indicator for the seriousness of the crisis is that businesses have never been more anxious to emphasise that they are *servicing the community*, that they are *investing in people*, and that everything hinges on the customer's *autonomous choice*.

<sup>xvii</sup> See for example my analyses of *simulative democracy* (Blühdorn 2006b) and *simulative radical action* (Blühdorn 2007).