Power, pathways and planetary boundaries: Negotiating green and just transformations

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Abstract

The concept of planetary boundaries is exerting extraordinary influence in current debates about sustainability. While scientists acknowledge and debate the ongoing, uncertain science of assessing impending ecological thresholds and their implications, versions of planetary boundaries thinking have rushed headlong into policy and public spheres. For many, this is science – especially earth system science – providing unprecedented evidence and justification for the urgency of action to safeguard human futures on our planet. Yet others see this as a dangerous return to ‘limits’ thinking, invoking impending catastrophe and disaster to uphold top-down power grabs. Debate about planetary boundaries and power is heating up fast.

There can be little doubt that rapid green transformations will be needed to re-steer current pathways of societal, political and economic change in sustainable directions. For moral and practical reasons, such transformations – in systems of production, consumption and human-ecosystem interaction – must also seek greater justice in human wellbeing and use of the earth’s resources. But what kinds of politics and governance are best suited to bring this about? And what are the relationships between such politics, and the concept of planetary boundaries? Moving beyond the polarities of much current debate, this presentation will consider planetary boundaries as a ‘boundary term’ around which discursive politics are accreting. By illustrating a range of recent usages, meanings and contestations around the term in current policy discourses, I will reflect on how and how far planetary boundaries thinking might valuably contribute to the negotiation of green and just transformations.

I will illustrate a tendency for the concept of planetary boundaries to align rather neatly with governance approaches that are global and top-down, and with large-scale, control-oriented technocratic approaches to innovation – both of which may prove ineffective and unjust. Yet other evidence and arguments connect planetary boundaries with resilience thinking in ways that valuably legitimate poly-centric, multi-scale, adaptive approaches to governance that recognise and facilitate local institutions, experiences and responses. A further and vital step in accelerating green and just transformations, however, is to recognise their plurality. Different possible pathways to variously-defined sustainability goals are possible, requiring deliberation amongst these, considering their implications for direction and distribution, and forms of politics that build alliances and networks between multiple actors and movements, informal as well as informal. I will argue that building a productive relationship between planetary boundaries thinking and such deliberative, bottom-up democratic politics is now vital, if the concept is to take its rightful place as a means to democratically-set ends, and

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to open up (rather than close down) inclusive debate about sustainable futures.

Nb. This presentation will form part of a session on:
"Whose planet? Whose ‘boundaries’? A dialogue on the politics of planetary boundaries"

**Keywords:** power, pathways, transformation, deliberation, planetary boundaries