Abstract of presentation

Searching for the social causes of anthropogenic climate change, the social sciences and humanities have tended to provide overly generic explanations in terms of an instrumental relation to nature, of capitalist expansion drives, or of the human longing for comfort. Focusing on the socio-political transformations since the middle of the twentieth century, which have been referred to as the “Great Acceleration” in the use of biophysical resources and in environmental degradation, in contrast, this presentation will focus on the socio-political mechanisms that brought the resource-intensive path of social development about, showing how Western democratic societies tended to “solve” difficult social problems by means of a triple displacement: onto other societies; onto nature and the planet; and into the future. As an unintended consequence, this displacement politics led to the globalization of resource-intensive development and to a planetary situation in which further displacement no longer seems possible.

Biographical note

Peter Wagner is Research Professor of Social Sciences at the Catalan Institute for Research and Advanced Studies (ICREA) and at the University of Barcelona. Currently, he is also linked with the University of Central Asia for the research cluster “Modernity in Central Asia: Society, identity, environment”. His main research areas are historical and political sociology and social and political theory. He is particularly interested in the historical-comparative analysis of major social transformations, in particular with regard to the human use of biophysical resources. His recent book publications include: Collective action and political transformations: the entangled experiences in Brazil, South Africa and Europe (with Aurea Mota), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019; European modernity: a global approach (with Bo Stråth), London: Bloomsbury, 2017; Progress: a reconstruction, Cambridge: Polity, 2016 (translated into French, German, and Croat).