
Ecological neutrality as a frame for environmental policies A socio-historical approach

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Abstract

Environmental public action is often based on the notion of ecological neutrality, as expressed in legal objectives and principles such as Carbon Neutrality, No-Net Loss of Biodiversity, Zero Pollution, Net Zero Plastic, etc., or in institutional programs such as the UN’s “Race to Zero”. This accounting approach to environmental problems, which consists in balancing impacts with beneficial actions (production of environmental goods, services and credits), is the fruit of a compromise between economic development and the management of nuisances, with one allowing the other to continue without fundamentally challenging growth trajectories. How can we explain the success of the net in environmental policies, and what consequences does this have for the way we deal with environmental problems? To answer these questions, I trace the socio-history of this category, to show that its growing appropriation goes along with an evolution in its definition, becoming more open and fuzzier. Through a literature review, the presentation highlights three main conceptualizations of ecological neutrality, ranging from a regulatory operation that allows firms to comply with environmental regulations, to voluntary arrangements embedded in supply-chain certification, and to market mechanisms included in decarbonation pathways. The historical trajectory of the category shows a progressive evolution where equivalence of impacts and gains is becoming more open and flexible, allowing for the participation of a broader range of actors and therefore complicating the regulation of related policies.

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