

# Green Capitalism, Sustainability, and Everyday Practice

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## 1 Introduction

Today, more ado than ever is being made about appropriate ways of dealing with the global ecological crisis and of building sustainable futures.<sup>1</sup> In these debates, two opposed modes of thought can be distinguished. One type of diagnosis claims that the capitalist societies of the Global North will be able to initiate the necessary ‘self-healing’ processes without fundamentally revising their modern lifestyles. The trademark of this strategy is *green capitalism* – conceived as a reconciliation of economic growth and sustainable development. On the other side, we find a more critical approach that highlights capitalism’s inner contradictions and calls for a transformation of the economic, political, and cultural framework in order to address global (environmental) problems. The fundamental characteristic of this second approach is its emphasis on *multiple* crises, instead of the superficial talk of a decoupled ecological crisis. It considers global environmental problems as the most prominent side-effect of capitalism’s general crisis.

Despite their theoretical antagonism, I argue that both approaches share the same deficiency. Although everyday practice is – explicitly or implicitly – at the center of their arguments, they have inadequate concepts of human conduct. The disciples of green capitalism, for instance, hold that the *sustainability shift* ultimately consists of the challenge to change individual *behavior*. They emphasize the role of knowledge, rationality, and values in the process of modifying everyday resource use patterns. But why, then, do individuals and societies not simply change their

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, I use terms such as *sustainability shift* or *socio-ecological transformation* as rough equivalents.

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everyday behavior, although it is widely known that current lifestyles bring about devastating consequences on a global scale? In light of the widespread hiatus between knowledge and practice – the notorious attitude-behavior gap – it does not seem as if the road to sustainability is particularly well paved with green ‘enlightenment’ programs.

The same problem, albeit in a more subtle form, holds true for capitalism’s environmental critics. While emphasizing the necessity of a fundamental turn-around, i.e. a break with capitalist modes of production, these critics often fall back on a rhetoric of social macrostructures without recognizing the central role of everyday human activity in addressing (socio-ecological) transformation processes. While left-wing environmental positions stress the state’s role (as a power relationship) and deliver deep insights into the state’s prosperous marriage with capitalism, what people do in their everyday lives has received very little conceptual attention. It is therefore unsurprising that capitalism’s perseverance in the face of its – obvious – contradictions has remained a mystery for many of these approaches.

I will now pursue two objectives: First, I provide a brief survey of some proponents of the above-mentioned approaches and outline their arguments and conceptual deficiencies. Second, I show that *theories of practice* offer useful insights into the nature of human conduct and might thus help us to understand the persistence of unsustainable activities. I argue that a practice theoretical approach involves all key aspects of the sustainability shift and offers a theoretically ambitious framework of its interpretation.

## 2 Green Capitalism and Everyday Behavior

I would like to state from the outset that talk of a single, unified *green capitalism approach* is fairly misleading. Just as there is no universal capitalism, there is also no homogenous *greening* of capitalism. As Tienhaara (2013) points out, alongside a myriad of other approaches, three particularly popular strategies try to reconcile economy and ecology. The *green new deal* approach primarily seeks to reform of the finance sector in order to prevent debt-based unsustainable patterns of energy and resource consumption, and to promote public and private investment in environmentally friendly technologies (Tienhaara 2013, 3; see Friedman 2007, 72). *Green stimulus* strategies, on the other hand, apply fiscal measures (e.g., taxation, or direct investment) to support the ‘green’ sectors of the economy and thus indirectly enhance resource use efficiency (Tienhaara 2013, 4). Finally, the centerpiece of *green economy* approaches is the attempt to price ‘ecosystem services’ and thus systematically include nature in economic calculations (Tienhaara 2013, 7).

Regarding these different approaches, it seems at first glance as if socio-ecological transformation was only a matter of (government) designing smart institutional frameworks. The protagonists of such rather technocratic, seemingly top-down, approaches are legislative bodies, tax authorities, departments of commerce or labor, and so forth.

However, concern with institutional measures and public policy cannot hide that the vision of a green capitalism in all three paradigms depends substantially on *individualist* thinking. Neither tax incentives nor high interest rates for green investment, price increases of environmentally ‘unfriendly’ goods, or job offers in the green industries bring about socio-ecological change. *Individual* market participants making the ‘right’ choices are required. The various strands of green capitalism – regardless of the concrete measures they propose – are organized around the idea that individual behavior and consumer-citizens’ sense of responsibility are the crucial instances for achieving socio-ecological change. Steinberg therefore calls green capitalism *green liberalism*, which he conceives as “the idea that market forces combined with individuals all doing their part can save the planet” (Steinberg 2010, 8).

However, talk of green *liberalism* must not hide that the measures applied interpret the idea of individual freedom (of choice) in distinct ways. On the one hand, tenacious advocates of libertarian thought seek to establish a framework in which “individuals pursuing their own best interests could create a sustainable society” (Steinberg 2010, 11). Using a classic metaphor of economic liberalism, such an approach could also be understood as the greening of Adam Smith’s *invisible hand*. In an appropriate setting, the libertarian reasoning is that the individual’s freely-made choices bring about ecologically sound conditions.<sup>2</sup> According to this position, the main goal of environmental policy is to make free markets work and to internalize (ecological) externalities as far as possible.

On the other hand, strategies to establish green capitalism often also imply attempts to *directly influence* market participants’ behavior and hence shape their choices and decisions. In recent years, ideas of ‘soft’ or ‘libertarian’ *paternalism* have emerged and have in some way become the *dernier cri* of green capitalism strategies (see Thaler and Sunstein 2003). At first sight, this appears surprising, since paternalism has a bad name in libertarian debates. In a strict sense, paternalism is conceived as “the interference of a state or an individual with another person, against their will, and defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm” (Dworkin 2014). Clearly, ‘freedom-loving’ disciples of neoliberal capitalism reject such reasoning outright. However, as Friedman (2007, 72) notes in his summary of some of the arguments in favor of green capitalism, “[a]n unusual situation like this calls for the ethic of stewardship.” Thus, in the seemingly oxymoronic phrase *libertarian paternalism*, the *libertarian* serves to soften the authoritarian connotation by emphasizing the actors’ agency, while at the same time claiming that subjects *ought* to make their choices in a certain way. This notion is perfectly encapsulated by the definition of Thaler and Sunstein (2003, 179), who consider libertarian paternalism “an approach that preserves freedom of choice but that authorizes both private and public institutions to steer people in directions that will promote their welfare.”

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<sup>2</sup>For instance, when an ecological rucksack of goods and services receives a proper price tag, the market will do the rest.

To summarize: Green capitalism is mainly based on the attempt to achieve sustainability through *individual* behavior, or individual behavior change. Both the orthodox market approach (internalize externalities and leave the rest to the market) and libertarian paternalism agree on the fundamental role of individual choice and, in the end, hold individuals *responsible* for socio-ecological change. Thus, most policy approaches developed in the context of green capitalism clearly draw implicitly or explicitly on – more or less sophisticated – *behavioral theories* of everyday conduct.

It is important to note here that different behavioral theories translate differently into concrete policy measures. Radical followers of market solutions – who would reject paternalist proposals – draw on fairly simple, rationalistic models of behavior. Their implicit economic anthropology is the classic model of the *economic man* (rational agent). Green economy approaches, for instance, use this thinking when they argue in favor of (changing) pricing mechanisms. Such strategies presuppose rational choices by fully informed individuals with clear preferences. The change in individual economic behavior (such as consumption patterns, for instance) is thus a function of changing price tags, or changing utility functions. The best way to instigate change is thus to set economic or material incentives.

Behavioral economics present a different approach. Following the idea of libertarian paternalism, behavioral economists suggest ‘supporting’ individuals by *nudging* them to make rational decisions (see Thaler and Sunstein 2008). The basic argument of the ‘nudging theorists’ is that suboptimal choices are widely observable, because individuals often do not possess the capacities to act rationally, and are thus prone to make – what ex post appear to be – mistakes (i.e. choices that do not improve well-being, or serve one’s long-term interests). Behavioral economics thus suggests steering people’s behavior towards rationality, albeit without eliminating freedom of choice.

It is important to recognize that nudging means more than just materially incentivizing individuals to behave in a certain way. Nudging, as Thaler and Sunstein (2008, 3) repeatedly point out, means to improve the ‘choice architecture.’ Through a deliberate design of situations of choice, the “psychological quirks” (Wilkinson 2013, 341) responsible for irrational behavior could be overcome and, ultimately, people’s lives could be made “longer, healthier, and better” (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, 5).

The means applied in choice architecture range from the material arrangement of offered goods (taking the idea of architecture quite literally), to information campaigns and default rules (see Thaler and Sunstein 2008). The latter two have specifically become classic strategies in environmental contexts. Information campaigns seek to provide better information, and thus aim to improve individual knowledge of the consequences of one’s decisions. The German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU), for instance, recommends ‘supporting’ changes in consumer behavior “through information measures such as product labelling, product standards and targeted communication policies” (WBGU 2011, 185). The underlying argument goes that given the right information at the right time in the right way, individuals are very likely to make proper choices. Default rules, on the

other hand, are concerned with steering people's behavior by pre-defining procedures or courses of events. In this sense, *default* is what happens when people simply do nothing, i.e. when they do not explicitly articulate their (diverging) preferences and stick to the pre-defined option (Sunstein and Reisch 2014, 131). A standard example is electric energy supply. Setting 'green' electricity as the standard that must actively be opted out of often increases the number of people purchasing eco-power (Sunstein and Reisch 2014, 134 ff.). Default strategies thus build on the establishment of obstacles, requiring a deliberate decision, compared to more or less effortless routine.

Both the setting of material incentives and the nudging strategy center around the idea of rational action as the *normal* case. Whereas the former strategy expects rational decision making and seeks to exercise control by materially rewarding 'good' choices, the latter proactively intervenes in what is regarded as (potentially) irrational behavior and takes countermeasures.

Despite the fundamental role behavioral economics plays in public policy making, and especially so in the context of green capitalism, it must be emphasized that the various approaches have been challenged. Besides a wide range of normative questions about libertarian paternalism (its manipulative or coercive dimension, for instance; see Wilkinson 2013; Henderson 2014), three (interrelated) critical aspects can be specifically highlighted: first, a reductionist understanding of everyday human conduct; second, an overemphasis of individual capabilities to bring about socio-ecological change; and third, an incapacity to think outside the box, i.e. to question the systemic frame.

The theoretical *reductionisms* that come with most green capitalism approaches become apparent in the use of a rather simplistic *ABC model* (Shove 2010) of social and behavioral change. In short, the ABC model assumes that people's *values and attitudes* (the A) "drive the kinds of behaviour (the B) that individuals choose (the C) to adopt" (Shove 2010, 1274; see Shove et al. 2012, 142). Social change is thus solely thought of as a function of an individual's values, attitudes, and knowledge; public policy's task is to initiate and steer social change by affecting these determinants (Shove 2010, 1275). Material incentive strategies draw on this model, just as nudging approaches do. Although, at first glance, nudging seems to transcend simple models of economic behavior by acknowledging social context's role (see Sunstein and Reisch 2014, 128–130), it is nevertheless based on the search for behavior *drivers*, and takes rationality as its normative horizon, i.e. it seeks to "cultivat[e] the rational and reflexive aspects of the mind" (Pykett 2011, 220) in situations where people are inclined to act irrationally. However, such an outlook reduces the social sphere to a physicalistic world of *drivers* and *determinants*. It obscures the intrinsic logic and situatedness of our everyday conduct by introducing criteria that are foreign to it.<sup>3</sup> An understanding of (non)sustainable practice,

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<sup>3</sup>The academic and political surprise at a *knowledge-behavior gap* serves as a succinct example here. Whereas 'lay people' do not wonder at inconsistencies in behavior, the gap becomes "mystifying if we suppose that values do (or should) translate into action" (Shove 2010, 1276).

though, will have to avoid the reductionist language of drivers and determinants, and develop a language of *complex* social realities instead.

The second difficulty that behavior-based approaches face relates to the view that individuals are responsible for and the central unit of socio-ecological change. Two strands of critique must be distinguished here: On the one hand, assigning environmental responsibility to individuals can be criticized from a *moral* perspective as a form of overburdening. Since personal environmental stewardship faces profoundly complex, in part unpredictable, systems (both environmental and socio-cultural/political-economical), individual actors are barely to blame for the ecological crisis (see Steinberg 2010, 12). Green capitalism's role model of an active citizen tends to obliterate the *structural* deficiencies that prevent individual initiative from bringing about the desired consequences.

On the other hand, individualism can be criticized for its theoretical insufficiencies. As Shove et al. (2012, 144) concisely note, rather than being arbitrarily changeable acts, everyday practices "are outcomes of complex, essentially emergent processes over which no single actor has control." The social and cultural context of practices (conventions and values, for instance) is not an external driver of behavior, but an integral part of practice itself (Shove 2010, 1279). A theoretical language that captures the fundamental sociality of our everyday conduct is needed. As I will argue later, practice theory offers such a language.

The third point of criticism relates to behavioral economics' limited capacity to challenge green capitalism's ideological basis. Since the approaches outlined above focus on the more or less technical problem of changing individual behavior, questions for the wider context of everyday conduct – fundamental economic and political institutions, shared thought patterns, and patterns of interpretation, for instance – are systematically omitted. Thus, behavioral economics – theoretically and empirically – remains within the system. It reproduces capitalism's economic anthropology and, simultaneously, suggests that minor adjustments are sufficient to overcome unsustainable modes of living. In other words, it is incapable of articulating criticism. In the next section, I introduce an approach that seeks to overcome this shortcoming.

### 3 Challenging the *Imperial Mode of Living*

As noted, there are a great number of objections against approaches such as green capitalism. Besides a general critique of capitalism, as expressed, for instance, by critical left projects such as the Occupy movement, an explicitly ecological critique of the dominant socio-political-economic system of our time has developed, or – in terms of the environmental aspects in Marx's writings (see Foster 2000) – is currently being *revitalized*. I now focus on the approach developed by the political scientists Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen. They provide an implicit (ecological) critique by emphasizing capitalism's systemic contradictions and environmental myopia.

Brand and Wissen are particularly interesting for my account, not only because they address the problem of capitalism's tenacious adherence to unsustainable development,<sup>4</sup> but also because they partly use a language similar to that of the practice-theoretical approach I will discuss. Yet, importantly, the authors do not elucidate a theoretical concept of practice, thereby leaving a glaring gap at the very center of their theory.

The argument presented by Brand and Wissen is, in its widest sense, concerned with the nexus of state, capitalism, and nature (or nature-society relationships). It is based on the basic premise that, in order to understand the ecological crisis, we must acknowledge the interdependence of ecological and social issues (Brand and Wissen 2012, 556). However, in opposition to the standard view in current politics, the authors are skeptical of the state's capacities to reshape capitalist nature-society relationships and to implement serious socio-ecological transformation processes (Brand and Wissen 2012) (see Brand 2012a). Therefore, they propose to talk of a *multiple crisis* of capitalism, calling for a fundamental renegotiation of the roles of the state and the economy.

The core piece of Brand and Wissen's analysis is the notion of the *imperial mode of living* (Brand and Wissen 2012), by which the authors mean "dominant patterns of production, distribution, and consumption that are deeply rooted in the everyday practices of the upper and middle classes of the global North and increasingly in the emerging countries of the global South" (Brand and Wissen 2012, 548). In everyday life, the imperial mode of living expresses itself in things such as a certain standard package of consumer goods; the widespread availability of services; so-called minimum conditions for labor; the promise of progress, growth, and prosperity; and – most importantly – the demand that the state permanently guarantees all these conditions, for instance, through a relevant labor market policy, or by ensuring the supply of natural resources.

With its emphasis on production, distribution, and consumption, the *imperial mode of living* generally conceives of societies' relationships with nature as capitalist *patterns of matter and energy use*. Thus, from the outset, it is clear what separates the imperial mode of living from common notions of lifestyle, customs, and habitude: First, Brand and Wissen advocate a strong emphasis on structural conditions, or constraints of everyday resource use and its change (see Brand 2012b, 30). Drawing on the theoretical assumptions of *regulation theory*, they place the imperial mode of living in relation to specific regimes of accumulation, which – guaranteed by the state and social institutions – constitute coercions that cannot readily be avoided (Brand and Wissen 2012, 548). Second, the imperial mode of living also entails a normative position that contests the generalizability of Western ways of life. While classic notions of lifestyles are often confined to a mere reconstruction of individual choices, Brand and Wissen offer a global view that considers questions of structural inequality and injustice. Since the imperial mode of living generalizes resource usage patterns that – for ecological reasons,

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<sup>4</sup> Even though they do not use the term *sustainability*.

at least – cannot be globalized, they conclude that, in the end, the “existing rules of the game” must be “call[ed] into question” (Brand and Wissen 2012, 554, 556).

It is worth noting the two central properties that Brand and Wissen attribute to the imperial mode of living. On the one hand, and unsurprisingly, the imperial mode of living is seen as reinforcing and advancing asymmetrical global power relationships. As the term *imperial* indicates, the *normal* lifestyle of people in the Global North is inextricably linked to the capacity to access the raw materials, cheap labor, and waste-sink capacities of the Global South (Brand and Wissen 2012, 555). The perpetuation of capitalist consumption patterns thus inevitably presupposes the acceptance of global inequalities and exploitation or, to put it bluntly, Western imperialism.

On the other hand, the imperial mode of living is also characterized as *hegemonic*. Broadly speaking, this aspect may be regarded as a tacit consensus on the *good life* ideal in capitalist societies (Brand and Wissen 2012, 549). By and large, there is usually only little doubt about what we are supposed to have or to experience in everyday life, even though there might be significant differences in the actual choices we make. However, it is crucial that *hegemonic* not only means that the current capitalist lifestyle is omnipresent and ‘operates’ behind people’s backs, it also means that the imperial mode of living successfully conceals its nongeneralizability. According to Brand and Wissen (2012, 551), state institutions normalize and secure the capitalist mode of living (despite all its contradictions), thus promoting the specific (unsustainable, unjust, etc.) nature-society *and* global North-South relationships associated with it.

The irony of this lies in the ‘supposed to have it’ phenomenon<sup>5</sup> (see Wittmayer et al. 1994), which holds true even for those who are not in a position to share the affluent life considered *normal* in capitalist societies. Both the lower classes of the Global North and the lower and emerging middle classes of the Global South seem to share the ideal of a globally generalizable capitalist lifestyle, even though this is only possible on the basis of an (asymmetrical) exploitation of the workforce and natural resources. From Brand and Wissen’s perspective, this might ultimately be the key paradox in need of explanation: How can a specific lifestyle that necessarily involves (global and intra-societal) inequalities be successfully disseminated globally?

To sum up this brief outline of an ecologically grounded critique of capitalism, it can be concluded that Brand and Wissen substantially broaden the debate about socio-ecological transformation processes and seek to overcome the oversimplifying technocratic approaches common to current politics. They show that capitalism in its present form relies upon and perpetuates global inequalities that are inherently incompatible with sustainable development. With their reference to people’s living conditions and ideas about the *good life*, they add a further dimension to the inquiry of capitalism’s spread and perseverance (besides macro-structural arguments such as David Harvey’s idea of spatio-temporal fixes, for instance). In a way, Brand and Wissen’s approach is one of the few critiques of

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<sup>5</sup> That is, ideas about what, materially speaking, is a *normal* or *good life*.



capitalism that – prima facie, at least – takes the commonly neglected logics of everyday life seriously.

Yet, as instructive as Brand and Wissen’s approach might be, it must be theoretically enhanced in order to deliver a truly convincing framework for an analysis of socio-ecological transformation processes. While Brand and Wissen’s borrowings from and advancement of regulation theory provide a cogent account of the capitalist state’s role in the ecological crisis, their inquiry into the nature of everyday practice is less convincing. The two authors repeatedly speak of the imperial mode of living’s *deep-rootedness* in everyday practice (see Brand and Wissen 2012, 548–555). Furthermore, they likewise speak of “microstructures of daily life,” in which the imperial mode of living is “hegemonically reproduced” (Brand and Wissen 2012, 555), or they claim that globalized liberal markets *inscribe* themselves in “everyday practices” (Brand 2012b, 30). But what, one might ask, does *deeply rooted* or *inscribed* mean? Are these descriptions just a synonym for “routine”, or does the term “practice” mean more than that? Brand and Wissen provide little and indirect information about their understanding of *practice*. Besides the obvious association with activities, knowledge, and values (such as ideas about *the good life*), the only hint we get is that practices seem to be stable or inert and, therefore, they serve as a strong anchor of everyday life capitalist structures. However, to explain why so little change occurs, an elaborate concept of practice is necessary in order to elucidate not only the routine character of everyday conduct, but also its social embeddedness, and the role of the actors that carry social practices.

#### 4 Interlude: Sustainability and Practice

Arguing that sustainability research must be anchored in practice theory might at first glance appear somewhat redundant – it seems all too obvious that any socio-ecological transformation process is bound to practice from the outset, because someone is urged to *do* things in a different manner. It is worth noting that we can observe a remarkable affinity between the sustainability concept and a practice-centered approach from the very beginnings of the use of sustainability. Sustainability, or *Nachhaltigkeit*, as introduced in German by Hans Carl von Carlowitz in the early eighteenth century (see Carlowitz 2000, 105–106), means, in its broadest sense, to *do* things in a particular way. As the head of the Royal Mining Office of the Kingdom of Saxony, Carlowitz was entrusted with managing forests in order to prevent a scarcity of timber that would have sent the economically crucial silver ore mining in Saxony into crisis (Grober 2012, 76 ff.). The guidelines he developed for the conservation and cultivation of timber were centered on the idea of taking forests’ natural regeneration rates into account. The loss of a certain stock of trees (owing to harvesting or natural depletion) must be replaced in order to ensure a durable – in principle *indefinite* – use of a forest. Hence, the essential *rule of (sustainable) action* is “Do not use a resource beyond its regeneration rate.” This

reproducibility principle, which in Carlowitz's profession became known under the title *sustained yield forestry*, is also indicated by the term sustainability's etymological roots. *Sustainability* derives from the Latin *sustinere* (to keep up); sustainability thus means "being able to keep in being" or "being able to keep something in a certain state" (Grober 2012, 19). Irrespective of the particular character of the thing to be kept in a certain state, sustainability means to *do* things in a way that takes the past, present, and future use into account. This very core of sustainability is also contained in the term's contemporary use. Despite the semantic shift to *sustainable development*, the 1987 Brundtland Report, for instance, conceives sustainability in terms of long-term thinking and *actively* balancing the present against the future.

Two primary aspects of these practical foundations of sustainability must be specifically highlighted. The *first* relates to the ecological dimension. While sustainability in Carlowitz's technical sense denotes a *certain type* of nature-society relationships (as a result of sustainable practice), it must be emphasized that *all* kinds of nature-society relationships are established, reproduced, contested, and transformed in (everyday) practice. Any transformation of nature, or intervention in the material world – whether or not it follows institutionalized rules, as in forestry, and whether or not it successfully matches present and future demands – ultimately occurs through what can be conceived as social, supra-individual practice. In this sense, *sustainability* denotes a specific mode of practice, i.e. an attempt to arrange nature-society relationships to successfully deal with the natural environment's unavailability.<sup>6</sup> It is important to bear this in mind, because it shows that socio-ecological transformation processes can only be properly understood – and initiated – when we acknowledge the everyday logic of practice.

The *second* aspect leads us to the complexity, multidimensionality, and sociality of practice. Carlowitz's original use of *sustainability* serves as an example. As a practice, sustainable forest management is not limited to observing concrete, individual acts of harvesting or planting trees. Since practice inherently transcends the level of individual agency – thereby resembling the aforementioned *mode of living* – an appropriate understanding of sustainable forestry must necessarily involve the shared knowledges and cosmologies, the technical means and social positions, etc. that make related individual acts possible. To understand the (non) sustainable use of forests in Carlowitz's time, it is necessary to consider historical contexts such as the eighteenth century economic worldviews, the forestry technology applied, common concepts of nature and nature-society relationships, the symbolic value of possessing natural resources, and so on. To some extent, it can be said that practice-centered approaches prioritize complex, social practices over individual, atomistic acts, even though practice 'reveals' itself only in such concrete human conduct.

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<sup>6</sup> *Unavailability of nature* means that society has only limited capacities to transform, use, or influence nature in the directions it wants, since nature (or the bio-physical world) follows its own logic.

## 5 Theories of Practice

Given the striking ‘practical’ nature of sustainability issues – and ecological issues in general – it is unsurprising that theories of practice provide a useful theoretical framework for analyzing nature-society relationships. Over the past 35 years there was, and still is, much debate about praxeological approaches, culminating in the (seemingly inevitable) proclamation of a *practice turn* in social theory (see Schatzki et al. 2001). Since the late 1970s, scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu – to whom I will return later in detail – Anthony Giddens, and Theodore Schatzki (to mention just three of the most prominent names) have addressed questions of practice.<sup>7</sup> Their various oeuvres draw on theoretical and methodological considerations in ethnology, sociology, and philosophy, thus forming a fairly *heterogeneous* field of research rather than a unified theory of practice. All these divergent approaches share the general notion of practice as “a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge” (Reckwitz 2002, 249).<sup>8</sup>

Practice theoretical approaches thus do not focus on subjective or individual acts, or on ‘practice’ as opposed to ‘theory,’ as is sometimes supposed, but on *types* of human activity and their socio-material contexts. These types bind together knowledge, bodies, social relations, material objects, etc., and constitute the focal point (or *essential unit*, to use a common expression in social theory) of the social world. Thus, theories of practice not only pose questions concerning human agency – the capacity to *act* – but also include questions of social order and its change. Practice is thus necessarily *social*, and practice theory allows for a systematic integration of the micro level and the macro level of the social.

While the general approach outlined above is widely shared by all theorists of practice, the specific concepts and ideas to which the term *practice* is applied differ (in some cases considerably) between authors. I next outline the practice approach as developed by Pierre Bourdieu.

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<sup>7</sup> Their central works include Giddens (1979), (2012), Bourdieu (1995), (1990a), (1998), Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), and Schatzki (1996).

<sup>8</sup> A shorter, but also widely shared understanding, considers practice as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki 2001, 2).

## 6 Bourdieu's Praxeology

Pierre Bourdieu's praxeology centers on the concepts of *habitus* and *field*. In a very broad sense, these concepts address questions of agency, social reproduction, and transformation. Similar to Giddens's theory of structuration, Bourdieusian praxeology explains the tension between the seemingly coercive power of social structures on the one hand, and its construction in and through everyday practice on the other. In doing so, praxeology conceives of actors as neither completely free agents (which theories based on the assumption of rational choice seem to), nor as subjects determined by structures (as some strands of Marxist or structuralist theories tend to). Instead, it seeks to develop a language that can capture the social, cultural, and historical contextuality of everyday practice. In the following paragraphs, I address the meanings of Bourdieu's central concepts, habitus and field, in order to clarify how praxeology differs from the two approaches outlined earlier.

*Habitus* denotes Bourdieu's heuristic device to grasp the – seemingly paradoxical – nondetermined directedness of everyday practice.<sup>9</sup> As Bourdieu notes, “types of behaviour can be directed towards certain ends without being consciously directed to these ends, or determined by them” (Bourdieu 1990b, 9–10). This says that, on the one hand, everyday life follows certain rules that manifest in comparatively stable behavior types that a number of people share. Praxeology traces these behavior types back to past experiences that individuals incorporate, and thus provide the basis for their current “*perceptions, appreciations, and actions*” (Bourdieu 1995, 83; emphasis in original). In this sense, habitus denotes our *acquired* dispositions and the ability to reproduce the past. However, it must be emphasized that, on the other hand, habitus does not postulate the total predictability of social life on the basis of social experiences' formative role. Since habitus also denotes acquired *dispositions*, i.e. *tendencies* to perceive, appreciate, and act, there is nevertheless always the possibility of deviation, or variance, transformation, and disruption in everyday practice (which, in this view, is necessarily contingent).

These reproductive and generative/transformative aspects of habitus are also captured in its characterization as an *opus operatum* and a *modus operandi*. Bourdieu calls habitus an *opus operatum*, because it can be regarded as a result of the internalization of objective structures in the course of socialization (Bourdieu 1995, 81; see Bourdieu 1990a, 52 ff.). *Embodiment* is the key mechanism through which social experiences are appropriated and memorized as an *opus operatum* (see Bourdieu 1995, 87 ff.). Praxeological thinking contends that the lived body serves as a repository of past experiences (e.g., the learning processes of how to walk, eat,

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<sup>9</sup> In Bourdieu's view, habitus and field are not 'existing' entities in the sense that everyday agents use them as a means to describe their social experiences. Instead, they are specific, sociological ways of comprehending the social world. Neither habitus nor field are thus simply observable objects. On the contrary, to take them 'for real' would, according to Bourdieu, conflate the logic of theory with the inherent logic of practice (see Bourdieu 1990a, 81, c).

or position oneself in the presence of other people), and at the same time represents our current access to the world. In this perspective, the body, “enacts the past” (Bourdieu 1990a, 73; emphasis in the original).

This pivotal role of embodied histories and biographies draws attention to two aspects of habitus that are of particular interest to questions of social and socio-ecological change. The first aspect relates to the capabilities to comprehend and access one’s habitus. If the idea of embodiment or the *incorporation* of biographical experiences is taken seriously, habitus must be conceived of as being more than mere knowledge. To equate habitus with knowledge is to confuse conscious aspects of the mind with pre-conscious ones. While knowledge is amenable to reflection, habitus is not. Or, in Bourdieu’s words, “[w]hat is ‘learned by the body’ is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is” (Bourdieu 1990a, 73). Given the deep anchorage of dispositions in bodies, it is clear that they cannot be as easily modified as theories of behavior change seem to assume. Since dispositions and subsequent forms of practice draw on long-term *experiences*, mere information campaigns – addressing the reflexive parts of the mind – are unlikely to be sufficient to trigger behavior change.

The second aspect concerns the consequences of the durability of habitus. According to Bourdieu, our dispositions are inclined to be inert and relatively stable. For this reason, they may sometimes no longer fit the living conditions in which agents find themselves. In praxeology, this phenomenon is called *hysteresis*, or the delay of habitus (Bourdieu 1995, 83). The hysteresis effect idea contends that a rapid change in living conditions is very likely to result in adaptation problems, since the adjustment of everyday practice takes time and is not a matter of conscious decision, even though reflexive deliberation plays a role in changing habitus. Conceptualizing processes of social transition in terms of hysteresis draws attention to the actors’ strategies to cope with new contexts and, thus, helps us understand seemingly irrational or unreasonable behavior as an effect of the inertia of habitus.

Whereas the aspects concerned with habitus as an *opus operatum* are encapsulated in the concepts of embodiment and hysteresis, those concepts concerned with habitus as a *modus operandi* can best be grasped through the notion of practical sense. Practical sense is one of the keys to understanding the difference between behavioral theories and practice theories. The notion of practical sense draws attention to our everyday conduct being largely based on *pre-reflexive* capacities, or tacit knowledge about “what is to be done in a given situation – what is called in sport a ‘feel’ for the game” (Bourdieu 1998, 25; see Bourdieu 1990b, 61). From the actor’s perspective, it is unnecessary to deliberately decide what to do in each and every moment; in most everyday situations, actors simply act without consciously examining their options. Practical sense thus provides us with the strategies to cope with everyday life through well-adjusted, albeit always improvisatory routines (Bourdieu 1990b, 61).

The concept of habitus not only allows us to understand the persistence of practice, but also draws attention to the fundamental difference between social science and everyday life worlds. Whereas a plethora of approaches to collective

behavior change – at least implicitly – urges individuals to act more rationally or self-consciously, Bourdieusian praxeology acknowledges the inherent logics of practice and reminds us not to mistake scientific rationality for everyday conduct: “the logic of practice,” Bourdieu concludes, “is logical up to the point where to be logical would cease being practical” (Bourdieu, as cited in Wacquant 1992, 22–3).

To summarize: The praxeological concept of habitus seeks to link objective structures (e.g., living conditions) with the subjective reproduction and transformation of these structures. Treating habitus as an *opus operatum* and a *modus operandi* means highlighting the agents’ acquired abilities to generate well-adjusted practices by means of practical sense. Yet, the habitus and practical sense concepts do not lead to a sociologically sophisticated picture of the social world. In addition, we need a concept that can incorporate practice’s social context. In praxeology, the notion of (social) *fields* serves this purpose.

Thinking in terms of social fields involves two central aspects: a symbolic mapping of the social world and an agonistic, relational perspective. The first aspect might best be described with reference to sociological modernization theories. Like other theories of modernization, Bourdieu’s praxeology claims that the social world is differentiated into various autonomous spheres of action – fields. Therefore, the process of modern societies becoming increasingly complex simply means that a growing number of distinct social fields are being developed. From the individual’s perspective, ‘being modern’ means engaging in specific types of practice, each with their own “stakes and interests, which are irreducible to the stakes and interests specific to other fields” (Bourdieu 1993, 72).<sup>10</sup> Thus, fields are *social microcosms*. Classic fields are, for instance, economy, arts, religion, and science (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97 f.). Each of these social spheres follows its own logic, and what counts in one sphere does not necessarily translate into other spheres; for instance, to gain a reputation as an artist and succeed in art, one must do things differently than one would do in the economic field, and religious practice follows different rules than scientific practice, and so on.

Thus, field theory highlights not only the striking differentiation of the modern social world (macro-perspective), but also the effects this has on the agents (micro-perspective). To enter a field, an agent must have a sense of what the field is about – he or she must accept and apply its logic. The term Bourdieu uses for this phenomenon is *illusio* – a (deliberately) false etymology from the Latin *ludere* (to play) (Bourdieu 1998, 76; see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 98 f.). *Illusio* denotes that agents engaged in a specific field agree on the fundamental value of ‘playing’ or engaging in the field despite all their differences. And they need a feel for the game, or a field-specific habitus and practical sense to succeed in the field.

Insofar as Bourdieu’s praxeology draws attention to the common denominator of practice, one might assume that fields are mainly about consensus. Quite the opposite is true, however. In line with Bourdieu’s thoroughly agonistic vision of

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<sup>10</sup> As an aside, this view is close to what Max Weber and Alfred Schütz refer to as *spheres of values* or *provinces of meaning*.

the social world, he envisions fields not only as spheres of meaning, but also as areas of *struggle* for resources and social positions. Ultimately, Bourdieu's social theory is based on the assumption that "to act in the social world means necessarily to engage in certain arenas of competition" (Peters 2011, 66). Agents compete – not necessarily consciously – for positions within a sphere, for resources such as field-specific capital, for the rules of the field, and for interpretational sovereignty over what the field is about. Competitors can be divided into *orthodox* agents, defending their status and the existing rules of the game, and *heterodox* agents (or 'heretics'), who challenge the field's order (Bourdieu 1993, 73). The result of these struggles is a relational space of positions, or a social topology, which reflects the power relationships in the field. Praxeological field theory thus draws attention to the inherent dynamics of social arenas and helps make the various strategies to preserve, or challenge, a field's topology visible.

To sum up this brief outline of Bourdieusian practice theory, we might say that praxeological thinking provides a useful account of the social nature of everyday conduct and thus helps illuminate behavioral economics' inability to explain, or even acknowledge, the knowledge-action gap. Further, Bourdieu's approach offers one way to theoretically fill the conceptual void in Brand and Wissen's critique of capitalism. In other words, praxeology allows us to widen the scope of observing seemingly individual behaviors, and to discover powerful social relationships and trajectories, where behavioral economics more or less only sees individuals in concrete situations of choice. According to practice theory, the decisions people make in their everyday lives are deeply anchored in embodied (social) experiences that cannot simply be overcome by providing additional information. The implications of the anchorage and subsequent inertia of habitus must – specifically in terms of the global ecological crisis – not be underestimated. As Leggewie and Welzer (2009, 11) persuasively note:

After 250 years of superior power, economy, and technology, our self-image and habitus are bound to conditions that no longer exist. The time-lag between our perception and self-image on the one hand, and the 'globalized world's' speed of alteration on the other becomes obvious also in other respects of our existence – for instance with regard to the energy-, environmental- and climate-crises (own translation).

In the next and last part of this article, I briefly point out what follows from this diagnosis of the issues concerning the socio-ecological transformation processes.

## 7 Sustainability as Practice

Applying the practice paradigm to socio-ecological transformation processes has only become common in recent years. Broadly speaking, practice theory is primarily used to investigate *specific fields* of the socio-ecological transformation. Gram-Hanssen (2011) and Wilhite (2014), for instance, introduce practice theory to energy consumption research; Haluza-DeLay (2008) uses Bourdieu's praxeology

to theoretically frame environmental movements; Sahakian and Wilhite (2014), as well as Røpke (2009), apply theories of practice to the study of everyday consumption; while Scott et al. (2012) enhance (sustainable) design theory with praxeological insights, and so on.

Whereas these thematically narrow strands of practice theoretical research have – deservedly – experienced a certain boom, a wider perspective on large-scale social change does not seem particularly fashionable today. Besides a few studies on the general nature of (ecological) practice and its modification (see Shove 2010; Shove and Walker 2010; Shove and Spurling 2013; Spaargaren 2011), questions of socio-cultural change and disruption in the context of the ecological crisis have only rarely been addressed using practice theory. Furthermore, most of the few studies concerned with the sustainability shift do not seem to recognize the heuristic value of Bourdieu’s praxeology for examining social change.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to conventional wisdom in the social sciences, I argue that Bourdieu provides a cogent approach to examining the socio-cultural conditions and consequences of far-reaching change in a given society (see also Wacquant 2004). Based on his early experiences in the Algerian War, Bourdieu’s *ethnology* “deal[s] squarely with cultural disjuncture, social disruption, and structural rupture at levels ranging from the individual to the societal, and in temporalities spanning the biographical to the epochal” (Wacquant 2004, 389). Thus, the concepts of practical sense, habitus, and field make an alternative language available to describe socio-ecological transformation processes. What, then, does it mean to conceive the sustainability shift in terms of Bourdieusian praxeology?

In a general sense, speaking of sustainability as practice does mean to acknowledge the routinized, unexamined, embodied character of the everyday activities that propel the nature-society metabolism. However, this seemingly straightforward premise exposes the profound difficulties of contemporary market-based attempts to steer socio-ecological transformation processes. In this view, a shift towards sustainable practices does not consist of cognitively driven, rational decisions to act differently, but involves the transformation of a whole set of inherited ‘ecological’ dispositions and the socio-material context in which they have developed. Using Bourdieu’s vocabulary, we could say that the road to sustainability necessarily includes a *habituation* of sustainable behavior patterns against the inertia (*hysteresis*) of nonsustainable lifestyles and their socio-material preconditions. The outcome of this process can be called *ecological habitus* – the agents’ capacity to generate sustainable practices. Following the praxeological premises outlined above, it should be clear that *ecological habitus* means more than *environmental attitudes, knowledge about one’s ecological impact* or, as Daniel Goleman (2010) famously put it, *ecological intelligence*. *Ecological habitus* transcends the level of cognition and values concerning the environment; it is applied to the complex package of embodied dispositions in order to perform sustainable acts and obtain a *feel for the game* of sustainable living.

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<sup>11</sup> I discuss some exceptions below.



While it does not (yet) belong to the core concepts of sustainability research, the notion of an ecological habitus developed here has been used elsewhere, albeit in a slightly different fashion. Debbie Kasper, for instance, uses the term in a broad sense to generally denote the ecological dimension of everyday acts. She argues that “[e]verybody, whether aware of it or not, lives in, depends on, affects, and is affected by their ecosystem and the wider biosphere” (Kasper 2009, 320). Kasper concludes that an ecological habitus concept must be *value neutral*, i.e. it must not focus on pro- or anti-environmental tendencies, but must consider *any* ecologically relevant outcome of human conduct (ibid.). Randolph Haluza-DeLay, in contrast, applies the heuristic of an *ecological habitus* explicitly to the “routinization of environmentally sound practices” and the “everyday environmentalisms” that can be currently observed (Haluza-DeLay 2008, 206, 207). Haluza-DeLay has in mind social or environmental movements that, to him, are a breeding ground for the development of ecological habitus (Haluza-DeLay 2008, 210). Finally, in *Ethics of Place* (Smith 2001), Mick Smith suggests an ecological ethics based on acknowledging the level of the local and the logics of practice. In respect of the moral consideration of nature, he argues that “[o]ur moral identity is best understood in terms of inspiring, developing, and sustaining an ethical *habitus* rather than a compliance with codes, rules, or conscious calculations of benefits and losses” (Smith 2001, 202). To put it more plainly, Smith argues that, in order to prevent ecological crises, our everyday ecological outlook must be radicalized and take the form of a ‘second nature,’ or an “ecological habitus,” creating a “practical environmental sense” (Smith 2001, 204).

Clearly, all three approaches are based on Bourdieu’s basic notion of habitus as a system of embodied dispositions and therefore share the same vantage point with my argument; however, they draw different conclusions.

Whereas Kasper’s general idea of all practices’ ecological impact helps point out the significance of everyday life in building sustainable futures, the weakness of her approach seems to be the emptiness of the attribute *ecological*. Kasper broadens the meaning of the *ecological habitus* to such a degree that it becomes hard to distinguish *ecological* from *non-ecological* habitus. If one takes her interpretation of quotidian life seriously, every habitus must ultimately be considered *ecological*, since undoubtedly all – embodied! – practices have relationships with nature and the material world.

At first sight, Haluza-DeLay’s approach appears much more convincing. Yet, in my view, he empirically emphasizes domains too narrowly to fully exhaust the habitus concept’s heuristic power. While one cannot but agree with Haluza-DeLay’s view of environmental movements as sites of counternarratives and alternative ways of life, he runs the risk of losing track of the manifold changes happening in the *midst* of contemporary society with this focus (although changes at the margins may play a role). The widespread emergence of a whole new sphere of everyday environmental logic – in other contexts referred to as the *greening of society* – is not only crucial owing to its dimension (compared to ‘marginal’ phenomena such as environmental movements), but also because it produces its own social dynamics. It might be true that widespread cultural change almost

always originates in a small avant-garde, but in order to fully attain the dynamics of the current socio-ecological transformation processes, it seems necessary to hypothesize the emergence of ecological habitus at the center of society.

The same problem ultimately applies to Smith's approach. While he convincingly (and quite close to Bourdieu here) argues for ecological habitus to be a form of *attunement* to locations (or environments), he first seems to confine the project of a place-based ecology to the realm of radical environmentalism (see Smith 2001, 25–26). This might have been due to the paucity of evidence of the substantial presence of 'green' issues in wider society at the time of publication (the earliest in 2001). However, as noted, to explain the current *sustainability wave* (see Woehrle 2010), one cannot only look for ecological habitus in radical pro-environmental circles.

As an interim conclusion, we could first propose that the heuristic device of an ecological habitus enables us to understand what a genuine sustainability shift must be about: If we are to durably keep the natural world in a certain state – roughly speaking, the state of reproducibility<sup>12</sup> – the pre-reflexive routines that govern our everyday resource use must be 'equipped' with an 'ecological bias.' By taking the impact of everyday practice seriously – virtually everything we do leaves an ecological footprint –, it seems particularly unlikely that a sustainability transformation exclusively based on knowledge and the demand for a permanent reflexive evaluation will succeed. Consider such mundane practices as housing, the use of private consumer goods, nutrition, waste disposal, personal mobility, etc. – we so rapidly become customized to a certain way of being-in-the-world that even the task of reflexively *imagining* a different mode of living seems difficult in many cases.<sup>13</sup>

The notion of an ecological habitus does not imply that socio-ecological change is impossible. Because habitus correlate with specific socio-cultural contexts, they are also likely to change when an environment changes, or when a specific context emerges. My central argument is that the increasing public relevance of sustainability issues in countries of the Global North goes hand in hand with the rise of a specific realm of ecological practice – an ecological field. This sphere, like other fields, has its own rules, a certain consensus among the agents about what is at stake, and a competition for dominant positions and capitals within the field.

Applying *field theory* to the sustainability shift might at first glance seem somewhat irritating. In Bourdieu's empirical works on fields there is a clear tendency to limit this perspective to spheres that are closely linked to established professions and institutions (see Lahire 2011, 29). As noted, in this strict sense,

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<sup>12</sup> This, of course, is a disgraceful oversimplification of the debates about sustainability, but it will suffice for our purposes.

<sup>13</sup> Practice theory also shows that through these internalization processes, the perseverance of unsustainable lifestyles is not only a question of existing material infrastructures, but also of mental and bodily 'infrastructures,' so to speak.

fields are realms of action equipped with relatively clear entry points (e.g., professional qualifications or exams), accurately defined roles, and so on.

However, I contend that extending field theory beyond the realm of professions helps make the converging point of the myriad of activities around sustainability and everyday environmentalism visible.<sup>14</sup> Agents such as environmental movements, politicians, natural and social scientists, consultants, ‘eco-authors,’ and ‘ordinary people’ try to define what is ecologically sound (or *sustainable*) behavior, even though they act in different professional and nonprofessional contexts and are thus, simultaneously, part of other fields. However, through their contributions, they create a sphere that is increasingly emancipating itself from other social life arenas. Incidentally, it does not matter that the agents engaged in the ecological field often disagree on the particular definitions and strategies, it is important that they *share* the belief (or *illusio*) that nature-society relationships need to be actively managed and that sustainability must be brought about rather than being a ‘natural’ state of affairs.

The specific capital (or commodity) with which the ecological field is concerned might be described as *ecological integrity*. By this I mean the result of an agent’s ability to minimize his or her ecological footprint and not (directly or indirectly) negatively impact other beings’ present and future living conditions. In other words, ecological integrity roughly means to adhere to the reproducibility principle suggested in the sustainability debate. With this field-theoretical framework in mind, we can also further specify the above-mentioned idea of an ecological habitus: Possessing a feel for the game means to accept the idea of and strive for ecological integrity.

It is crucial to see here that the dispositions, which I suggest we call *ecological habitus*, generate practices that *fit the field*, i.e. that match what a given cultural and historical situation considers environmentally friendly or sustainable. This does not mean that the ‘actual’ ecological outcomes of our practice, i.e. the physical/material dynamics that our bodily acts set in motion, are insignificant. Yet, as social constructivism convincingly argues, we only have symbolically *mediated* access to the world. The socio-cultural domain is thus the only source of the ideas and worldviews that organize our practices, and what sustainability (or environmental friendliness) ‘is’ must thus be regarded as subject to negotiation.

Such a perspective is far from relativist. Bourdieusian practice theory specifically urges us to notice the ambiguities and power-ladeness of our taken-for-granted views. Field-specific practice (like sustainable practice) is neither immutable nor arbitrary. It is the result of dynamic and contingent struggles within the fields but, is simultaneously fairly inert and stable through embodiment or habitualization processes.

For instance, take the two approaches to the ecological crisis I mentioned at the outset. The increasingly dominant (or *orthodox*) view that the ‘green capitalists’

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<sup>14</sup> In her work on emotional capitalism and emotional fields Eva Illouz develops a similar, inspiring approach, albeit in an entirely different context (see Illouz 2007).

grosso modo hold, claims that individual agents are ecologically significant and should change their lives. Approaches like that of Brand and Wissen, however, challenge this position and place more emphasis on structural aspects. They often try to unmask the individualization narrative as a means of capitalist domination: Individual efforts to live an ecologically sound life, they conclude, ultimately serve to distract from capitalism's structural flaws.

We find different everyday life strategies to cope with the ecological crisis that correspond to these two – at first sight fairly academic – positions. In keeping with the green capitalism perspective, there are (on the one hand) widely observable attempts to achieve sustainability through 'greener' consumption. The rationale goes that if we were to substitute the consumption of environmentally more benign goods for our pre-ecofriendly consumer basket, sustainability would soon be achieved. This approach ultimately amounts to a commodification of ecological issues – i.e. you can *buy* your way to sustainability – and leaves the underlying capitalist system untouched.

On the other hand, there is a more fundamental approach based on what might be called an *austerity principle*. Here, ecologically sound behavior presupposes a considerable reduction of resource use.<sup>15</sup> By renouncing the long-accustomed conveniences of Western life, it seems, agents seek to take a stance against the capitalist growth mechanism. As outlined above, theorists such as Brand and Wissen insist that (marginal) individual sacrifices cannot hide that capitalism as a system necessarily depends on extensive consumption. Nevertheless, if their plea for counter-hegemonic struggles is taken seriously, alternative practices of everyday consumption might be one (of several) arena(s) where a fundamental switch in the production/consumption mode takes its course.

The rivalry between the above two approaches is obvious. However, field theory allows us to identify their common ground, and also calls attention to their positions and their prospect of being heard in the field. Whereas orthodox approaches (such as behavioral economics) possess a certain interpretational sovereignty – indicated, among others, by political programs and research funding – a fundamental critique of capitalism still appears to be the ecological field's marginal position, academically and non-academically.

The specific topology of the ecological field, the interrelation of the positions it offers, and its boundaries deserve much empirical attention. On a very small scale I sought to point out that the notion of the ecological field as an arena of negotiation and struggle clarifies how seemingly remote agents contribute to the same thing. The relational perspective that the field model applies allows one to investigate not only how ecological worldviews are shaped and perpetuated, but also how they are challenged. Concerning the crucial question of the socio-ecological *transformation*, we might conclude that such processes of change are (more) likely to happen when new actors enter the stage or field, or marginalized actors find ways to enforce new,

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<sup>15</sup> Such efforts have been discussed under catchphrases such as *simple living*, *lifestyle of voluntary simplicity*, *intentional deceleration* (Rosa 2013), and *post-affluent society* (Etzioni 2004).

alternative narratives, change the rules of the game (e.g. allowing solutions outside capitalist commodification), and so on.

## 8 Summary and Concluding Remarks

The global ecological crisis inevitably yields socio-ecological change. In some cases, it might be possible to deliberately govern or design change in the long term; in others, change might consist of ad hoc reactions to rapidly transforming environments. As I tried to show, different theoretical approaches seek to address socio-ecological change and provide insights into the causes of the ecological crisis and remedies for it. The approaches that behavioral economics back and the approaches that criticism of capitalism informs make different – more or less sophisticated – assumptions about the social world and the mechanisms of social transformation. Whereas for the former, the overcoming of nonsustainable development, is only a technical problem of behavior change, the latter claims that individual behavior and its conversion merely represent the surface of fundamental structural flaws. Similarly, market-based strategies are inclined to presume fairly quick solutions for the scope of change, while capitalism's critics seem to be more aware of socio-political systems' perseverance and inertia.

Not only diverging theories follow from these different starting points, but also different policies. From a praxeological perspective, we observe that the political efforts to date (based on behavioral economics) display a certain unease with the complexities of social life, preferring fairly technocratic approaches to the ecological crisis. Nevertheless, whatever the pathway to sustainability will be paved with, from a praxeological position it is safe to assume that the present calls for the steering of transformation processes will not suffice in the long run. If we take the growing evidence that transforming unsustainable modes of living requires a *fundamental* reduction in resource use seriously, policies of environmental governance should address the *roots* of our resource usage patterns.

I sought to illustrate that these roots of nonsustainable lifestyles – or their various counterparts – can be conceived in terms of habitus, field, and practical sense. The cursory framework developed theoretically here, acknowledges that everyday practice is not performed in a vacuum, but is always part of a socio-cultural universe. Hence, from my perspective, a threefold enterprise is necessary to better comprehend the ecological crisis. *First*, a careful empirical examination of concrete (non) sustainable practices and their respective backgrounds will help us understand the perseverance of current nature-society relationships and identify sites to challenge these. *Second*, if we further conceive sustainability research as a venture in *transformation science*, we might be able to make better use of the insights into other (historical) change processes. While social experiences are unlikely to translate directly, there is, for instance, a striking analogy between the expectable socio-ecological change and the transformation processes Bourdieu observed in Algeria in the 1950s. In both situations, actors are (or will likely be) faced with a deep

transformation of their lifeworld structures. *Third*, praxeological thinking calls for radical reflexivity. Following the notion of an ecological field, sustainability research does not only mean producing *scientific* knowledge (as opposed to a layperson's knowledge), it also means providing narratives and ideas that might actively contribute to socio-ecological transformation processes. Behavioral theories' crucial role in current sustainability policies, for instance, is a strong challenge of the view that social science is restricted to academic ivory towers. As I have argued, field theory enables us to see the common 'playground' of distinct actors. Thus, sustainability research also requires analyses of the ecological field's current state, of its actors, the dominant narratives, and the power relationships.

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