

THE SOCIAL SPECIFICITY OF SOCIETAL NATURE RELATIONS IN A FLEXIBLE
CAPITALIST SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to debates on societal nature relations by investigating the systematic differences between different types of ‘social relations with nature’ in a flexible capitalist society. Based analyses of a 2016 German survey, it presents a typology of ten different ‘syndromes’ of attitudes toward social and environmental issues, which are grouped to distinguish between four ideal types of social relationship with nature: *Dominance*, *Conscious Mutual Dependency*, *Alienation* and *Contradiction*. These are located in Bourdieu’s social space to illustrate how social relationships with nature correspond to people’s positions within the totality of social relations. Understanding how people’s perceptions of and actions in relation to nature are shaped by their positions in these intersecting relations of domination both within social space and between society and nature is an important precondition for developing transformative strategies that will be capable of gaining majority support in flexible capitalist societies.

KEYWORDS

Societal nature relations; social relations with nature; social class; environmental consciousness; environmental behaviour; capitalism; social domination

There is, not least on the pages of this journal, a broad ongoing debate on *societal nature relations*, a concept originating mainly from the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory that has become formative for several strands of Social and Political Ecology, mostly in the German-speaking countries (Brand, 2016; Brand and Görg, 2001; Becker and Jahn, 2006; Görg, 2011; Görg et al., 2017). The concept of societal nature relations has proved essential for gaining a theoretical understanding of the social dynamics at the root of the currently escalating processes of environmental destruction, as well as of the social forces and structures obstructing the deep social-ecological transformation that would be required to halt that destruction – a transformation that will, as most authors in the debate agree, need to be broadly in line with the principles and ideas proposed within the pluralist ‘degrowth spectrum’ (Eversberg and Schmelzer, 2018; D’Alisa et al., 2015; Demaria et al., 2013). This article draws on this debate to make some of its insights amenable to the study of the different ways of perceiving and acting on nature that are the subject of this special issue. In relation to the theory, it argues that an analysis of the prospects for and hurdles to a social-ecological transformation needs to be based on an understanding of *flexible capitalism* as a specific, historically new type of societal nature relation. However, knowing about the macro-scale shape and dynamics of this regime is only the starting point for a sociological analysis of how different groups of people in a flexible capitalist society relate to nature, of how this relates to their social positions, and of the challenges this poses for the plural dialogue and the mobilisations required to actually achieve a transformation.

To enable such empirical analysis, I draw on the debate on societal nature relations to argue for the complementary concept of *social relationships with nature*, which I use in the second part

of the article to demonstrate what different kinds of such socially specific relationships coexist within the population in a flexible capitalist society. Knowing about the classed, gendered and ethnicised differences in these cognitive, emotional and practical relationships, and the ways in which they correspond to people's positions in the totality of social relations, is a crucial precondition for assessing the prospects of a large-scale 'degrowth transformation' (Asara et al., 2015) of the flexible capitalist societal nature relations.

I proceed in three steps. First, I recount some core arguments from the debate on *societal nature relations* to define the concept of *social relationships with nature* as a complement to it, and briefly sketch out the contours of the current regime of *flexible capitalism* as a specific regime of organising societal nature relations. Second, I draw on a typology of ten different 'syndromes' of attitudes toward questions of ecology, environmental policy, and social change more broadly, based on the survey *Environmental Consciousness in Germany 2016*, to examine each type for their socially specific relationships with nature. The conclusion reflects on the relations between the different kinds of social relationship with nature thus identified, points to the ways in which they tie in to the flexible capitalist societal nature relations, and highlights some resulting challenges for transformative politics.

I. SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH NATURE IN FLEXIBLE CAPITALISM

Understanding systematically the different ways in which people and groups within the population of a country or region cognitively, emotionally and practically relate to nature requires a theory of how society *as a whole* perceives, evaluates, uses, controls, adapts to, preserves and protects – in short: *organises its relations with* – nature. In the tradition of the Frankfurt School, German-speaking strands of Social and Political Ecology have developed the notion of *societal*

nature relations (*Gesellschaftliche Naturverhältnisse*) as a key concept for understanding historical change in how societies do this. This concept has been widely deployed in conceptual work and macro-level analyses of policies and discourses, and has been a guiding concept for a broad range of detailed empirical work (for a comprehensive account, see Becker and Jahn, 2006). It has proved well suited for examining the complexes of material infrastructures, institutions, discourses and regimes of knowledge that societies deploy, and continually redeploy, to establish and maintain a certain type of relation with nature and specific nature-society boundaries. The focus is thus not so much on ‘society’ and ‘nature’ as allegedly fixed entities, but on the historically variable processes of *societalisation* in which both, and the relations between them, are constituted. It is these same processes that set the context and limits for how people can relate to each other within society, i.e. for the relations of power and domination that characterise a specific social formation. This implies a three-way relationship between society, nature and human individuals (Institut für Sozialforschung, 1956: 43; Görg, 1999; Becker and Jahn, 2003): Just as society and nature cannot be reduced to each other, individuals are neither mere ‘natural beings’ nor purely products of society, but stand in specific, and interrelated, relationships with both. And this is where the need for a notion of *social relationships with nature* becomes apparent: While existing work on societal nature relations has (rightly) focused on the ‘society-nature’ side of the triangle, the relationships at issue here are those unfolding between socialised individuals and that (equally socialised) entity called ‘nature’ – and these cannot be addressed from a macro-structural perspective. The sociological study of social relationships with nature operates ‘one level below’ that of Political Ecology, investigating the social bases that the political movements, debates, struggles and policy initiatives normally analyzed in Political Ecology rest on.

Actually existing individuals and groups are socialised in very different ways depending on their specific positions in relation to the totality of the (spatial-material, institutional, discursive,

social) structures of society, producing very different kinds of incorporated experiences and everyday practices. They therefore assume different positions in relation to the complex of infrastructures and practices that enact the societal nature relation. Social relations with nature cannot be reduced to ‘perceptions’: As *position-takings* that possess cognitive, emotional and practical dimensions, they are the product of incorporated ‘schemes of perception, appreciation and action’, or *dispositions*, that make up the social in the body (Bourdieu, 1990: 95). They consist both in ideas, attitudes and beliefs concerning what nature is, what it should be and how humans ought to relate to it, and in practices of using, acting on, protecting, or otherwise dealing with, nature. The specific forms of these dispositions depend on the socially specific – more or less mediated, active or passive, powerful or exposed, harmonious or repulsive – kinds of experience with nature that people accumulate during their life.

Many of these experiences are not direct encounters with some ‘natural substance’, but rather consist in participation in the often highly mediated ways in which a society has organised its dealings with its biophysical environment. They are thus always shaped by the location someone occupies in relation to others within a common social space: As *position-takings*, social relations with nature vary both with people’s *positions* in the social world and with the imprint of that social world in their bodies (*dispositions*). Yet, the relation between these three levels is not one of mechanical causation or even determination, but should be thought of as a statistical correlation that holds true as a general pattern, while individual exceptions abound. Empirical case studies in rather remote settings such as rural Nicaragua or Southern Chile (Berghöfer et al., 2010; Tittor, this issue) have found different kinds of relationship with nature among relatively clear-cut groups, set apart by their different social backgrounds and functions in the respective local environment, whose perceptions and practices pertaining to nature are closely related to these properties. In a complex, highly dynamised society such as the one addressed in the empirical part of this article, these separations are much less clear-cut, and differences

always gradual when analysing them at a highly aggregated level. Thus, there will be much less direct correspondence between social or professional affiliations on the one and perceptions and practices relating to nature on the other hand. Nevertheless, as will be shown, significant differences in the latter exist, and are linked to the relative social positions in which they typically occur. Further, the analysis of social relationships with nature in such societal settings cannot restrict itself to the ways in which people relate to the landscapes and species of their immediate environment. Rather, it must take into account the whole of the ways in which people are positioned toward, and cognitively, emotionally and practically relate to, the material, institutional and discursive infrastructures that mediate the societal nature relation. This requires a theory of what these encompass, and of their concrete configuration in the place and time of enquiry. In the present case, I posit that this configuration should be understood as that of a *flexible capitalist* growth regime.

Capitalism is a mode of organising the societal metabolism with nature based on an abstract and universal measure of value, rather than any concrete biophysical properties of the subjects and objects of economic activities (Foster, 2011). *Flexible* capitalism may be seen as the latest in a series of historically specific *accumulation* or *growth regimes* (Aglietta, 2000, 2008; Boyer, 2004), i.e. typical, relatively stable strategic arrangements of societal infrastructures geared to temporarily overcoming the concrete boundedness of the subjects and objects it draws on, uses and, in effect, destroys, in order to allow capitalism's infinite abstract logic of universal commensurability and unlimited expansion to proceed further. In contrast to the logic of expansion through standardisation and mass consumption that characterised the *organised capitalist* regime of the mid-20th century, *flexible capitalism*, by catering to and further spurring the individualised desires that organised capitalism had fostered as a by-product of the crucial role it accorded to consumption, ensures further expansion of the metabolism by competitive strategies of de-standardisation and continuous downscaling of the units of account for all inputs to

production (Eversberg, 2018, 2016; Holst, 2018). Chopping up labour, matter and sources of energy into ever smaller units allows for the subjection of their concrete form and situatedness in space and time to the expansionary imperative. In the centres of the global North, this logic immediately affects many workers and suppliers of productive inputs, and its effects are handed down along supply chains as increasing competitive pressure, enforcing adoption of the same logic of abstract flexibilisation. In tandem with the global service and care chains established in parallel, the flexibilisation of labour in the centres thus ends up damaging social relations far away in other regions of the globe, while flexibilised practices of ‘global sourcing’ of materials and energy translate into an increasing pressure to extract resources (minerals, fossil fuels, biomass) at an increasing scale. Therefore, the deepening of inequalities between the global North and South, and the creation of new ones, at the service of maintaining the ‘imperial mode of living’ (Brand and Wissen, 2018) and its collective practices of ‘externalisation’ (Lessenich, 2019), is a direct effect of the ongoing ‘flexible’ reorganization of global capitalism.

Within capitalist centres, the piecemeal logic deployed in turning human subjectivity, matter and energy *both* into products *and* into the desires needed to sell them amounts to a *subjectivation regime* – a mode of producing subjects – that can be termed *dividualisation* (Eversberg, 2014, 2015, 2018). Despite all contemporary talk about ‘individuality’, the actual processes of reorganising the production of and trade in labour power as a commodity *and* the production and realization of commodifiable desires take place at a *sub-individual* level. Dividualisation – the production of fragmented, modular, constantly shifting and reassembling subjects – of course by no means affects people in all kinds of social positions in the same way or to the same degree. Still, on a larger scale, the fragmenting, de-standardising dynamics that flexible capitalism subjects human as well as non-human nature to are the order of the day. This overarching

logic shapes the ongoing reorganization of social and socio-natural relations, and it is this overall constellation that individuals and groups are integrated into, and subjected to, in different ways, structuring the ways they perceive, feel about and act on nature.

II. SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH NATURE WITHIN THE GERMAN POPULATION

Fig. 1 summarises a typology of ten different types or ‘syndromes’ of attitudes toward social and environmental issues that I developed based on a cluster analysis using the dataset of the survey *Environmental Consciousness in Germany 2016*¹ (Eversberg, 2019, see also Annex 1). I first performed a Principal Component Analysis on 29 questions from the survey concerning respondents’ attitudes on socio-environmental issues, yielding seven factors that stand for underlying ‘character traits’ structuring their responses. Based on these seven variables, I then did a *k*-means cluster analysis to partition the sample into ten segments that would each represent an ideal type or ‘syndrome’ of socio-environmentally relevant attitudes. While the portrayals of these types given below must not be misunderstood as descriptions of people that ‘actually exist’, or even of homogeneous groups, they do stand for typical, non-coincidental combinations of attitudinal traits that can be shown to be statistically significantly related to certain socio-demographic characteristics. The relations between these ten types are visualised in fig. 1 by plotting the ideal typical positions in which respondents assigned to each cluster tend to concentrate in the social space according to Bourdieu (1984), as differentiated along a vertical ‘class’ or ‘power axis’ and a horizontal ‘modernization axis’. Departing from this spatial representation, it is possible to examine the relationships with nature typical to clusters that are located in different sectors of the space, (i.e. differ significantly in terms of social composition).

¹BMUB and UBA (2017). This is a representative survey (2000 respondents) commissioned bi-annually by the German Environmental Ministry and Federal Environmental Agency since 1996. The dataset and detailed further information are available from dbk.gesis.org as study ZA6799.

If the assumption that different social relationships with nature are closely connected to shared social positions and collective experiences is correct, we should find that proximity in the space indicates similar stances and practices in relation to nature. As the analysis will show, this is indeed by and large the case.

The scope of the survey's questions conveys a relatively broad, albeit not particularly detailed, image of the cognitive, emotional and practical aspects of the social relationships with nature that typically go with each of the ten syndromes². Comparing these images reveals that most clusters closely resemble one or two others in terms of their relationships with nature, while contrasting sharply with the rest. To illustrate this, I will begin with the two clusters that appear most distant from each other in social space: *Status-oriented Authoritarianism* in the upper right and *Stressful Precariousness* in the lower left segment of the space. I will give brief profiles and describe the social relation with nature that typically goes with each, before moving on to those clusters that can be shown to relate to nature in similar ways. I will then repeat this for the remaining clusters, again starting at the two most mutually removed ones: *Alienated Affirmation* in the lower right and *Active Eco-Social Citizenship* in the upper left quadrant³.

Fig. 1: Relative positions of the ten clusters in Bourdieu's social space (percentages indicate share of respondents in cluster)

[Insert fig. 1 here]

²The dataset offers a variety of relevant items, including information on environmentally relevant practices (mobility, housing, nutrition), perceptions and evaluation of ongoing policy developments and activism, exposure to environmental risks, etc. To reconstruct each type's social relationship with nature, I took a wide array of these variables into account. For reasons of space, these cannot be reported in detail for each type. Rather, only summaries of the most defining and significant characteristics will be given.

³This is merely the order of presentation. In the actual analytical process I first came up with descriptions of the social relations with nature typical to each cluster, which I compared to all others equally before grouping them.

Upper right: Status-Oriented Authoritarianism and related types

The *Status-Oriented Authoritarian* cluster is defined first and foremost by a radical rejection of cultural openness and social diversity, paired with a fixation on status and private property. Ecological concerns are clearly subordinated to these primary preoccupations. Six out of ten respondents in this cluster are male, and their average age is relatively high. The shares of people living in rural areas (half) and owning homes (three quarters) are higher than in any other cluster. They typically have medium-level educational degrees, but the second-highest mean income, with many working in higher-level office positions, as public servants and in liberal professions, or owning businesses.

Relationships with nature are mediated by the basic possessive individualism. The utmost concern with protecting one's private property evokes generalised mistrust of others, stoking desires for control, order, security, and the exclusion of anything foreign. These desires are projected onto society and nature, both of which this type of personality tries to insulate itself against, leading to practices of retreat from the public realm and into private, protected spaces (automobility as preferred mode of transport, home ownership), and inspiring anti-modern views and regressive critiques of economic growth and social complexity. This is also a way of fending off threats to the material wealth often acquired in segments of the economy that flexible capitalism's dynamic threatens or symbolically devalues (state bureaucracies, traditional crafts). One's accustomed mode of living, particularly in its material dimensions, is perceived as an earned right. This implies a claim to using natural resources and sinks to an extent incapable of being generalised at the global level (including fossil-based heating, automobility, and high meat consumption). To defend this extractive relationship with nature, all political and ideological means are accepted, including racist and exclusionary policies as well as climate

denialism. Both ‘nature’ and the social are construed in line with a basic *social darwinism*: nature, including human nature, appears as a permanent brutal struggle, in which only the most ruthless survive, justifying any means, however deplorable. This makes for an ambivalent relation with flexible capitalist change: On the one hand, such attitudes resonate strongly with neoliberal beliefs in the virtue of competition and private property; on the other, the ongoing small-scale and short-term reformatting of productive inputs, and particularly labour, in increasingly complex productive processes are eyed with growing resentment and countered with politically articulated desires to ‘take back control’.

This shows that, both in relation to nature *and* to society, the driving force of this syndrome is the desire to *dominate*, to ensure the sovereignty of one’s own will and actions regardless of the consequences for others and for non-human nature. Similar basic patterns can be found in two other syndromes: *Anti-Ecological Externalisation* and *Progressive Neoliberal Sovereignty*.

Anti-Ecological Externalisation exhibits an ideologically charged, aggressive anti-ecologism, paired with a utilitarian ‘matter-of-factness’ and self-image as a ‘doer’ so preoccupied with individual economic success that all other concerns are dismissed as naïve and idealist. Growth and the market are emphatically supported as principles of social organization, whereas cultural diversity is viewed rather negatively. Almost three quarters of respondents in this cluster are men, mostly either under 30 or over 60. They typically hold medium-level degrees, but tend to work in comparatively elevated positions, including higher-level office and public-service jobs, mostly in full-time, or as business owners.

Anti-Ecological Externalisation relates to nature mainly through a fundamental opposition to any kind of sustainability-oriented ideas, as well as through personal practices consciously and deliberately fixated on intense automobility, aviation and meat consumption. It is often associated with an aggressive brand of masculinity that signals the desire to dominate and control

women, who are negatively associated with nature, just as ecology is devalued as a ‘female’, ‘weak’ system of ideas. Based on the experience of having advanced to mostly middle management positions through competitive practices rather than qualification, and in line with the abstract instrumental rationality of the ‘organisational work logic’ of these fields (Oesch, 2006: 62ff.; Graeber, 2015; Merchant, 1980), the rejection of pro-ecological change is legitimated by an ideology of individual achievement and a belief that any environmental problem can be overcome by technical means. This is an even clearer example of a *dominant* relationship: Both human and non-human nature appear merely as that which one seeks to prevail over and submit to one’s will.

Progressive Neoliberal Sovereignty, the attitudinal syndrome typical to those profiting most from flexible capitalism, can do without such obsessive self-assertion. It combines a strong belief in growth and the market, a general optimism concerning one’s personal situation, and a penchant for status consumption, with little concern for ecological issues. It rests on the calm conviction of sovereign control and the belief, acquired in social positions of authority over others, that one will also always be able to dominate nature and make it amenable to one’s needs. This syndrome is more typical of men than of women, it tends to be associated with the highest levels of income and education, high-profile job positions, and frequent home ownership. Typically, respondents in this cluster feel least affected by environmental problems, and express a strong belief that social and ecological crises can always be overcome by strategies of technology-driven ‘development’. Accordingly, economic concerns are prioritised over ecological and social issues. In a kind of ‘work hard, play hard’ attitude, one’s self-ascribed superior ‘performance’ provides legitimacy for unsustainable practices, such as frequent flying. Yet, the rejection of ecological principles is less a matter of ideological conviction than a practical affair: Where they do seem personally beneficial, pro-ecological practices (buying organic, eco-

investment) are endorsed without ideological qualms. In all, in this type of relationship sovereign control is exerted over self and nature just as it is over others in society, and this control is seen as an earned claim to be defended.

We can thus label the basic type of relationship with nature that these three groups share, and that seems to be typical for social positions in the upper right segment of social space, a relationship of *dominance*. Albeit with somewhat varying accentuations, it construes ‘nature’ as those aspects of existence that need to be defeated and subdued in order to assert the sovereignty of one’s will; in all three variants it is in some way associated with images of ‘weaker’ or ‘inferior’ humans that these groups are typically also socially superior to. This applies most overtly in terms of class in the case of *Progressive Neoliberal Sovereignty*, in ethnicised or racialised terms in *Status-Oriented Authoritarianism*, and in gender terms in *Anti-Ecological Externalisation*. However, aspects of social domination along all three dimensions are present to varying proportions in each of these clusters. Being positioned high up in most social hierarchies they are part of, these groups habitually delegate the *interpretive labour* (Graeber, 2015: 42ff.) needed to maintain social cohesion to those on the bottom, saving themselves the effort of having to empathise with them in any way. Likewise, they seem to lack any mental equipment for an empathetic relationship with nature, enabling the logical reduction of non-human substances to the status of ‘resources’ available for indiscriminate use for one’s own ends just as well – the relationship with nature reflects the dominant positions in relationships with other people.

Lower left: Stressful Precarity and related types

The relationship with nature typical to *Stressful Precarity* could hardly be more different. The prime aspect of this syndrome is an overwhelming sense of status anxiety, forming the basis for a work-centered ‘survival attitude’. The threat of losing out in the permanent competition for

getting and retaining a job or establishing oneself in working life dominates everything, so that, although typically associated with rather strong pro-environmental attitudes, this syndrome seems to depend on some amount of compensatory consumption for stabilising and regenerating one's psychic energies when off work. This pattern is typical for a 'new working class' of mostly young people in stressful job/family arrangements, often working in insecure and low-paid jobs, doing part-time or unpaid domestic work. Further characteristics are intermediate educational levels, a heightened share of people from migrant families, and few homeowners. They report the highest exposure to noise and pollution, and express strong feelings of dependency on an intact natural environment, the destruction of which is perceived as a great, imminent threat. This threat is frequently interpreted in an explicitly political way, and ascribed to the mode of living prevalent in one's own society. It is met with an ethos of responsibility to the planet and to succeeding generations, and with a high expressed readiness to act up. However, reported actual participation in pro-environmental activism is rather low, and everyday practices are partly at odds with the call for greater sustainability (high meat consumption, frequent driving, compensatory consumption – but also few flights). Being typical for younger people in heteronomous, passively individualised labour market positions, this seemingly contradictory pattern seems to be produced by the everyday pressures this situation imposes: Driving or cycling is often not a choice, cheap 'convenience' products win out over costly, laborious organic alternatives. The pro-environmental ethos, in turn, seems to be related to the widespread experience of working in subordinate positions in the care sector or other 'interpersonal' (Oesch, 2006) occupations – which both require a high capacity for empathy (for both clients and superiors) and have, in an age of austerity-imposed public poverty, been particularly vulnerable to the damaging effects of flexible capitalism's techniques of small-scale and short-term reorganisation. Precisely because the perceived state of nature so closely resembles one's own position, and because of the defining role of *care* for one's own relation to the world,

nature is perceived as a condition for survival that all humans depend on, just as it depends on the caring responsibility of humans.

Again, comparing this to the remaining clusters, we find two that, once more with slightly different accentuations, exhibit similar relationships with nature: *Overstrained Environmentalism* and *Ecosocial Contentment*.

Overstrained Environmentalism is the most pro-ecologically minded syndrome of all. Fervent support for ecological concerns is linked to an ethos of humble self-limitation and a ‘habitus of necessity’ (Bourdieu), as well as a defensive position on growing social and cultural diversity. One could call this the ‘working class environmentalism’ of an aging ‘eco-proletariat’: Older respondents are overrepresented in this cluster, incomes the lowest of all, educational levels equally low. Manual workers and self-employed tradespeople comprise unusually high shares of this group, many are pensioners, and almost half live in rural areas. Like *Stressful Precarity*, *Overstrained Environmentalism* is typically associated with high reported exposure to environmental risks. Typically, long-term experiences of social subordination and material scarcity have translated over decades into a disposition that holds austerity and self-restraint as virtues, and a strong ethos of responsible moderation. Due to these dispositions, and since people in this cluster are typically less or no longer exposed to the constraints of working life, practices are normally more aligned with beliefs (restricted mobility, little meat consumption), and there is often intense engagement with environmental matters. Many in this cluster are well-informed and critical, reporting a surprisingly high degree of active involvement – but in a marked distance from organized politics. In short, nature appears as that which everyone depends on, and which everyone is morally obliged to help protect.

Compared to these two types, whose relationships with nature appear almost like generational variants of the same pattern, *Ecosocial Contentment* is much less shaped by experiences of

anxiety and disadvantage. Based on a down-to-earth ethos of necessity and a rejection of consumptive individualism, it is embedded in a generally optimistic outlook on life and associated with support for pro-ecologism and cultural liberalism. Two thirds of these respondents are female, almost three quarters live in urban areas. They are typically of above-average age, have medium incomes, relatively moderate levels of education and work in medium-skilled jobs. Only a quarter are full-time employed, while many work contingently or are pensioners. In short, it is mostly found among people integrated into the predominant mode of living in safe, but rather humble places, who mostly feel they have received their fair share. This subjective experience of having been treated fairly seems to entail a readiness to de-prioritise one's personal issues for the sake of a greater good, and even to question one's own mode of living, which is self-critically perceived as unjust. Therefore, a far-reaching social-ecological transformation finds expressed support – not out of discontent with the current situation, but out of deeply held beliefs. The corresponding personal practices are normally relatively sustainable, but politicization and activism tend to be seen as the business of experts. Nature, in this conception, is a common good that everyone is morally obliged to help protect, but defining the guiding principles of that protection is delegated to others.

Almost as a mirror image of the self-centered, aggressive 'male' approaches to nature discussed above, these three types, with their predominantly (but not overwhelmingly) female constituencies and their incorporated experiences in socially subordinate positions, could be said to share a *caring* relationship with nature. It rests on the consciousness that all humans rely on nature as much as on mutual care, and are reciprocally obliged to take care for it. It therefore seems appropriate to call this kind of relationship *conscious mutual dependency*. The knowledge of depending on forces one cannot control, but has to live with, corresponds to a structurally homologous dependent position within social relations – in terms of class for all

three, clearly in gender terms in the case of *Ecosocial Contentment*, and, in the case of *Stressful Precarity*, in partly ethnicised terms as well.

Lower right: Alienated affirmation and Indifferent Non-Ecologism

Of the remaining four clusters, *Alienated Affirmation* is the one furthest removed from both of the paradigm cases discussed above. This syndrome is the most difficult to interpret, as its main feature is that *any* statement tends to be emphatically affirmed. Concentrating in the lower right quadrant, it is most typically found in people who are both in socially subordinate positions and losing out in the ongoing processes of flexible capitalist change: Although average incomes are near the mean and many own homes, social status is often less than secure, as educational levels are lowest among all clusters, many work in unskilled jobs, marginal and insecure employment, and under a third work full-time. Respondents in both young and older age groups and in rural areas prevail, many are from migrant families.

Careful analysis beyond the artifacts created by the positive bias of the responses reveals a state of mind dominated by repressed feelings of insecurity and disorientation associated with these situations of disadvantage and/or impending loss, which are concealed behind a surface of optimism. Partly due to the distorted response pattern, any kind of active cognitive or emotional engagement with 'nature' as a concept or reality is hard to discern from the data. The relationship seems to be highly mediated by the infrastructures of production and consumption one is desperately hoping to remain integrated into. As the repressed social fears tend to be projected onto strangers and the unknown, 'nature' disintegrates into the idealised, romanticised 'innocent nature' of artificial media imagery on the one hand and a threatening, rejected 'dangerous nature' on the other. In addition to the 'forced unsustainability' of everyday practices also found in the case of *Stressful Precarity* (many respondents in this cluster live in rural areas, enforcing frequent driving), the particularly strong desire to improve one's positive self-image through

compensatory consumption also leads to less sustainable practices (albeit at a lower level than in more affluent clusters). Pro-ecological policies tend to be rejected if they threaten to infringe on this latter arrangement, as this would endanger the capacity to maintain and restore mental stability. In all, this can be termed an *alienated* relationship with nature: Like the dominated social position one is objectively locked into, the dependency on certain biophysical conditions is banned from consciousness and glossed over by an ideology of optimism and opportunity trying to convince itself that one's sovereign individual action can yield success independent of any – social or natural – preconditions.

A second variety of an alienated relationship with nature is found in *Indifferent Non-Ecologism*, in which ecological concerns are not so much repressed as rather simply ignored or dismissed. Constitutive of this syndrome is a high degree of economic stress and status anxiety, a tendency to passively retreat into the private – and a very pronounced liberal attitude, supporting societal openness and diversity. This cluster has a small female majority, concentrates among middle age groups, and predominantly comprises urban dwellers, with the lowest percentage of homeowners among all clusters. Educational levels are intermediate, household incomes lower than average, many work in simple manufacturing and service jobs, often living in work-centered arrangements with little room for personal fulfillment. More than in any other cluster work full-time. These stressful arrangements abet ecologically unsustainable practices, but this, rather than presenting a source of discontent, is shrugged off as 'the way it is', or even endorsed as a preferred way of life. Personal practices centre around driving and eating meat – but not around flying, probably because it cannot be afforded. Respondents in this cluster, mostly situated in segments of the working class whose jobs follow a 'technical' or 'organisational work logic' (Oesch, 2006), cope with their experiences of subordination and heteronomy within an instrumental logic: Through the lens of one's status anxiety, ecology is dismissed as an issue of general concern and reframed as a luxury that one cannot afford and may legitimately choose not

to care about. The perception of life as an everyday struggle to get by is mirrored in a relationship with nature as unempathetic as that with one's opponents in social competition, and legitimates practices of compensatory consumption as a means to maintain good spirits. In short, nature is *shunned* and ignored. This results from dispositions quite similar to those at work in a dominant relation with nature – but that relation cannot come about because one's subordinate social position is at odds with the desire to dominate.

Alienated relationships with nature thus seem to be particularly prevalent among people in subaltern positions who strongly identify with those dominating them, want to be in sovereign control in similar ways, and thus need to blot out their own social powerlessness and their dependency on nature from their consciousness. This could be interpreted as another dimension to the 'double alienation' diagnosed by Günther Anders (1956: 199ff.). Anders observed that in capitalist consumer societies, people are not only alienated from the products of their labour, but also from the labour embodied in the products they use to serve their needs. In both directions, alienation renders invisible humans' mutual dependency on each other's labour, as well as the relations of domination that effect the unequal and unjust redistribution of the products of that labour through the workings of the abstract, 'alien' sphere of the market. This implies a similar kind of relationship with nature: Just as the effects of one's actions on the biophysical environment unfold well out of view, the dependency on that environment is concealed from consciousness through the technological mediations structuring everyday life. It might rightly be objected that in a highly technologised society, this is equally true for everyone. The reason for specifically labelling the type of relationship described here 'alienation' is that for these two clusters, this is not merely a structural property of the *societal* relation with nature, but is actively affirmed by the practices of repression and wilful ignorance that make up their *social* relationship with nature, in effect turning the aspirations to achieve a dominant relationship

with nature that they pursue in identification with the socially more powerful into a tool to secure their consent to the domination those powerful groups exert over them.

Upper left: Active Eco-Social Citizenship

A fourth basic kind of relationship with nature is displayed by *Active Ecosocial Citizenship*, a syndrome whose most striking property is a strong disposition for intense involvement in all kinds of – social, cultural, political – activities. This is associated with critical eco-social views, skepticism toward economic growth and support for an ethos of self-limitation, as well as culturally liberal beliefs. A majority of respondents expressing this are women, the average level of education is very high, with a quarter holding tertiary degrees. Many work in skilled white-collar and interpersonal service jobs, often part-time or in self-employment. Bourdieu (1984) describes the position of groups in this region by the contradictory term ‘dominated faction of the dominant class’ – and the corresponding relationship with nature is equally contradictory. On the face of it, this is the most eco-socially minded type of all: Ecology and far-reaching societal change are endorsed, the potentials of a sustainable society are evaluated enthusiastically, all kinds of eco-social political measures strongly supported. Activism for such causes is stronger than in any other cluster, and personal practices are the object of intense reflection. Precisely this, however, in many cases expresses an ‘activist’ individualism (Lessenich, 2011) that historically originates in classed subjectivities of bourgeois origin: The high estimation of one’s capacities to effect change in the world that incentivises people in this cluster to become so intensely involved and so focused on their own practice typically results from biographical experiences made in relatively privileged positions, which allow people to perceive themselves and their actions as effectual and to grow used to thinking of themselves (and others) that way. It is a recurring curse of ecological movements in the global North to be driven by groups from these strata, and as a consequence to suffer from the communicative problems that arise from

their inability to understand and cooperate equally with others who do not share such long-term experiences of self-efficacy. The bourgeois class origin is also the source of the contradiction between this cluster's beliefs and typical practices: While they do act more sustainably than almost everyone else in *most* respects – cycling, buying organic, going vegan – there is one important exception to this pattern: long-distance mobility. While scoring 'more sustainably' than all respondents on all other indicators of environmentally relevant practice, the mean number of flights respondents in this cluster undertook does not differ significantly from the mean. This is no coincidence, as the same bourgeois 'activist' subjectivity that spurs self-reflection and involvement in matters eco-social is, at the same time, bent on constantly expanding the scope and reach of the experiences that it defines itself by. This contradiction can be reconciled with respect to food, housing or everyday mobility – the more sustainable versions of these practices can always pass as new and exciting experiences – but since there is no sustainable intercontinental travel, actually 'going sustainable' in this field necessarily infringes on the 'freedom' of personal experience, and is thus often sidelined. Such is the fundamental contradiction of this kind of relationship with nature: Both nature and the social are to be saved by one's own actions – but those actions are, for structural reasons, not wholly suitable for achieving that goal, and the same dispositions that make for the activism and the pro-ecological beliefs simultaneously drive the practices that factually render it invalid.

In such obvious form, the *contradictory relationship with nature* is only found in this cluster. Still, certain aspects of it may also be detected in *Ecosocial Contentment* and *Apolitical Privatism*. It seems to reflect the position of groups in the upper left quadrant of social space – academics, medical and educational professionals, women in different kinds of high-status positions – who both need to constantly engage in imaginative labour *and* are (at least partially) superior to others in other respects, i.e. necessarily engage in practices of directing and controlling others. This double relation of cognitive and emotional empathy paired with the practical

exertion of power translates into the empathetic-yet-destructive relationship with nature described above.

Whither Apolitical Privatism?

The final type, *Apolitical Privatism*, is typically located almost exactly in the centre of social space. It consists of a tendency to retreat into the private sphere, an optimistic outlook on life, a fondness for fashioning one's identity through consumption, and a verbal affirmation of pro-ecological ideas. Respondents holding such attitudes are predominantly female, older than average, possess relatively low educational degrees, and work in medium-skill jobs or have already retired. In terms of social relationships with nature, this is a mixed type: The desire to privately enjoy one's wealth and defend one's standard of living is an aspect of a *dominant* relationship with nature, but the actual practices seem somewhat less environmentally destructive. The way environmentalism is verbally affirmed while practical consequences are not discernible resembles a *contradictory* relationship, but without the corresponding 'activist' self-image: Active involvement in any matter of public concern is low, and political activism seems to be habitually rejected. Instead, responsibility for all matters political is delegated to politicians and experts – a trait otherwise associated with a *consciously mutually dependent* relationship. In effect, nature tends to be viewed as an abstract ideal that needs protection, while practically, protecting one's wealth and mode of living is prioritised.

III. CONCLUSION

The interpretation presented in the preceding section has shown that the kinds of social relation with nature typical to different social groups indeed broadly correspond to the positions these groups occupy within the totality of relations in social space. Fig. 2 summarizes these findings

in a highly stylized representation of a ‘space of social relationships with nature’, which is homologous to the social space as displayed in fig. 1 above.

Fig. 2: Stylized typical locations of the four types of relationships with nature in social space

[Insert fig. 2 here]

Each geometric form represents one of the four kinds of relationship discussed, denoting very roughly the approximate bounds of that sector of the space of social relations within which that type of relationship with nature seems most prevalent. This extremely schematic display must not be misread in a crudely materialist way to suggest that people’s relationships with nature can be directly inferred from their social positions, or vice versa, nor that these kinds of relationship are in reality as clearly distinct from each other as these geometric forms suggest. It merely provides an approximate indication of those sectors of social space in which different types of relationship with nature *tend* to predominate – and only insofar as the statistical relations analysed here suggest certain spatial *concentrations* of patterns each of which can also be found in many individuals throughout the rest of social space.

Visually condensed in this display are the conclusions we can draw concerning the correspondence between social relations and relationships with nature in both dimensions of the space. The four kinds of relations thus broadly correspond to positions within the four quadrants of social space, but their typical social locations are not coextensive with them.

On the vertical axis, it turns out that there is indeed a close link between class relations and relationships with nature: The two kinds of relationship in the top half are both structured by dispositions acquired through biographical experiences of self-efficacy, as are typically made in socially efficacious, i.e. powerful, positions. Within the individualising subjectivation regime of flexible capitalism, this implies a primarily *active* mode of self-conduct that we could call

‘consumptive dividualisation’, in which the relationship with nature is mediated particularly by practices of self-fashioning through acts of consumption. Although privileged positions often depend on a large endowment with ‘competences’ and the capacity to bring them to bear in economically ‘productive’ activities, even these (which often have a strong consumptive aspect – job-related travel, business lunches, etc.) tend to be treated as ‘experiences’ to be consumed and integrated into one’s ‘curated personality’ (Reckwitz, 2017). While in the top left, these images of self tend to revolve around ‘conscious’, ostentatiously universalist and altruist, consumptive practices, in the top right ‘conspicuous’, status-minded and ostentatiously egocentric patterns – and thus a more unambiguously ruthless way of relating to nature – prevail. Both variants, however, imply an active, formative approach to nature – be it to preserve and ‘save’ it or to dominate and use it up.

The two kinds of relationship concentrating in the bottom half are born of experiences of powerlessness and feelings of exposure and dependency, which are dealt with in very different ways: Through conscious engagement for the ideal of a caring relationship of mutual dependency mainly in the lower left, or by repressing and ignoring that dependency in the futile pursuit of an elusive dominant sovereignty further to the right. The common denominator of flexible capitalist subjectivation mechanisms in the bottom half is that of a primarily *passive* ‘productive dividualisation’: Everyday consciousness and practices are dominated by the increasing pressure to develop ‘competences’ and the capacity to ‘flexibly’ adapt to the imperatives of productivity as a precondition for survival in an increasingly demanding labour market. What is offered in exchange are opportunities for *compensatory consumption* of staple goods and services as both incentives and necessary aids for maintaining the capacity to function as a worker. In the lower left, this is met with attempts to adapt to the economic pressure and survive, without abandoning hope that both this pressure and the perceived threats to nature can be overcome in the future. In the lower right, the consumptive practices instead take centre stage, enabling the

construction of an artificial ‘island of well-being’ within the private sphere, with work being relegated to a means to the end of securing the stability of that sphere.

There is thus no simple correspondence between class and relationships with nature. Rather, these relationships come in different variants both in the upper and the lower classes. This variation plays out in the horizontal dimension of the space: In tendency, social environments in which egalitarian and autonomy-based social logics predominate (left) generate more pro-ecological, status- and hierarchy-centred environments (right) more anti-ecological attitudes. Therefore, there is both a working-class and a middle- or upper-class version of a ‘caring’ approach (*Conscious mutual dependency* and *Contradiction*), and equally classed varieties of instrumental or inconsiderate approaches to nature (*Alienation* and *Dominance*). Yet, since effective *practices*, and even more their environmental impact, vary more vertically than horizontally (Moser and Kleinhüchelkotten, 2017), there is something of a disconnect between these mental dimensions of the relationship with nature and its practical-material aspects. This is particularly relevant to the practices in which the fervently pro-ecologically minded type of *Active Eco-Social Citizenship* contradicts itself.⁴ In terms of subjectivation mechanisms, what the horizontal axis represents is individuals’ and groups’ relations to the ongoing modernisation of the subjectivation regime, i.e. the degree to which both the promises and the exhortations of the dividualising logic of flexible capitalism have inscribed themselves into the dispositions of individuals and groups. In the most ‘modernised’ segments near the left pole, this internalisation is most advanced, whereas at the right pole, dividualisation is perceived as a strange, alien force.

⁴In line with this conclusion, another finding is that there is a diagonal from lower left to top right along which positions within social relations and relationships with nature are aligned (from dependency in the lower left to dominance in the upper right), whereas off that diagonal, they diverge: In the case of *Contradiction*, privilege-enabled practices do not live up to the ecological ideals, while in *Alienation*, the dominance one aspires to remains out of reach.

However, having *internalised* the flexible capitalist logic does not imply accepting or even endorsing it – in fact, both a *Conscious Mutually Dependent* and a *Contradictory* social relationship with nature are associated with a critical view of its social and ecological effects. On the other hand, attitudes typically found in the far right segment of social space – in particular, *Status-Oriented Authoritarianism* – are also clearly opposed to flexible capitalist change – but precisely due to the fact that it contradicts the norms that most of their holders acquired through biographical experiences in the era of organised capitalism. Whereas this *reactionary* orientation, intimately connected to a *dominant* social relationship with nature, attacks flexible capitalism ‘from the past’, a social-ecological transformation that would overcome its destructive effects can only be furthered by those challenging it from the present, and from the standpoint of a *caring* relationship with nature.

What supporters of a degrowth-based social-ecological transformation could take away from this analysis is a greater capacity to critically reflect on the social preconditions of their own transformative aspirations, as well as on the possibilities and limits of forming broader transformative alliances. The analysis presented here has shown that in the right half of social space, capitalist societalisation – and its concrete manifestation in the exhortation to engage in wage labour as the primary mode of economic reproduction – is not only accepted, but actively embraced. Anyone wishing to further the cause of degrowth ought to take very seriously the deep entrenchment of fundamentally growth-based and growth-dependent ways of relating to oneself and the world among certain groups, and to clearly accept as opponents of one’s goals those that factually are. As long as capitalist conditions prevail, certain sectors of society cannot and will not be ‘won over’ for degrowth by convincing them of its benefits. They will eventually need to be defeated in protracted political struggles by the forces of transformation, and those forces should accept this challenge rather sooner than later.

But critical reflection is also in order with respect to the relations within the potential pro-transformative camp, which concentrate in the leftmost regions of the social space. Here, the capitalist mode of societalisation is generally perceived more as an outside imposition and viewed more critically. Near the top, this partly leads people to give in to the lure of flexible capitalist ‘modernisation’ projects that promise ‘liberation’ by further eroding the standardised social norms of organised capitalism. Further down, however, such promises ring rather hollow, and personal experience in subordinate positions acts as a foundation for a more thorough scepticism. Indeed, the kind of social relationship with nature that is most likely to lead to actual, more-than-verbal support for a degrowth transformation, based on an experience-based rejection of the logic of flexible capitalism (rather than a secret belief in its promises), and that is linked to patterns of attitudes and practices that more or less anticipate the kind of societal nature relation such transformation is to pave the way for, is the kind of relationship I have called *Conscious Mutual Dependency*. It is somewhat ironic that an alliance of all those forces that call for and believe in the possibility of democratised, consciously mediated societal nature relations is currently blocked by the incoherent practices of its biggest verbal supporters.

Annex 1: Technical Information on the factor and cluster analyses

Step 1: Factor Analysis

I conducted a Principal Components Analysis on respondents' ratings of 29 statements they were asked to assess on a scale from 1 (completely agree) to 4 (completely disagree). In addition to the 13 items of the Environmental Consciousness scale used by the survey, I also included 17 items capturing broader attitudes on personal, social and political issues that the survey uses to locate them in a typology of social milieus. The KMO criterion of 0.904 indicated a very good suitability of the sample for factor extraction. The Principal Component Analysis reduced these 29 items to seven factors, which together summarise just over half (52%) of the overall variance in the answers of all participants to the 29 statements. The results were optimised using the Varimax rotation method.

The factors may be read as shared dispositions or "character traits" structuring respondents' views on the issues at hand. The seven factors Each individual respondent has a personal score on each factor, which can be positive or negative, indicating where they are located on a continuum between people in whom that trait is highly pronounced and those that hold strongly opposing views. Factors are thus relational concepts, describing someone's attitudes *in relation to* the sample mean: For instance, if pro-ecological statements received support from a broad majority of respondents (as was the case), those scoring positively on pro-ecologism were even more emphatic in this respect, while those scoring negatively did not necessarily reject ecologism, but may have just expressed weaker support.

The seven factors I found are (for further details and the complete component matrix, see Eversberg 2019):

- (1) *Ecological common sense vs. eco-indifference* (18% of overall variance): Positive scores indicate very strong concern for environmental matters. Negative scores, given the very broad support for pro-environmental statements, often imply a lower level of concern rather than open rejection of ecological ideas.
- (2) *Status anxiety vs. lighthearted optimism* (7%): Respondents scoring positively are taken up by fears for their personal social and economic situation, while negative scores indicate an optimistic outlook.
- (3) *Active citizenship vs. passive retreat* (7%): Positive scores imply a disposition to get actively involved in all kinds of activities. Respondents scoring negatively tend to retreat into the private sphere.
- (4) *Privatist faith in growth and the market vs. eco-social political critique* (6%): Positive scores mean that respondents view market mechanisms favourably, prioritise growth over environmental concerns, and are strongly focused on personal economic success. Negative scores indicate an ecosocial attitude views growth and the market critically, favouring care and cooperation.
- (5) *Transformative self-limitation vs. belief in the promise of growth* (5%): Scoring highly implies that one is skeptical about the benefits of economic growth and believes that far-reaching social and ecological change is necessary and desirable. Given the very broadly shared scepticism of growth in the sample, negatives do not imply an open celebration of growth as such, so much as a belief that it is necessary for social well-being or one's career.

(6) *Cultural liberalism vs. regressive fear of complexity* (5%): This indicates respondents' position in the conflicts around increasing social diversity and immigration, with "cosmopolitans" supporting these developments scoring high and "localists" viewing them with fear or open opposition scoring negatively.

(7) *Consumptive identity vs. unpretentious necessity* (5%): For those scoring highly, consumption plays an important role for well-being and for fashioning one's identity, while negative values indicate that respondents are focused on the basic everyday necessities of life.

Step 2: Cluster analysis

After identifying the seven factors, I used the factor scores as input for a series of *k*-means cluster analyses. Cluster analyses sort the cases in a dataset into a number of groups according to their similarities with respect to a certain defined set of variables. What the analysis was to come up with were thus segments of the sample that were as internally similar in their scores on the six factors as possible, while being as distinct as possible from all other clusters. The groupings presented in this article were thus constructed solely on the basis of their patterns of attitudes, not based on the socio-demographic criteria or practices that they can be shown to be significantly correlated with. *K*-means clustering yields a solution for how to best divide up the sample into a number of partitions that is predefined by the researcher. To come up with the best solution for the purpose at hand, I did this for anything from five to 12 clusters, reviewed all of the results and settled for the ten-cluster solution as the best compromise between statistical quality and interpretive plausibility. For full details and a table of mean factor scores for each cluster, see Eversberg (2019).

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Fig. 1

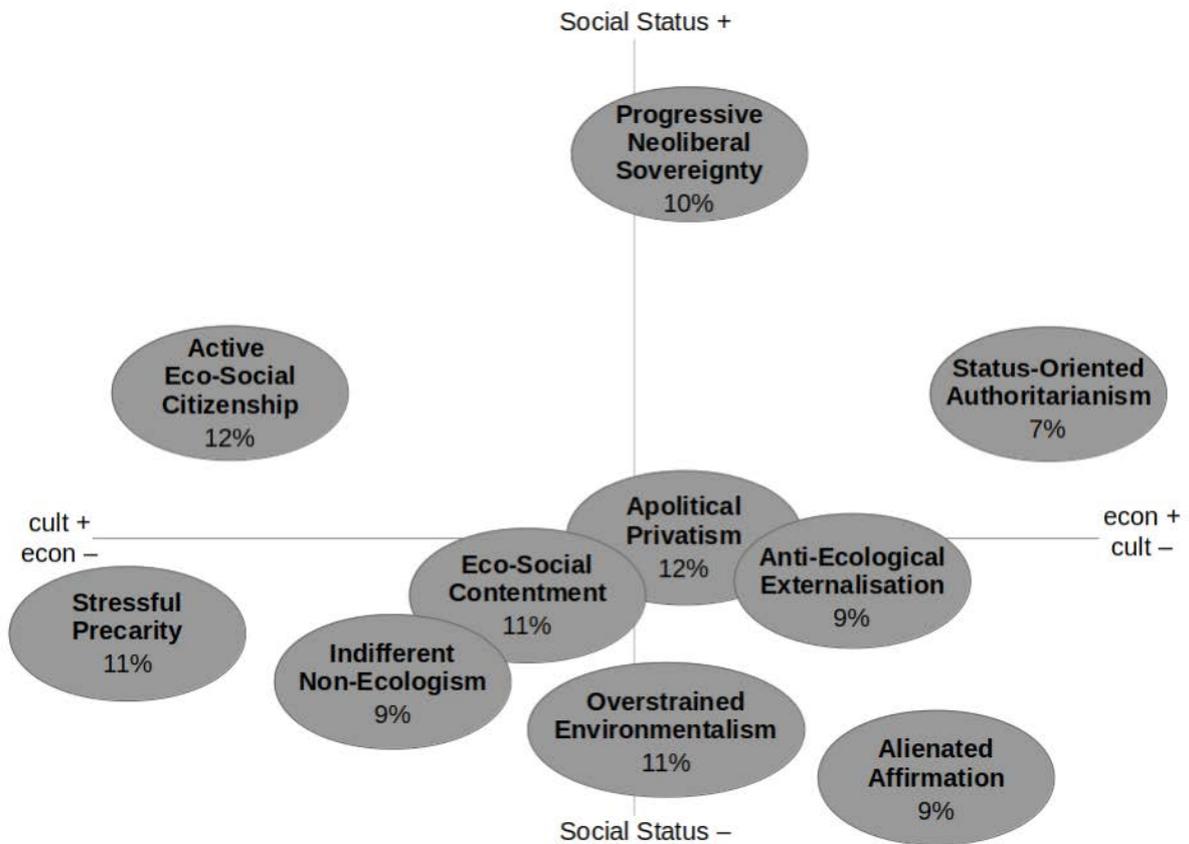


Fig. 2

