

"That's how we live sustainably"! Conflicting environmentalisms in Franconian Switzerland

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Abstract

What is sustainable – and who gets to decide what sustainability is – remains a central question for political ecologists. Scholars have explained and critiqued specific iterations, as well as proposed versions of what they believe sustainability ought to be. In practice, environmentalism is made up of a panoply of emerging, concurrent and conflicting views that continue to change over time and are emplaced and enacted differently. This article contributes to making sense of not only of how environmentalisms are constructed, but how they interact with each other, perhaps complementing, perhaps displacing each other. This article draws on data from a four-month immersion into rural Franconian Switzerland (FS) in Germany alongside twelve semi-structured interviews to gain insight into a grounded example of the interplay of perspectives, practices and sustainability. Using food as an example to anchor our discussion, we found that participants' explanations of sustainability were entangled with rooted knowledge and an emphasis on locality. They highlighted that frugality and self-sufficiency underpin sustainability and exemplify interconnectedness, enabling ecological balance and sustainable livelihoods. Participants were also asked their opinions on the sustainability of two practices present in hegemonic European notions of environmentalism: bio/organic production and vegetarianism. These practices were largely rejected for a range of reasons, raising important questions about the interaction between different sets of environmental beliefs. Here, our intention is not to reconcile this conflict, nor to define what is *really* sustainable, but instead to highlight how the environmentalism of the participants is both challenged and expanded through the contestation of its ideological boundaries.

Keywords: Environmentalism, Political Ecology, food, self-sufficiency, frugality, organic agriculture, counter-hegemonies, Germany

Résumé

Ce qui est durable – et qui décide de ce qu'est la durabilité – reste une question centrale pour les écologistes politiques. Les chercheurs ont expliqué et critiqué des itérations spécifiques, ainsi que proposé des versions de ce qu'ils pensent que la durabilité devrait être. En pratique, l'environnementalisme se compose d'une panoplie de points de vue émergents, concomitants et contradictoires qui continuent d'évoluer au fil du temps et sont placés et mis en œuvre différemment. Cet article contribue à donner un sens à la manière dont les écologismes sont construits et dont ils interagissent les uns avec les autres. Ils sont parfois complémentaires. Cet article s'appuie sur les données d'une immersion de quatre mois dans la région rurale de la Suisse franconienne (FS) en Allemagne, ainsi que sur douze entretiens semi-structurés, afin de mieux comprendre l'interaction entre les pratiques et les perspectives en matière de durabilité. En prenant l'exemple de l'alimentation, nous avons constaté que les explications des participants sur la durabilité étaient liées à leurs connaissances enracinées et à

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l'accent mis sur la localité. Ils ont souligné que la frugalité et l'autosuffisance sous-tendent la durabilité et illustrent l'interconnexion, permettant l'équilibre écologique et des moyens de subsistance durables. Les participants ont également été interrogés sur la durabilité de deux pratiques présentes dans les notions européennes hégémoniques d'environnementalisme: la production bio/organique et le végétarisme. Ces pratiques ont été largement rejetées pour diverses raisons, ce qui soulève d'importantes questions sur l'interaction entre différents ensembles de croyances environnementales. Notre intention n'est pas de réconcilier ce conflit, ni de définir ce qui est réellement durable, mais plutôt de souligner comment l'environnementalisme des participants est remis en question et élargi par la contestation de ses frontières idéologiques.

Mots-clés: Environnementalisme, écologie politique, alimentation, autosuffisance, frugalité, agriculture biologique, contre-hégémonies, Allemagne

Zusammenfassung

Was gilt als nachhaltig? Und wer darf darüber entscheiden? In der Politischen Ökologie werden bestehende Iterationen von „Nachhaltigkeit“ analysiert und kritisiert, während gleichzeitig neue Definitionen vorgeschlagen werden, die unterschiedliche Vorstellungen dieses Konzepts widerspiegeln. In der Praxis jedoch manifestieren sich Nachhaltigkeitskonzepte sowie -bewegungen in einer Vielzahl sich stetig wandelnder, teils widersprüchlicher Perspektiven. Dieser Artikel untersucht nicht nur, wie Nachhaltigkeitskonzepte und –verständnisse konstruiert werden, sondern auch, wie sie miteinander interagieren, inwieweit sie sich ergänzen und wann sie in Konflikt geraten. Die Analyse basiert auf Daten aus einem viermonatigen Forschungsaufenthalt in der Fränkischen Schweiz (FS) in Deutschland, sowie auf zwölf halbstrukturierten Interviews. Ziel war es, ein empirisch fundiertes Beispiel für das Zusammenspiel verschiedener Perspektiven und Praktiken im Hinblick auf das Nachhaltigkeitsverständnis der Teilnehmerinnen zu liefern. Am Beispiel von Ernährungspraktiken zeigte sich, dass Definitionen von „Nachhaltigkeit“ stark von lokalem Wissen und der Verbundenheit mit ländlichen Wurzeln geprägt waren. Insbesondere Selbstversorgung und Sparsamkeit wurden von den Teilnehmerinnen als zentrale Prinzipien einer nachhaltigen Lebensweise hervorgehoben. Darüber hinaus wurden Teilnehmerinnen zu zwei Nachhaltigkeitspraktiken befragt, die in hegemonialen europäischen Umweltdiskursen eine wichtige Rolle spielen: biologische Landwirtschaft und Vegetarismus. Beide Konzepte wurden aus unterschiedlichen Gründen kritisch hinterfragt und teilweise abgelehnt, was grundlegende Fragen zur Interaktion divergierender Einstellungen bezüglich der Nachhaltigkeit aufwirft. Unsere Absicht ist es nicht, zu definieren, was „Nachhaltigkeit“ bedeutet, oder diesen Konflikt zu lösen. Vielmehr soll dieser Artikel aufzeigen, wie das Nachhaltigkeitsverständnis der Teilnehmerinnen durch die Aushandlung ideologischer Grenzen sowohl herausgefordert als auch erweitert wird.

Schlagwörter: Umweltbewusstsein, Politische Ökologie, Essen, Nachhaltigkeit, Selbstversorgung, Bio-Landwirtschaft, Gegen-Hegemonie, Deutschland

1. Introduction

Back in the day, no one in the village bought anything. You had a pig, maybe some chickens and that was that. That's how we live sustainably... that's how we have always done it and that's how we will keep doing it. Anna [63]

What does sustainability look like in practice? Who gets to decide? While a significant amount of environmental activism and scholarship has and continues to focus on generating environmental awareness and action, political ecologists have long insisted that environmental problems and environmental solutions should not be taken for granted. Instead, knowledge about environmental science and sustainable systems and practices is political, created by people with particular imaginaries of what is and ought to be (Leach & Mearns, 1996; Forsyth, 2003). Pushing back against characterizations of environmentalism as the purview of a rich, global northern, white elite, political ecologists have insisted what counts as a sustainable life, livelihood and political economy is linked to culture, place and politics (Martínez-Alier, 2005; Lawhon, 2013). Pluralization has usefully opened up space for researchers to articulate a diversity of environmentalisms and connections between them (Watts & Peet, 2004; Lawhon, 2013).

Useful as pluralism has been to widening understandings of who gets to define what counts as sustainability, this literature also points us towards the need to more deeply understand how these environmentalisms might conflict in important ways. While many political ecologists have studied – and valorized – 'local' environmentalisms in the global South, McCarthy's (2002) provocations over 20 years ago remain important: how might this plurality be navigated? To what degree do different environmentalisms advocate for diverse but congruent movements, policies and futures? To what degree do they fundamentally conflict, making for antagonistic politics *within* a broadly construed environmentalism (see Robbins, 2019; Cavanagh & Benjamin, 2017)?

In this article, drawing on participant observation and semi-structured interviews by Ylva, we explain the environmental beliefs and practices of people living in a rural area in what is called *Fränkische Schweiz* or Franconian Switzerland (FS) in Upper Franconia, Germany (Map 1). We focus on food as a lens through which to understand these wider values and behaviors. Germany is a useful place for thinking through this plurality, because it is seen to be a foundational location of ecomodernism and a leader in environmental policy. Yet, in keeping with wider argument about the plurality of environmentalisms, our data challenges any easy, universal understanding of environmentalism in Germany. It raises questions about how environmental ideas travel and the complicated entanglements that occur between ecological arguments and social, cultural and political ones about 'what is sustainable.'

In what follows, we show that the practices and beliefs are based on an accumulation of rooted knowledge, which is place-based and situated, creating a web of emplaced practices. Specific examples like self-sufficiency and frugality illuminate how rooted interests in maintaining the ecological balance, and socioeconomic livelihoods, constitute local environmentalist values and practices. We then consider, based on our interview data, how participants responded to other environmental beliefs and practices commonly found in and beyond Germany. Research participants were often dismissive or even antagonistic of other ways of allegedly being sustainable: organic procedures were critiqued as overly standardized, aiming to codify and regulate the embodied practices already in place in FS and, at times, ultimately being counter to the broader aims of sustainability (Otto & Mutersbaugh, 2015). Vegetarianism and/or reducing meat consumption was rejected, and instead the status quo in FS was reasserted as already sustainable. These contestations provide practical examples of theoretical standpoints within political ecology and the plurality of environmentalism itself. Finally, we reflect on our data and argument within the multitude of environmentalist perspectives that have been considered and debated by political ecologists. Our intention is not to reconcile and provide a single answer to the question of what sustainability is, but instead to highlight the ongoing significance of questioning assumptions, political alliances and values as we continuously deepen our understanding of the plurality of environmentalisms.

2. A panoply of environmentalisms

Sustainability, as a concept, is and always has been opaque, plural in nature, and contested. The plethora of definitions, whether it be the basic pillars of sustainability, quick-fix solutions or eco-centric stances, mean sustainability itself is contested and difficult to define. The purpose of sustainability is often described as a practical one, focused on meeting material needs from an environment that is not limitless (De Fine Licht & Folland, 2019). Yet sustainability is comprised of actual practices, judgments about good practices are underpinned by values, and these are shaped by behaviors within social contexts that create specific environmentalisms. There are competing and complementary approaches to sustainability (see Redclift, 1992; Shiva, 2005; Ormerod, 2019).

Political ecology as an academic field of inquiry has long been characterized by critique, and has developed new propositions, often linked to greater social and environmental justice (Robbins, 2019). Early studies often showed how solutions that were proposed to 'protect the environment' failed to take into account local knowledge and practices, and as a result often did not achieve their intended aims: sometimes, they made environmental degradation worse (Leach & Mearns, 1996; Forsyth, 2003). Such studies provided critiques of 'expert knowledge' (that was often rooted in white, European, colonial or modern ontologies and epistemologies) and this was a reason to consider solutions that drew more carefully on local knowledge and

practices. Scholarship helped to reframe environmentalism as more plural (thus, there are environmentalisms), and rooted in a wide range of places, people and perspectives. Martínez-Alier (2014), for example, critiques metropolitan elitism that places conservation and the protection of 'wild' places and creatures over the interests of other humans. He insists that there is also an 'environmentalism of the poor', one that is also *environmentalist*, but differently so. Disregarding the idea popularized by 'environment versus development' thinking that poor people either lack awareness or only focus on their daily survival, Martínez-Alier illustrates how an environmentalism based on the needs, injustices and priorities of less privileged communities is very much prevalent and thriving (ibid.). When treated too simply, the dichotomies that underpinned much of this work were easy to criticize. McCarthy (2002), for example, asked a series of questions about how a political ecologist would analyze a rural environmental conflict in the global North, and whether the same analytical frames and politics might still apply.

Disagreements over 'the hatchet' (used by political ecologists to critique) and 'the seed' (what political ecologists advocate for) remain in political ecology, as scholars and activists point to the plurality of understandings of sustainability and disagreement over what they think it should entail (Robbins, 2004; Cavanagh & Benjamin, 2017; Robbins, 2019; Leff, 2021). While there is increasing consensus that a 'one size fits all' universal environmentalism ignores the importance of situating practices in different socioecological contexts, there is as yet no agreement on what can be considered environmentalism, how it is enacted and to whom it stands in agreement with, and in opposition to. New terms and combinations of terms often draw on longstanding debates: ecomodernists can be capitalist or socialist (White, Gareau & Rudy, 2017) and degrowth draws on a long tradition of arcadian thought but not all aspects are easily subsumed within this tradition (Lawhon & O'Connor, 2024). Just as with other terms and framings, there are many different understandings of these terms, and they are adopted, adapted, and critiqued in sometimes unpredictable ways.

The 'degrowth' movement, for example, is seen by some to be exclusively reserved for a "well-educated urban middle class that share progressive-green-cosmopolitan values" (Muradian, 2019, p. 257) that lacks resonance in the global South (Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023). However, this ignores the wide range of arcadian lifestyles practiced by rural communities over generations, across the North and South. For example, Gowan and Slocum (2014) highlight the 'petits producteurs' of the Aude, France, who enact a frugal lifestyle rooted in anti-consumerism and ecological sustainability. In this context, the long-standing agglomeration of smallholders and artisans has fostered frugal practices centered on self-provisioning and small-scale market production, driven by a search for voluntary simplicity and resource efficiency. More broadly, debates over degrowth highlight how normative perspectives of environmentalism travel, are contested, adapted and are adopted in sometimes surprising ways. There is always debate about oppositional sustainability terminology and principles (Gräbner-Radkowsch, 2023; Lawhon & O'Connor, 2024).

Similarly, how rurality is treated within environmental thought differs, from a perspective that identifies an arcadian, environmentalist idyll – a serene, slow-paced lifestyle with a strong bond to land and nature – while others see rural communities as conservative, 'backward', and anti-environmental. In contrast, environmentalism has been perceived as an overwhelmingly progressive 'new social movement' led by cosmopolitan urbanites. Across all these different dimensions are different assumptions of what sustainable practices should – and should not – look like (Engels, 2017). These assumptions are underpinned, as Rzedzian suggests (2023), by a variety of environmental values.

Useful as these broad characterizations of different environmentalisms may be, in practice people adapt them to their specific contexts (Loftus, 2012; Henderson & Lawhon, 2021). The specific constellation of any environmentalism should be studied in relation to its position in time and space, and its scale (Lawhon, 2013). Political ecologists, often trained as geographers, have urged against simplistic understandings of 'locality' and instead highlight "local, regional and global scales of analysis" (Roberts, 2020, p. 7) to understand how and why power relations, economic structures, and historical and cultural context influence the various strands of environmentalism (ibid.). In a classic text, Brookfield (1978) argued that local-level, place-based environmental behavior is a starting point, along with the network of factors that constitute and influence such a system. More recent scholarship, drawing on Massey's geographical work on place and place-making, suggests the idea of 'emplaced sustainability' (Barron *et al.* 2020; Lawhon & McCreary, 2023).

How might we understand diverse and emplaced environmentalisms? Prominent scholarship often focuses on large-scale counter-hegemonic movements whose aim is to directly challenge political structures (Schlosberg & Coles, 2016). Yet there is also value to studying everyday practices as a site of plural understandings. As Loftus explains in *Everyday environmentalism*, "ideas emerge from everyday men and women, whose practical acts make the world as it is" (2012, p. 4). We can look at resilient and sustainable practices within people's everyday lives, as well as broader actions. Although mundane, practices can transform communities and encourage wider economic and political change (Schlosberg & Coles, 2016). Cunningham (2009) goes one step further with "banal environmentalism." He argues that banal, everyday environmentalism can challenge macro social structures and (re)construct them through everyday processes and meanings. It is particularly the mundane, often unassuming practices of the everyday that can be overlooked. Particular, situated environmentalisms may be broad in scope, but they are not limitless. In this article, we do not attempt to reconcile competing narratives about what 'real' environmentalism should entail, nor identify what is truly sustainable. Instead, we work to explore a version of environmentalism that remains controversial and we reflect on the explanations research participants offer about their own and other's beliefs.

In order to provide a focal point for our analysis, the article emphasizes the environmentalism that emerges through everyday food practices in a rural German community. Not only is food and its production inextricably related to place, but people's relationship to food as part of their culture and identity is often locally defined (Béné *et al.*, 2015). We don't see food production and consumption in term of producing and consuming commodities, because power and natural resources are embedded in local food systems (Follett, 2009). Working to understand food practices allows us to begin understanding the values underlying the emplaced, everyday environmentalism in FS, showing tensions between these and other prominent environmental practices.

3. Food politics in Upper Franconia

While it is not an officially recognized term and can be geographically confusing, the name 'Franconian Switzerland' or 'Fränkische Schweiz' has been well established for more than two hundred years and refers to the triangle of land situated between the cities Bamberg, Bayreuth and Nürnberg in Upper Franconia, Bavaria (Map 1; Bätzing, 2000; Schirmer, 2012).



Map 1: Fränkische Schweiz in Germany (n.d.). Ihre Anreise in die Fränkische Schweiz [map]. Retrieved from <https://www.fraenkische-schweiz.com/service/anreise>

Within Upper Franconia, most residents vote conservatively, with 42% voting for the CSU (Christian Social Union) in the FS (Bundestagswahl, 2021). Historically the area has been faced with economic stagnation and its rural communities face economic and demographic decline, often with only a few families making up each village (Bätzing, 2000). Over recent decades, urbanization and the economic prioritization of the three surrounding cities have meant a further decline in industrial activity, and many local shops such as butchers, bakeries and tailors have closed (Becker *et al.*, 1996). Above-average German poverty rates are also related to the FS's hilly geography, making commercial agricultural ventures difficult and creating a degree of spatial isolation (Figure 1 & Figure 2).



Figure 1: Near Mittelehrenbach. Adapted/reproduced from a private image provided by H. Will (personal communication, April 1, 2022).



Figure 2: Typical rock formation in Frankonian Switzerland. Ylvali Koch, June 2022.

Agriculture is comprised of smallholdings, and farmers tend livestock (Bender *et al.*, 2005). Commerce is predominantly about food production, with many small breweries and a notable cherry industry (Bätzing, 2000). Otherwise, Catholic customs alongside distinctive Franconian food and drink specialties shape the cultural milieu (Kantova, 2018). The name Franconian Switzerland is based on cultural rather than spatial boundaries, making the area's collective identity one of the strongest in Bavaria. Thus, although far more complex than the summary above, the FS provides a useful example of a place to examine an environmentalism that is both distinct and that interacts with other beliefs.

Rural environmentalism in Germany is often conflated with organic agriculture. In Bavaria, this is perpetuated by political agendas and classifications such as the *Bio Siegel*, which pushes for an increase in certified organic farming (Hempel, 2020). It is argued that such an increase will create more regional value and reduce the environmental impact of the current food system (Haller *et al.*, 2020). Organic agriculture is seen as more than the pure production of food, but rather a prioritization of the sustainability and quality of food (Tovey, 1997) which is also represented in everyday practices of consumption. Here, the production of organic foods feeds into a cycle of generating income in the form of local organic markets, increasing qualitative output through local farming and heightening awareness of sustainable food systems (Prügl, 2004).

Organic agriculture does include potential risks. Some have reported a decline in crop yields (Leifeld, 2012). As has been shown in many other contexts, the certification and inflexible standards distance organic production create difficulties for small-scale producers (for Germany, see Scialabba & Hattam, 2002; Jouzi *et al.*, 2016; Reddy, 2010; more broadly, Rigby & Cáceres, 2000). Further, whilst organic food production is critiqued for its rigid classification and elimination of lived experience, organic consumption is often hindered by its "inability to serve a diversity of income, education and occupational backgrounds" (McEntee, 2010, p.787). Thus, as Fitzpatrick and Willis (2015) argue, the imposition of organic systems and regulations,

although based on sustainable objectives and expert knowledge, might not represent current lifeways and food practices – quite literally 'dis-placing' some groups from the food they produce and consume. The authors elucidate how such imposed values often create forms of resistance through preserving pre-existing food systems such as small-scale and subsistence farming, or the promotion of regional produce (*ibid.*).

Discourses and practices of 'localism' are also important in and beyond Germany. Fonte (2008) presents two perspectives on local food systems. Whilst the first one, the 'reconnection' lens, focuses on re-localizing through grassroots initiatives, the second, the 'origin of food' perspective, repositions local food practices within a value system of traditional practices and relations to place. McEntee (2010) delves deeper by explaining how traditional 'origin of food' localism is based on affordability, ease of access and tradition whilst the contemporary 'reconnection' localism focuses on supporting the local economy and farmers whilst still maintaining rural heritage (McEntee, 2010). Whilst contemporary localism portrays clear environmental goals such as a desire to reduce the carbon footprint, traditional localism is based on more subtle environmentalist connections such as maintaining a balance between society and the environment through long-standing, established practices. As shown in the 'origin of food' localism, environmentalist practices are reflected in a breadth of interlinked resources such as cultural techniques, traditional know-how and skilled employment (Tregear *et al.*, 2007).

Maintaining a local ideology based on traditional systems of meaning often results in a stronger focus on self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency is a certain level of economic independence with basic needs and well-being met (Mitcheam-Eatmon, 2020). Concerning food practices, rural self-sufficiency might focus predominantly on the production of food to feed the family and the surrounding neighborhood (Prügl, 2004). Struthers and Bokemeier (2000) argue that self-sufficient practices are often mythologized as the standard rural resident being a provider for self and family. Thus, a self-sufficient lifestyle takes on an agrarian ideology, as farming is seen to be the main source of food production (*ibid.*). However, in reality, this is not the case as modern rural populations are not detached from the industrial food web. Rather, Maretzke (2013) argues for a different conception of self-sufficiency in the form of small practices that relate to conservation, growing vegetables or maintaining livestock. Nevertheless, even partial provision of one's food creates an enduring relationship with the land (Larson *et al.*, 2015). This relationship is based on ecological balance instead of prioritizing profit-orientated production. In Germany, these modes of food production create sites of contestation where traditional practices are visible in small vegetable patches, shared food sovereignty within villages, or part-time farming within farmsteads. But they are progressively overhauled by an increasing focus on larger, mechanized, and specialized farms (Prügl, 2004).

Furthermore, whilst alternative food production patterns are based on self-sufficiency, consumption patterns are shaped by discourses of rationalization and frugality. Especially in Germany, post-war rationalization along these lines dominates rural communities (Prügl, 2004), with a moderate use of goods and resources and an emphasis on the avoidance of waste and overconsumption (Evans, 2011). Whilst some argue that frugality is not necessarily environmentalist (*ibid.*) but rather an ascetic critique of excess, Van Kempen *et al.* (2009) maintain that the connection between environmental concerns and frugal practices is pertinent. This link is often woven into the social fabric of rural and peripheral communities and yet is often overlooked. Thus, frugality in praxis, in the context of food production and consumption, encompasses a myriad of potential practices, motivations and reasonings – not uncommonly in direct relation to environmental concerns. There are important connections here with degrowth scholarship in and beyond what political ecologists study, and questions about the politics of terminologies and knowledge. As Lawhon and O'Connor (2024) point out, people may well embrace or reject the subsumption of longstanding practices under an umbrella term that comes from somewhere else.

Meat consumption remains a particularly provocative point of contestation within this wider understanding of environmentalism. Statistically, meat consumption in Germany is more than twice the global average (Stoll-Kleeman & O'Riordan, 2015), with high consumption most prevalent amongst those with lower socio-economic status and/or living in rural areas (Koch *et al.*, 2019). Whilst globally industrial meat production and consumption are catalysts for deforestation, biodiversity loss and increased greenhouse gas emissions (Stoll-Kleeman & O'Riordan, 2015), for rural communities, regionally produced meat is inextricably linked to socio-economic livelihoods, conservation of landscapes and economic security (Maretzke, 2010). To

exemplify, hunting to control the wildlife population is considered essential for maintaining an ecological balance in countless rural communities in Germany, ensuring a steady household income and maintaining traditional meat consumption (Larson *et al.*, 2015; Neal, 2013). Yet the impacts of meat production and consumption are visible globally, raising important questions about what kind of environmental values are centralized, and ignored.

In sum, environmental thinking and behaviors consist of many different views and values. Sometimes this is rooted in different understandings of ecology, where different practices are understood to be impactful. But these views and values are also related to cultural differences, with a sensitivity to power-laden discourses imposed by powerful actors 'from elsewhere.' It is important to recognize these entanglements and the conflicts that can arise as individuals attempt to make, justify and explain their decisions to others. What this means for environmentalism, and how sustainability should be pursued, remains subject to debate, but crucial to understand.

4. Methods

Data collection for this article took place during a four-month internship by Ylva at the *Ökologische Land-Akademie Feuerstein* (ÖLA) in 2022. The ÖLA was an environmental education center with a focus on sustainability, based just outside Ebermannstadt, a village in the center of the FS.² All fifteen employees, except the CEO, lived in remote-lying villages in the surrounding area. Ylva initially focused on participant observation, with a 'natural' engagement between her internship and research.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with twelve participants, all of whom identified as women. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 62 years, with half being between 25–45 years old. As the ÖLA acted as the predominant site for fieldwork, all participants were employed through the ÖLA, with nine working full-time and three part-time. Five of the women were single, and seven were married with children. Out of these seven, five participants owned a farm; none of the single women did.

Notably, none of the women identified as full-time farmers nor relied solely on farming for their livelihood. Instead, they perceived their employment at the ÖLA as a crucial source of income, independence and the opportunity to acquire new skills beyond agriculture. The five who also owned a farm often had a full time commitment there in addition to their job at the ÖLA. Supplementary sources of farm income included cherry cultivation, crop production (such as wheat) and livestock farming. Growing vegetables, keeping animals and other farm activities featured in descriptions of environmental practices. The participants who did not own a farm were also embedded in the local agrarian culture, as they often sourced food from neighboring farmers, reinforcing strong connections to land-based livelihoods.

While the sample size is small, it was most of the employees of the ÖLA. We want to show how people grapple with differences and conflicts over what is sustainable, rather than generalizing to all of Germany. Interviewees' names have been changed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Interviews pursued two broad questions, with some follow-up ('If you had to explain the word "sustainability" to someone, how would you explain it?' and 'Is there anything that you do in your day-to-day life that you consider to be sustainable?'). Crucially for what follows, respondents also raised examples of what they determined was *not* sustainable, so the interviewer also asked questions about two 'mainstream' environmental practices: meat consumption and organic farming, and the follow-up was spontaneous (Turner, 2010). Interviewing face to face was ideal for picking up on body language as well as verbal responses (Opdenakker, 2006), and these were noted (O'Reilly, 2012). Daily notes were consolidated and written up, and later analyzed thematically through 'open coding' (Watson & Till, 2010) and then the reduction and cataloging of themes (Alhojailan, 2012) in conversation with Mary. The process revealed patterns of meaning across all interviews and field data (Guest *et al.*, 2012) and overarching themes such as 'frugality' or 'self-sufficiency' emerged. While we do not wish to overstate and flatten diversity within the FS, we did find notable agreement across the interviews and participant observation, which are shown in the next section.

² The ÖLA has been shut since December 2022 due to bankruptcy.

Ylva has personal connections to the site, as she had family working at the ÖLA. Further, as a native German and with a rural upbringing near the *Feuerstein*, she was a partial insider with knowledge of the narratives surrounding culture, rurality and sense of place. Her international background gave perspective and distance, and she could also "ask the dumb questions" (Naaeke, *et al.*, 2011). As Bourke (2014) explains, acknowledging and valuing positionality enables us to further comprehend the multifaceted nature of reality, but it was at times difficult to balance personal viewpoints with cataloging those of others, given the tight-knit relationships that formed. We discuss this below.

5. Environmentalism in Franconian Switzerland

The geographically and temporally limited environmentalist practices and beliefs we found in FS are best understood as a set of emplaced practices that unfold and progress as they are shaped by contextual surroundings, and people's relationships with their environment and with each other. We try to remain respectful of the limits of our positionality and the validity of respondents' perspectives, and the links to theoretical questions, as we report them.

Contestations, perspectives and practices different among the respondents, but we found strong correlations that largely congealed around a shared perspective. Given that these women come from the region and work together, this is perhaps not surprising. Their environmentalism is shaped by – and can be understood through – practices in their daily lives, involving farming, food distribution and consumption in a similar socioeconomic and biophysical context. It involves maintaining a balance in the local ecosystem – the land and social networks. There are, however, tensions and contradictions due in part to external influences and pressures. Here, we first trace the core ideas that emerged when we asked participants what is sustainable. In the section that follows we examine the resulting tensions.

Emplaced practices

Irma is 63, and about to retire – she has worked at the *Feuerstein* kitchen for more than forty years. Every day she goes home with a bucket full of food scraps she has collected throughout the day. She explains:

I collect all sorts: banana peels, eggshells, whatever gets thrown away that day. I feed it to my chickens and that way I can save some food from being wasted, my chickens get nutritious feed, and I get good eggs from my chickens. It's a win-win really.

Such small, yet constant practices feed into a wider network of activities we encountered throughout the fieldwork. Whether it is Irma feeding her chickens and simultaneously reducing food waste, Karina conserving fallen fruit off the neighboring trees or Anna providing the surrounding communities with sourdough bread starter – these practices are created as part of a cumulative body of knowledge which has been maintained and expanded by the participants. Interestingly, whilst sustainability often isn't at the forefront of reasonings behind these practices, people such as Irma or Anna consider the sustainable aspect of their food practices as seemingly self-evident. In response to whether she believes these daily activities are sustainable, Tina replies "Of course, it is sustainable, I mean, we benefit from it, and we always have ... [and] by 'we' I don't just mean you and me, but our animals, our land, our neighbors – everyone." The continuity of human-environment interactions creates specific food practices but more importantly allows for sustainability to be the underlying factor in daily life. Traditional knowledge is situated knowledge (Sole & Edmonson, 2002).

Agnes, whose husband hunts for a living, said:

It's funny because people always hate on hunting. But actually, we hunt to restrict the local deer population so that farmers can keep up their food production. We use the whole animal, from head to toe and give most of it away to neighbors for free. People here understand the relationship better and that's why hunting is sustainable after all.

By 'relationship', Agnes refers to the relationship between the land and its people. Not only is she defining place to be the key determinant in what makes practices sustainable, but she also argues for a need to situate practices within their environment. Here she elaborates, "deer don't have natural enemies... and they destroy as much harvest as wild boars do here, so for farmers this is awful." Further, she explains how the hunting of deer is heavily regulated by the German government: "...there are specific times you don't shoot the doe, numbers of what you can shoot and specific places, where you shoot." She is keen to defend the tarnished image of a hunter, as hunting is often seen as morally repugnant or even destructive (Larson *et al.*, 2015), and highlights there is no "natural cycle of life" anymore. She sees hunting as essential in her role as a local land steward, and emphasizes that it preserves ecological balance rather than causing harm to the environment. That is not to say she isn't aware of the ethical issues surrounding hunting. Rather, she talks about hunting customs and traditions such as "the last bite", whereby a fir branch is placed in the mouth of the animal, and explains that hunting is community-orientated (Maretzke, 2013), as the animal shot is shared within the immediate neighborhood. She explains how "these traditions are our livelihoods, we are proud of them and proud to hunt...people despise it, but they don't see the rigorous regulations, ecological focus and care for the animal behind this work."

Agnes's relationship with wildlife, the land and others within her immediate community shaped her argument that hunting practices are sustainable. Throughout her explanation, there is a notable contrast between what 'people here' understand to be sustainable and what "people not from here" insist is both morally correct and ecologically sustainable. Such is the case with many other practices that were encountered within the FS community – hunting, farming, conservation or neighborly distribution of food – all of which centered around the socio-economic as well as environmental well-being of the area. A relationship exists between the ever-expanding accumulative web of traditional practices and the place through which they are enacted. It is such a relationship, such an emplacedness, that creates the particular environmentalism of the FS.

Self-sufficiency

While none of the research participants were self-sufficient in food, the practices and the importance of producing one's own food were often noted. All the respondents produce much of their own food, with many having a garden or vegetable patch and some rearing pigs, sheep, or chickens. Agnes explains "We eat a lot of game, and my brother who owns a farm raises a pig for us every year, which is then slaughtered in January, and we use it to make sausage ... we really make sausage *ourselves*!"

Others like Karina aspire to produce more of their own food. "Yes, I get my eggs from the farmer around the corner, but actually, I'm trying to grow more vegetables in general... [Pause] I have a garden, you know, and so much space." Here, the 'origin of food' or 'traditional' localism (see Treagear *et al.*, 2007; McEntee, 2010) emphasizes the importance of returning to locally maintained food networks as a means of preserving cultural techniques and traditional knowledge required for growing and preserving food.

These efforts to produce local food exemplify environmental values, including a strong connection between the participants in the FS and the land that nurtures their crops. It is this relationship that the participants view to be the most sustainable: "There are no long routes between the food [and you] and you know you grew it" says Tina, whilst Gerda argues "Being self-sufficient is the most sustainable because I re-invest in my land – the land feeds me and I feed the land." By taking on the role of the producer, the moral values and social structures that have been reproduced through the decentralized food system where food is reared, cultivated, processed and finally delivered to our tables without ever seeing any of the processes, are reduced or even eliminated (Tovey, 1997). Therefore, all of the participants view self-sufficiency to be at the heart of sustainable practices within their own lives. Whilst an 'origin of food' localism might accurately define the return to local food production to be related to accessibility and affordability, the practices of the FS expand such a framework to include sustainability as a driving force.

That said: most research participants also buy food from supermarkets such as Aldi. The bananas noted by Irma, for example, had surely travelled a long way to arrive at FS. However, as Gerda says "We grow it, we raise it and so we know it and we care about it" by which she is referring to the value system that is embedded in everyday self-sufficient practices. As Larson *et al.* (2015) argue, even the partial self-provision of food creates a stronger relationship with the land, as caring for the surrounding ecosystem becomes important for

one's survival. At the same time, although the self-sufficient practices might be individual in nature, social relationships within the community are strengthened as food production becomes a shared venture – one that is characterized by sharing, preserving and reusing.

Frugality

Talking about her family's food production, Emma argues "You have to admit that the people that have a farm here are the drivers behind this kind of sustainability." By 'this kind' she is referring to the frugal values which are inextricably interlinked with self-sufficiency. Frugality describes a restraint on consumption (Evans, 2011) which for these participants takes on the form of reusing, recycling and wasting less. One of the most important elements in the participants' everyday lives is decreasing individual consumption and promoting collective change by adapting frugal practices. Charlotte, for example, explains "Everything is put to use and that is sustainable for me... to not throw things away, to care for them and to only buy something if you really need it [and] that is the case with everything – including food."

These attitudes can also be linked to discourses of post-war rationalization, which continue to shape peripheral rural areas in Germany (Prügl, 2004). Such is the case in the FS. As Eva opines "The people who are rooted here, they live this life because the FS has always been a poor area. People have always had to save and reuse, so it's very anchored here" whilst Gerda explains "We have just been brought up to understand to not throw anything away. I guess because here on the land, that is how you survive." As with self-sufficiency, the practices surrounding a frugal lifestyle are based on an accumulation of knowledge which has been shaped by the history of the FS.

An interesting juxtaposition exists between these statements and literature arguing that sustainable consumption need not be borne out of economic scarcity. Evans (2011) argues that frugality is borne out of choice, because although people criticize waste, excess and over-consumption, this generally occurs when a community has overcome poverty and then acquired the means to focus on reducing consumption. Muradian (2019) agrees, stating that the return to austerity in the shape of frugal practices has influenced the degrowth movement, a post-materialist ideology based on progressive, often cosmopolitan values (and most popular in urban Euro America). He argues that such concepts have less traction among those living on the economic margins, as a result. However, framing frugality this way disregards the longstanding practices that are *already* being practiced in peripheral regions. Whilst frugality in the FS might have resulted from historical as well as socioeconomic necessity, it continues to shape consumption behaviors and attitudes. As Eva says,

Sustainability is a modern word. In the past, people were frugal and tried to live a simple life. How can you use something sensibly and also use less or reuse? That for me is sustainability – just without the fancy, new façade.

Therefore, while historical and socio-economic factors may be used by respondents to explain why they act sustainably, these practices are now being *maintained* because they are seen to be sustainable. By continuing to embrace voluntary, rather than forced, simplicity and rejecting consumerism, the participants have managed to include sustainable objectives within their everyday lives. This is in accordance with evidence showing how rural communities elsewhere not only hold environmental concerns but even steer their consumption towards more sustainable practices (Van Kempen *et al.*, 2009).

6. Sites of contestation

We have sought to describe participants' responses to our broad question of 'what is sustainable'? Respondents often leaned on their own practices to give answers here, telling and showing us what sustainability was in relation to the particularities of place. At times, respondents also raised examples of what they determined was not sustainable; we picked up on this during the fieldwork and subsequently also asked questions about other practices. Here, then, we discuss two prominent examples that respondents gave when working through different approaches to sustainability.

Organic certification and the imposition of systems

In Germany, 'Bio' is the label used to denote the certification system called 'organic' in English. *Bio* represents an external influence and has created conflict and resistance among the participants. Karina told us:

Our neighbor, for example, has had geese. And we had a scorching summer last year and so there wasn't any more water from natural sources and of course, he still gave them some water from his tap... He wasn't going to let them die of thirst, was he? And all of a sudden, those geese weren't organic anymore and he had to kill them and sell them for much less.

Like Karina, all the participants reacted to 'Bio' with great skepticism. Whilst some focused on *Bio* food being too expensive, most thought *Bio* production was unambiguously unsustainable. Specifically, they argued, it is the ignorance of the organic industry in understanding the reality of food production 'on the ground', as Lotte said. Schlosberg and Coles (2016) agree, stating that the corporate *Bio* industry has moved aggressively towards unobtainable *Bio* accreditation standards, with regulatory boards often not including a single farmer. Anna and Gerda considered this to be unsustainable for maintaining local livelihoods, as it directly harms the local community of smallholdings and local farmers. "I grow cherries, right and my cherries aren't organic, and they never will be ... [Pause] I mean, you tell a cherry fruit fly where it has to fly to", she explained, referring to the heavy use of pesticides necessary to grow cherries, making them unfit for *Bio* guidelines (Haller *et al.*, 2020). Whilst part-time farmers such as Gerda refused to grow organically, others explained how they will still purchase from local farmers first, even if those are not able to maintain organic standards:

I will always support the local farmers first. I buy exclusively from the farm next door, and we have a butcher and bakery around the corner. For me, *Bio* might come from God knows where and one thing is for sure – it doesn't help us around here. Charlotte [35]

Such differences create contestation. Generally, *Bio* is theorized to be both beneficial for socio-economic rural development as well as promoting sustainable food production (Darnhofer, 2005). Some might even go as far as to say that an area going through an organic transition undergoes a de-commodification of food (Fitzpatrick & Willis, 2015), by aiming for an alternative holistic food system. However, for the participants, 'Bio' signaled a new face to an old corporate model – one which doesn't benefit local people. Scholars have shown that the organic industry often reproduces the same power hierarchies that many environmentalists sought to demolish in the first place (Holt Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). Respondents said that it is the inaccessibility of a *Bio*-lifestyle which deepens these hierarchies. Lotte said, "I hate how we assume because it is *Bio*, it is sustainable. What about our local farmers, what about us who want to support our surroundings... often we just can't do that when we are dealing with *Bio*." This, as Follett (2009) explains, is the difference between corporate, weak alternative food networks and local, strong and alternative food networks.

As is the case with Gerda's cherry production or Eva's geese, imposing a standardized 'Catch 22'-like rule system onto messy, real-life practices fails to take account of the particular value system in place. Consequently, the standardized *Bio* objectives come into direct confrontation with the emplaced environmentalism of the FS that has been constructed through the accumulation of embedded knowledge. The imposition of such regulations fails to consider how they might lead to the erasure of the practices that have prioritized the well-being of both land and people, and this is actively disputed by people like the respondents who keep those practices alive. It is important to understand the specific contexts of a locale within an interconnected world (Lawhon & McCreary, 2023), as *Bio* ideologies might be accepted better in other circumstances, places and by other environmentalisms. As many other political ecologists have suggested, the concern here is subsuming sustainability to quantifiable, standard metrics that disregard particular circumstances that might, in some cases, call for different practices.

Conflicting practices

Stereotypes with Vegetarians are true, most of the times... You know when a man is a vegetarian right, like they will have a man bun or something. Agnes, [35]

Throughout Ylva's time in FS, comments like this arose frequently. Karina is clear on the matter "I don't really respect vegetarians... to me, they aren't sustainable", whilst Anna tells her "It's vegetarians, or vegans even... they think they are so much better, but they don't know our lifestyle." The consensus against vegetarianism is clear – it is a standpoint based on the urbanist, hippy stereotypes of environmentalism itself – “an alien ideology spouted by urban know-it-alls” (McBeth & Foster, 1994, p. 401). However, the underlying notion of rejecting alternative food consumption puts the FS's rural environmentalism in direct confrontation with belief systems that might contradict or place pressure on local ways of living.

As a vegetarian, Ylva's meat consumption (or the lack thereof) remained a constant catalyst for confrontation. Not eating the meat they had bought from their local farmer or even home-raised led to confusion, even anger. Here, Tobler *et al.* (2011) opine that people consuming meat don't generally support less meat in diets for environmental reasons. Conversely, Stoll-Kleemann and O'Riordan, (2015) believe a lack of knowledge of alternative consumption practices such as vegetarianism to be deliberate. However, our reading of interactions in FS suggests the importance of power and identity in the ongoing embrace of meat-eating. What was rejected was not just an ecological narrative but the imposition of practices from a broad 'outside.' As Gerda says, "Vegetarians were like aliens a few years ago, but we often don't eat meat anymore. Of course, the change in the village isn't the same as in the city. People here are still attached to their ways."

The traditional Franconian lifestyle, which all the respondents supported, was seen to be inextricably tied to meat consumption. Emma said "I mean, there just are a lot of traditional butchers and the roots in Franconian food make it impossible" whilst Lotte explains how a typical Franconian family will "come in and want a schnitzel and, even if you think it's more sustainable to have a meat-free day or something, you can't serve them a vegetarian quiche, can you?" Thus, even if people understood how reduced meat consumption could be seen as sustainable, their relationship to their customs and traditions could not justify it. Interestingly, Karina noted that most people in FS haven't lived outside the area and thus have rarely been confronted with other belief systems. Of course, this is not to say that they haven't heard of vegetarianism, but that Ylva's presence became a direct point of engagement, inquiry, and defensiveness.

Thus, it is difficult – not impossible – to disentangle the many different factors that come together to create an emplaced sense of sustainability. Longstanding cultural practices, and less direct exposure to differences, become entwined with a version of sustainability that emphasizes living from local resources in a place where meat is, relatively speaking, fairly accessible. The wider implications of meat consumption, particularly of meat that did not come from local hunting, were largely deemed to be of peripheral significance, and conversations centered around the meat that was locally obtained.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, we have seen how, within and beyond political ecology, there is no consensus on what environmentalism does (and should) comprise. Whether it be material, post-material or free market environmentalism, there are a plethora of definitions and categorizations. Many within political ecology suggest that sustainable practices ought not to be universalized and that we need to understand and analyze the pluralization of environmental practices and meanings – not through clear-cut boundaries, but through the messy, entangled web of place, culture and political influences. Yet as environmental crises continue to grow, there is also a need for analysis that clarifies what is and is not sustainable in the world we have. Doing so, as political ecologists have shown time and time again, is not a neutral, objective scientific act but a political one shaped by the views and values of those adjudicating 'what counts.' Even if there are broad categorizations such as an 'environmentalism of the poor', degrowth and ecomodernism, we need to investigate how these broad ideas (and the associated practices they endorse) travel, and are adopted and adapted in place. These journeys

don't happen across 'flat space' but through highly politicized processes in which what matters is not only 'what is said' but 'who is saying it' and 'where an idea is seen to come from.'

In this article, we have built on these ideas to examine a shared set of ideas amongst research participants in Franconian Switzerland. We found that embodied environmentalism is constructed through emplaced practices – the participants' relationship to their immediate surroundings, the land they live on and the community they are part of. Practices are framed by participants as beneficial for the local environment, protecting the immediate ecosystem and socioeconomic livelihoods. As exemplified through Agnes' hunting for example, the aim is to maintain a balance within the immediate ecosystem as well as providing resources for local farmers and strengthening community. Such practices are developed from rooted knowledge – the accumulation of beliefs and behaviors that have been shared, preserved and have evolved over time. Simultaneously, frugal consumption and practice, such as recycling, re-using and consuming less, are seen as established parts of local culture. 'Bio' agriculture was regarded as unsustainable, and vegetarianism/veganism as alien and unsustainable. There are echoes here of longstanding support by political ecologists for local knowledge and values over ideas imposed by experts from the outside.

Many political ecologists will surely and rightly continue to situate their work in alliance with marginalized communities. Yet as we continue studying a wide range of sites from which to make sense of environmentalisms, political critique can be ambiguous. The rural, predominantly white and low-income community we researched is hegemonic in some ways and marginal in others. Clearly, our research participants felt threatened by some versions of environmental thought that came from elsewhere and could undermine aspects of their culture and livelihood. We struggled to disentangle participants' *ecological* arguments from *social, cultural and political* ones about 'who gets to decide what is sustainable here.' Much of the emotive energy of the interviews focused not on material practice but on *who* is trying to impose these practices *here*. It was difficult, perhaps impossible, to separate concerns with the 'message' from concerns over who (and where) is deemed to be an acceptable 'messenger' of environmentalism.

We have sought to go slowly in our analysis and forego conclusions about, for example, whether meat-eating 'is' or 'is not' *ecologically* sustainable and instead highlight the difficult politics around how environmental ideas travel across power-laden spaces. Without providing easy answers, we hope that our work has shown the value of continuing to think with research participants across the political spectrum about what sustainability means, while being mindful of the spatial politics of knowledge that shape how environmental ideas are learned, adopted, and adapted as they travel.

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