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Article — Published Version

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Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research

Provided in Cooperation with:

Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS)

Suggested Citation: Krüger, Timmo (2020) : Identifying strategic entry points for transformative politics towards a degrowth society: how to operationalize the concept of the “imperial mode of living” for empirical research, Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research, ISSN 1012-8050, Taylor&Francis, London, Vol. 33, Iss. 2, pp. 257-275, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2020.1732196>

This Version is available at:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10419/218753>

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Identifying strategic entry points for transformative politics towards a degrowth society: how to operationalize the concept of the “imperial mode of living” for empirical research

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(Received 3 December 2018; final version received 29 January 2020)

The research on socio-ecological transformation has thus far focused on the necessity and the possible design of a transformed society. What is missing are empirical studies on the potentials and constraints of such a far-reaching transformation. One reason for this is the necessity to develop complex research designs, particularly, the need to capture the micro-level of subjects, on the one hand, as well as the macro-level of societal structures, on the other hand. A concept that systematically links both levels is that of the ‘imperial mode of living’. This paper outlines how the concept can be operationalized. First, different components of the concept are analytically distinguished. Second, how the interpretation of enthymemes can be made productive for analyzing the stability of the imperial mode of living is shown. These insights provide essential background information that can be used to identify strategic entry points for transformative politics towards a degrowth society.

Keywords: Degrowth; enthymemes; imperial mode of living; hegemony; socio-ecological transformation; sufficiency; transformative politics

Introduction: the paradoxes of the socio-ecological crisis

Within the scientific community and the political sphere, there is a growing recognition that the ecological problems can only be diminished with responses that are prompt and have far-reaching effects. For example, the IPCC Special Report *Global warming of 1.5°C* states that “pathways limiting global warming to 1.5°C with no or limited overshoot require rapid and far-reaching transitions” (IPCC 2018, 17). Despite this broad consensus on framing the ecological problems as a serious threat, there is only agreement on very moderate, incremental political and economic policies (Brand and Wissen 2017, 31; Brand and Wissen 2018, 23). Although the measures taken so far are of limited effect, the prevailing production and consumption patterns are hardly problematized.

The paradox at the societal level corresponds to a paradox at the individual level: the social groups with the greatest environmental awareness and knowledge (at least with the highest level of formal education) are, at the same time, those with the highest emissions and resource consumption. This is due to the fact that environmental self-identity

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statistically increases steadily as income rises – and income level, in turn, is the most significant determinant of environmental impact (Moser and Kleinhüchelkotten 2017, 646). People with high incomes tend to have the highest resource consumption and to emit more greenhouse gases than people with lower incomes. Indeed, “environmentally aware people intend to behave in a pro-environmental manner, but they mainly focus on behaviors that have relatively small benefits” (Moser and Kleinhüchelkotten 2017, 648). Summarizing, one can state that high levels of environmental awareness and knowledge have very little effect when it comes to changing consumption patterns that would really make an impact; for example, in the fields of housing and mobility.

In the following, I will argue that the tremendous implications of these paradoxes of the socio-ecological crisis¹ are not adequately taken into account by the dominant research approaches within the field of socio-ecological transformation², neither by the research on ecological modernization nor by the research on social innovations.

The debates about the necessity and design of a socio-ecological transformation are dominated (since the 1990s) by the paradigm of ecological modernization. Here, the priority lies in market-based mechanisms and technological innovations that are supposed to lead to an ecological modernization (Hajer 1995; Methmann, Rothe, and Stephan 2013; Mol, Sonnenfeld, and Spaargaren 2009). Regarding the so-called three sustainability strategies, the ecomodern approach relies on the strategies of efficiency and consistency and neglects the strategy of sufficiency. Efficiency-based strategies aim at reducing the input (of resources or primary energy) in production processes, while maintaining or increasing the output of produced goods and services. Strategies of consistency intend to reduce ecological damage by switching to renewable energies and utilizing closed-loop material cycles (reduction of waste, reuse of deployed raw materials, and the use of by-products like heat waste). Powerful actors from economy and politics support the ecomodern paradigm, as it promises to generate so-called *green growth*.³ The strategies of ecological modernization, however, have not led to a significant reduction of global emissions, resource consumption, let alone social injustice and power asymmetries so far. The gains made by efficiency strategies are partially neutralized, or sometimes even more than offset, by rebound effects (Santarius 2015). This implies that efficiency gains only lead to a relative decoupling of global economic growth from resource use and emissions (IPCC 2014, 6; Jackson 2009, 67ff; Lorek 2015; Schneidewind and Zahrt 2014, 19). In order to achieve appreciable benefits for sustainability, however, an immediate and significant absolute decoupling is necessary. Concerning the strategy of consistency, experts do see great potential in it, but so far it has not produced the necessary effects (Stengel 2011, 132). Additionally, for the future, it is very probable that the combination of efficiency and consistency alone will not achieve the needed reduction in emissions and resource use – as long as the amount of produced and consumed goods and services remains at the current level or continues to increase (Heyen et al. 2013, 8f; Stengel 2011, 139). One reason for this are the trade-offs and the land-use conflicts that come along with an expansion of the so-called bioeconomy (the substitution of fossil fuels by renewable resources, which is key for the strategies of consistency) (Bringezu et al. 2007, 44).

The lack of success of the ecomodern paradigm has given rise to a range of research approaches that attach more importance to the social struggles about the necessity and design of socio-ecological transformation processes. In this context, the concept of social innovation plays an important role within the social sciences. Broadly speaking, the concept covers new forms of organization, business models, consumption practices etc. that (are supposed to) lead to social change towards greater sustainability (for an

overview and discussion of various definitions and applications see Marques, Morgan, and Richardson 2018; Moulaert, MacCallum, and Hillier 2013). The research on social innovations does indeed reflect the shortages of a narrow focus on economic and technological answers. It increases the attention for the complex social requirements of socio-ecological transformation processes (Grimm et al. 2013) and thereby for grassroots initiatives within civil society (Pellicer-Sifres et al. 2017). But the concept of social innovation concentrates on phenomena that are not necessarily most relevant for far-reaching transformation processes. It does not question basic assumptions of modernization theory, for instance the notion that continuous development is the unquestioned goal that is to be achieved by steady – not only technical but also social – progress (Kropp 2015, 22ff). Thereby, the concept of social innovation remains within the logics of growth and acceleration that have led to the socio-ecological crisis in the first place (Rosa, Dörre, and Lessenich 2017, 61). Furthermore, the great significance of conflicts remains underexposed as the concept of social innovation widely ignores disharmonious processes, which are primarily not carried out with regard to innovations, but rather with regard to exnovations. The term exnovation refers to the intended elimination (or dismantling) of practices, products, technologies, and infrastructures (Gross and Mautz 2015, 3; Heyen, Hermwille, and Wehnert 2017, 326). Exnovations can be pushed by different actors and for different reasons. They can be carried out suddenly or gradually. Almost inevitably exnovations come along with conflicts. After all, the users and profiteers of the elements selected for elimination usually have an interest in the perpetuation of their patterns of production and consumption (David 2018, 523; Heyen, Hermwille, and Wehnert 2017, 327f). However, it is obvious that an ambitious socio-ecological transformation cannot be reached by just adding new, innovative practices, products, technologies, and infrastructures without tackling the existing ones (Gross and Mautz 2015, 146).

It is the concept of degrowth that focuses on (the necessity of) conflicts and issues of power that are linked with exnovation efforts. The notion of degrowth has hardly received any attention within government policies or the (mainstream) scientific community, although degrowth policy proposals could lead to a rapid reduction of emissions and resource use. The concept of degrowth is labeled as politically unfeasible because it clashes with the goals of economic growth and material prosperity (Buch-Hansen 2018, 160f; Linz 2017, 9). The resulting neglect of degrowth strategies is very risky in view of the lack of success of the sustainability strategies applied to date. Global greenhouse gas emissions remain at a high level (IPCC 2014, 6f), the loss of biodiversity proceeds unhindered (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2014), and there is no indication that this path will change within the next few years.

While natural resources are being used much more efficiently to produce goods and services, this progress is overwhelmed by our greatly increased total levels of consumption. It is unlikely that ecosystems can be kept within safe ecological limits given current patterns of consumption. (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2014, 12)

If one takes the challenge of the socio-ecological crisis seriously – and acknowledges that prompt and far-reaching effects are needed – a strict orientation towards a precautionary principle is appropriate: avoidance of risk due to incomplete knowledge. From this stems the normative assumption of this article, that transformative politics is needed that promotes a degrowth society. Transformative politics implies not to ensconce oneself in the small niches of alternative communities or projects, but to aim at changing social

values, norms, institutions, and economics (Calvário and Kallis 2017, 599ff) in order to initiate changes that lead to social upheavals (Brangsch 2015, 132).

Civil society actors are – according to both self-attribution and attribution by others – obvious actors of transformation that could make a significant contribution to overcoming the current deadlock situation (D’Alisa, Demaria, and Cattaneo 2013). They are charged with high expectations to bring about change, rich in concepts and practices of transformation, yet only moderately successful and in itself highly ambiguous. The last two aspects already indicate that the focus on so-called agents of change (D’Alisa, Demaria, and Cattaneo 2013, 214) like social movements, non-governmental organizations, pressure groups and the like always runs the risk of overstressing the importance of one layer of society. When discussing the transformation potential of specific actors of change, one always has to consider their embeddedness within overarching structures. Nevertheless, civil society actors are one important player among others and they do have an impact on shaping the future (Schulz 2016, 98f, 104). As self-proclaimed agents of change – when dedicated to transformative politics – they aim at making informed strategic decisions, in order to extend their impact beyond the small niches of alternative communities or projects (Calvário and Kallis 2017, 601). Against this background, the overall goal of the present article is to reflect on possibilities for identifying strategic entry points for transformative politics, while recognizing the embeddedness of agents of change within overarching structures.

In what follows, I outline my research interest that arises from the stated lack of empirical studies on the potentials and constraints of a socio-ecological transformation towards a degrowth society. Responding to the identified research gap, I introduce the notion of the “imperial mode of living” (Brand and Wissen 2017, 2018) as an adequate tool for conducting empirical research on potentials and constraints of societal transformation. As a preparation for such empirical research, I first define the analytic components of the concept “mode of living” and then present a specific analytical method (as one possible approach alongside others). To make it more descriptive, I provide an example of how the proposed interpretation process could look like. In the final remarks, I make some general points about how the method can be made productive for an analysis of hegemony and how such insights could provide essential background information to assist in identifying strategic entry points for transformative politics.

Degrowth research: state of the art and research gap

More and more actors from civil society and science are advocating for fundamental alternatives to the primacy of economic growth. In this context, sufficiency and degrowth are important notions. The strategy of sufficiency aims at lowering the absolute level of use of energy, resources, and soil through a reduced production and consumption of goods and services (Linz 2015, 5). A particular focus is on resource-intensive goods and services. The strategy of sufficiency is key for the degrowth approach, which criticizes the primacy of economic growth (Schneidewind and Zahrnt 2014, 135). At its core is the advocacy of a democratically led reduction of the overall material and emissions footprint of production and consumption, with the aim of achieving social and ecological justice (D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2015). In this context one has to emphasize that “[t]he goal of degrowth is *not* to make GDP growth negative” (Kallis 2018, 9) but to decrease the throughput (energy, materials, and waste flows) of an economy. But as “degrowing throughput will in all likelihood come with degrowing output” (Kallis 2018, 9) it is the degrowth hypothesis that “a social transformation in an egalitarian and ecologically

sustainable direction will in all likelihood decrease GDP.” (Kallis 2018, 9) In contrast to sufficiency, which is just a specific sustainability strategy, the concept of degrowth is linked with social theory and is understood as an aspired change of society as a whole. In the debates about degrowth four lines of research can be identified.

A central interest of degrowth research that cuts across the four lines of research is transformative processes – that is the changing of social values, norms, institutions, and economics. Within degrowth research it is widely acknowledged that far-reaching transformation processes require a spiral motion of politicization at both the micro and the macro level (Kallis 2018, 138f). In this respect, the limits and shortcomings of prevailing responses to the socio-ecological crisis are very well understood and described (cf. Table 1: line of research 1). Furthermore, there are larger-scale visions (line of research 2) as well as detailed proposals (line of research 3) that outline how a transformed society could look like. Moreover, (also counter-hegemonic) approaches and strategies of so-called degrowth pioneers are studied (line of research 4). But empirical studies on why counter-hegemonic practices are marginalized and by which alliances and in what kind of conflict and actor constellations they could gain in relevance are largely missing. It lacks convincing empirical studies on the potentials and constraints of a transformation towards a degrowth society (Buch-Hansen 2018, 157; for a discussion of actor-interest constellations as barriers towards a post-growth economy see Strunz and Schindler 2018; for a cluster analysis on the social bases both of support for and resistance to a socio-ecological transformation see Eversberg in this issue). One reason for this is the necessity to develop complex

Table 1. The four lines of degrowth research.

Line of research	Research topics
(1) Reasons why degrowth is necessary and desirable	Key aspects are the incompatibility of environmentalism and economic growth, and social justice – in particular, but not exclusively, at the global level (e.g. Daly 1991; Jackson 2009; Kallis 2018; Latouche 2009)
(2) Principles of social organization	The transformation of wage labor, the reevaluation of care work, and the establishment of commons are discussed as important cornerstones (e.g. D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2015; Kallis 2018; Kallis et al. 2018; Rosa and Henning 2018)
(3) Concrete policy proposals	The emphasis is on the regulation of wage labor, as it is regarded as structuring daily life. Thus, for example a reduction of working hours, an unconditional basic income, a maximum income, and a collectivization of firm ownership are perceived to have transformative potential (e.g. D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2015; Kallis et al. 2013; Knight, Rosa, and Schor 2013; Lange 2018)
(4) Lifestyles and social structure, everyday practices and strategies	Attitude patterns and their relation to social-structural factors are analyzed in cluster analysis (e.g. Eversberg in this issue; Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018). Business strategies as well as the political strategies and everyday practices of civil society initiatives and social movements are studied under the heading of degrowth pioneers (e.g. Burkhart, Schmelzer, and Treu 2017; Calvário and Kallis 2017; Leonhardt, Juschten, and Spash 2017; Sommer 2018)

research designs, particularly, the need to capture the micro-level of subjects, on the one hand, as well as the macro-level of societal structures, on the other hand.

The imperial mode of living and processes of (de-)politicization

In this context, the *imperial mode of living* (Brand and Wissen 2017, 2018) could provide an appropriate framework for empirical research as it focuses systematically on the co-constitution of everyday practices and societal structures in order to explain the inertia forces of growth societies – their attractiveness and normality despite escalating problems and crisis (Brand and Wissen 2017, 13ff; Brand and Wissen 2018, 11). This framework is embedded in a theory of hegemony, inspired by Antonio Gramsci. Besides Gramsci, Brand and Wissen refer, inter alia, to regulation theories, whereas the present article draws on the research perspective that evolved with the discourse-theoretical reinterpretation of Gramsci by Laclau and Mouffe (2001). In order to prevent misunderstandings, I would like to stress that the term discourse – as used in the hegemony and discourse theory by Laclau and Mouffe – does not separate discursive (linguistic) from non-discursive (non-linguistic, material) issues (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 107f). In this sense, every social practice is articulatory⁴, as it contributes to the partial fixing of meaning, and thus, to the (re-)production of social order (López et al. 2017; Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 105, 113f).

The hegemony and discourse theory – and this is the reason why it is applied here – delivers a theoretical understanding of processes of (de-)politicization. Like all postfoundational theories, the hegemony and discourse theory operates with a conflict-oriented notion of society (Marchart 2007). Postfoundational theories do not assume a total absence of all grounds, but the impossibility of a final ground of society. This “implies an increased awareness of, on the one hand, contingency and, on the other, the political as the moment of partial and always, in the last instance, unsuccessful grounding” (Marchart 2007, 2). The social order is formed by “a plurality of hegemonic moves that seek to ground society without ever being entirely able to do so” (Marchart 2007, 7). This means that the social order (social relationships, social practices, and social structures) always originates from conflicts. It evolves through struggles for hegemony in which particular discourses (patterns of interpretation, social practices, and the relating subject positions) become dominant (Laclau 1990, 34). In this regard, a crucial factor of success is a convincing narrative of a blissful state that is supposed to be brought about or saved from destruction (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 145ff). This dimension of discourses – hereafter referred to as common-good-promises – cannot be understood in the literal sense of actually narrated stories but more as an underlying fantasy. This

fantasy operates so as to conceal or close off the radical contingency of social relations. It does this through a fantasmatic narrative or logic that promises a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome – the beatific dimension of fantasy – or which foretells of disaster if the obstacle proves. (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147)

A hegemonic order gets developed, stabilized, and disseminated both by professional, strategic actions, and by everyday practices. In the process of routinization, the privileged status of particular discourses becomes depoliticized (Marchart 2007, 139). This means that hegemonic discourses become the social consensus⁵, and, thus, the dominant conception of the common good. They are not questioned anymore. Alternatives get marginalized and forgotten. Thus, the social distribution of power and institutional settings can develop a certain stability. Despite such a “relative structuration” (Laclau 1990, 43) of

society that privileges specific articulations and disadvantages others, the stability of hegemonic structures is constitutively precarious (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 97f, 142). Every hegemonic structure and thus every hegemonic mode of living has to be perpetuated by its constant (re-)production and a marginalization of alternatives (Laclau 1990, 31ff; Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 112f). Nevertheless, it always contains cracks and ruptures that are entry points for counter-hegemonic practices. In moments of antagonism, when the awareness of the contingent origin of the social order – and its resolution through power relations – is raised again, alternatives may gain relevance and solidified discourses may be drawn into the political sphere of contestation and struggle (Laclau 1990, 34f). Processes of politicization become apparent when established practices and structures are no longer considered to be without alternatives but, on the contrary, are called into question (Laclau 1990, 34f).

The concept “imperial mode of living” has a special potential for analyzing such processes of (de-)politicization in the context of the socio-ecological crisis as it does not focus on only the micro level of subjects, or the macro level of societal structures, but raises awareness of the interplay between the two levels (Brand and Wissen 2018, 11, 20f, 97). The authors, Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, assume

that in certain historical phases and in building on a coherence between norms of production and of consumption, a hegemonic – or in other words – broadly accepted and institutionally secured mode of living can emerge which is deeply rooted in the everyday practice of people and safeguarded by the state, and which is associated with certain concepts of progress: computers must be ever more powerful, food ever cheaper – regardless of the social or ecological conditions under which they are produced. (Brand and Wissen 2018, 11)

The notion *mode of living* has been used in different ways within the social sciences. As a common denominator can be noted that the term comprises both the (economic, political, cultural etc.) societal structures and the related dominant lifestyle (Rink 2002, 40ff). The use of the term by different authors differs mainly regarding the definition of the relationship between societal structures and the lived social practices. The concept of the *imperial mode of living* refers to the so-called western way of life that is characterized by material wealth and high levels of consumption. It comprises patterns of production, distribution, and consumption, as well as hegemonic values (e.g. a growth-oriented development model and a notion of wellbeing that focuses on income, status, and consumption) that are deeply rooted in the societies of the global North and very attractive for broad sections of the population in the global South (Brand and Wissen 2018, 2f, 10). Even if the upper and middle classes of emerging countries tend to adopt this mode of living (inasmuch as they can afford it), however, it remains valid that “this process is not socially neutral but rather is transmitted via global inequalities and geographically specific class and gender relations and along ethnic or ethnicized lines” (Brand and Wissen 2018, 12). This means that social hierarchies are being stabilized through uneven access to the means of living. At the same time, the imperial mode of living (re-)produces manifold hierarchies and forms of inclusion and exclusion (Brand and Wissen 2018, 3). One striking characteristic – among other inequalities – is the externalization of ecological and social costs to the global South.

Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen identify this mode of living as imperial, as it is “based on a principally unlimited appropriation to [*sic*] resources, space, territories, labor capacity, and sinks⁶ elsewhere – secured politically, legally, and/or by means of violence” (Brand and Wissen 2018, 13). Maintaining the imperial mode of living is inherently

linked to exclusive (asymmetrical) access to resources elsewhere, mainly in the global South. The ecological and social preconditions of the mode of living, as well as its destructive consequences, however, to a large extent remain invisible (Brand and Wissen 2018, 2). The effects of everyday production and consumption on society and nature elsewhere remain concealed. The vagueness of the term “elsewhere” reflects the invisibility of commodity chains (Brand and Wissen 2017, 44). It is this particular invisibility that normalizes the implementation of the imperial mode of living in everyday routines.

The imperial mode of living is broadly accepted, as it promises material wealth via technological progress and economic growth (Brand and Wissen 2013, 698; Brand and Wissen 2018, 10f). This means that the common sense values, subject positions, and everyday practices of many people correspond to the growth strategies implemented by government and economic policies (Graefe 2018, 204). Thus, the imperial mode of living generates a rather high level of social consensus that stabilizes dominant responses to the socio-ecological crisis (in which prevailing power relations and hegemonic structures remain unchallenged). But what has already been stated regarding hegemonic structures as such also holds true for the imperial mode of living: it is constantly being modified and reconstructed. This necessity of permanent (re-)production is not only a stabilization mechanism but also the gateway to politicizing and transforming social structures (López et al. 2017; Laclau 1990, 33ff).

Brand and Wissen sketch a “solidary mode of living” as a reference point for intended socio-ecological transformation processes (Brand and Wissen 2018, 102). They are convinced that such a transformation can only occur simultaneously as a transformation of social conditions and as a self-transformation by individuals (Brand and Wissen 2017, 169). In that process, counter-hegemonic practices can also play a decisive role on a small scale, inasmuch as they contain the political, i.e. the collective momentum of politicizing destructive conditions and developing alternatives (Brand and Wissen 2017, 180). Nevertheless, such processes of politicization always require a transformation of existing institutions and infrastructures, and the development of new institutions and infrastructures that increase the scope of counter-hegemonic identities and practices, and protect them against setbacks (Brand and Wissen 2017, 183).

Operationalizing the “mode of living”

After outlining the essential characteristics of one historically evolved mode of living – the imperial mode of living – I will now analytically differentiate between different components of the concept “mode of living”.⁷ It is important to analytically differentiate the individual components, as they are all factors with some degree of relative autonomy and, at the same time, they have a reciprocal influence on one another (Brand and Wissen 2018, 11). Like any other social structure that is hegemonic, a dominant mode of living can be more or less coherent, fragmented, hybrid, and contradictory, depending on the interplay between its components and the power of counter-hegemonic practices. Furthermore, one has to keep in mind that hegemonic structures are effective only in specific historical, spatial, and group-specific contexts. In order to be able to analyze a mode of living as a hegemonic structure, it is useful to distinguish between the following components of the concept: infrastructures, institutions, common sense, subject positions, and everyday practices.

- The term “infrastructures” refers to man-made things in their physical materiality (e. g. streets, smartphones, production facilities).

- “Institutions” are defined here as formalized rule systems (e. g. trade agreements, laws, house rules). This is a rather narrow definition as informal rule systems (which are often included in the definition of institutions), here, fall into the categories of common sense, subject positions, and everyday practices.
- The notion of “common sense” goes back to Antonio Gramsci (1971, 325f, 419) and comprises convictions, norms, values, and role models that are considered normal and are lived as a matter of course (Sutter 2016, 52). It provides practical guidance that is alleged to stem directly from life experience (Hall and O’Shea 2013, 8f). “It is a form of ‘everyday thinking’ which offers us frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world.” (Hall and O’Shea 2013, 8).
- “Subject positions” are identity offers that come along with specific demands and expectations (e. g. the entrepreneurial self, the responsible consumer). They are (re-)produced by discourses and, thus, by power – in that “any identity is based on the exclusion of that which denies it” (Laclau 1990, 33). Subject positions are appropriated by individuals (in the process of subject positioning). In doing so, individuals actively interpret and perform – and thereby shape, alter, and spread – subject positions (López et al. 2017).
- “Everyday practices” are social practices that are lived on a day-to-day basis (e. g. shopping, eating, traveling to work). They are, to a large extent, unquestioned routines.

At all these five dimensions specific, historically evolved modes of living are (re-)produced permanently by social action. In order to conduct empirical studies on the potentials and constraints of far-reaching transformation processes, I suggest analyzing responses to the socio-ecological crisis and their impact (on each of the different analytic components of the concept mode of living). In doing so, one has to find adequate objects of investigation. Some possible empirical approaches include:

- Institutions and infrastructures: I suggest analyzing official documents and strategy and policy papers, as well as the decisions and activities of influential actors – especially in the political and economic sphere – in order to grasp the norms, values, and power relations that are effective in (re-)producing institutions and infrastructures (see for example Glynos and Howarth 2007; Krüger 2017; Smerecnik and Renegar 2010; Wullweber 2014).
- Common sense: By means of group discussions, one can study the (re-)production of the common sense that is collectively shared in different milieus (see for example Bohnsack 2010). Under certain conditions, it can be helpful to utilize survey data (see for example Eversberg in this issue; Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018; for a discussion of difficulties inherent in the method and a warning against taking findings from polls as the unquestionable truth, see Hall and O’Shea 2013, 15f).
- Subject positions: The individual appropriation of subject positions can be explored via individual narrative interviews (see for example Schäfer and Völter 2005; Krüger and Strüver 2018).
- Everyday practices: Everyday practices are, to a large extent, unquestioned routines. Such unconscious processes cannot be detected by interviews, but by participant observation (see for example Calvário and Kallis 2017; Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2014, 39ff; Hochschild 2016).

This list is not to be read as a complete overview of ways to define and collect empirical data that are suitable for analyzing the mode of living. On the contrary, I want to emphasize that it is very important to be open towards different data formats. The list given here is by no means complete, but solely intended to point out that different starting points of research require different methods of data collection. A method – just like a theory – should never be an end in itself, but a tool for generating plausible explanations. In the following, I want to present such a tool: the interpretation of enthymemes.

Analyzing struggles for hegemony by interpreting enthymemes

I will now outline how the interpretation of enthymemes at the different levels of the analytic components of the concept “mode of living” can be used as one methodical approach (alongside to others) for exploring the potentials and constraints of transformation processes.⁸

An enthymeme is a concept from classical rhetoric. It is the name for an incomplete or “careless” syllogism (Feldman et al. 2004, 152). Syllogisms are the core element of Aristotelian logic and consist of a major premise (e.g. “All humans are mortal.”), a minor premise (e.g. “All Greeks are humans.”), and a conclusion (e. g. “All Greeks are mortal.”). Thus, syllogisms are a logical inference that demonstrates evidence and can be expressed with the following formula:

Major premise: A – B (All humans are mortal.)

Minor premise: C – A (All Greeks are humans.)

Conclusion: C – B (All Greeks are mortal.)

Enthymemes also consist of these three steps. In contrast to a syllogism, however, an enthymeme is not always a logical inference, but its conclusion can be based on plausibility and/or probability. Another characteristic of enthymemes is that not all three elements are always explicit. Very often it is the major premise that remains implicit, but this can also apply to the minor premise or the conclusion. This “carelessness” makes enthymemes a customary habit of everyday speech (Feldman et al. 2004, 152).

Feldman et al. (2004, 152) provide two possible reasons why some elements of the enthymemes remain implicit: either they are presumed to be self-evident facts or they are considered to be particularly controversial. I would add a third possible reason: elements that refer to hybrid, fragmented, or self-contradictory convictions and actions are also very often kept implicit. In the first case, according to the speaker, an explicit mention seems to be unnecessary as the relevant statement is assumed to be unquestionable, shared knowledge. It is also possible that the content is internalized to such an extent that it is not even consciously thought and, thus, remains unstated. In the second case, the speaker tries to avoid contradiction. Therefore he/she tries to divert attention away from the controversial element by leaving it implicit. In the third case, the speaker tries to handle the challenge that his/her performance is based on structures of common sense and subject positions that contain hybrid, fragmented, and/or self-contradictory elements (on the fragmented character of common sense and subject positions, see Hall and O’Shea 2013, 10f).

All three cases are a matter of (re-)producing consensus, in the sense of hegemony theory. This refers to an essential characteristic of enthymemes: the co-production of meaning by the speaker and the audience (Bitzer 1959, 408; Smerecnik and Renegar 2010, 157). With the use of common sense, the audience fills in the gaps of the implicit

elements and completes the enthymemes. From this, it follows that “successful” enthymemes do not invite further reflection but, on the contrary, generate immediate plausibility. Enthymemes have the effect of persuading the audience. Therefore they are used frequently in everyday speech. The use of enthymemes as an effective rhetorical figure that generates consent does not mean that this is done deliberately. Actually, in most cases they are used unconsciously. Whether deliberately or not, the use of enthymemes is a practice of hegemony that produces consensus on particular conceptions of the common good. After all, hegemony is based primarily on enforcing a consensus that privileges certain particular interests over others. Accordingly, the identification of enthymemes in empirical data can help to disclose practices of hegemony. Furthermore, implicit assumptions that are part of the hegemonic social consensus can be detected. For these reasons, the interpretation of enthymemes is especially useful for research perspectives that focus on the analysis of (de-)politicizing practices and struggles for hegemony.

An example of the interpretation process

To demonstrate the usefulness of the analysis of enthymemes for analyzing the structure of hegemonic consensus, I will now give a small example of the proposed interpretation process; using data from a previously conducted research project.⁹ In order to prevent misunderstandings, it is important to stress that the presented interpretation aims at identifying the self-presentation of the interviewee and her usage of strategies of legitimization (and not her “real” motives and practices). The following quotation is an excerpt from an individual narrative interview with a student living in Hamburg:

I work in a bar and that’s why I have this rhythm, because I start working at a time where one normally has dinner. [...] Therefore, I usually eat at midnight, and only Burger King is open then. I hate it, but that’s just the way it is. Of course one could cook something in advance, but I don’t have time for that. It is just not possible. Besides my studies, I work quite a lot, and that’s why I have no time at all. (Interview excerpt in Krüger and Strüver 2018, 227; translation T. K.)

The quote contains several explicit statements that are relevant for my research interest. For example, the assertion of an causal chain between wage labor and her everyday schedule is an interesting aspect that is treated in the following parts of the quotation: “I work in a bar and that’s why I have this rhythm [...] Therefore, I usually eat at midnight [...] I work quite a lot, and that’s why I have no time at all”. The typified content of these utterances can be captured with the following concise reformulation: my wage labor determines my everyday schedule.

Her daily routines are further characterized when the speaker declares “that’s just the way it is,” and that a conceivable alternative (cooking something in advance) “is just not possible”. The presentation of the speaker (that there are no alternatives) can be summarized as follows: my everyday schedule is not something I can choose on my own.

At this point during the interpretation process, I speculated about whether the two concisely reformulated statements are elements of an enthymeme, and I scanned the text for a possible third element. I then came to perceive that something was missing, namely the major premise that links the two statements: *The determining effects of my wage labor is not something I can choose on my own*. Thus, I identified an enthymeme with an implicit major premise (in order to illustrate that the text contains the major premise only implicitly it is written in italics), an explicit minor premise, and an explicit conclusion.

Enthymeme 1

Major premise: *The determining effects of my wage labor is not something I can choose on my own.*

Minor premise: My wage labor determines my everyday schedule.

Conclusion: My everyday schedule is not something I can choose on my own.

The major premise cannot be found explicitly in the quotation; it remains unstated. My interpretation is that, according to the speaker, it is a self-evident fact that is not worth mentioning.

She describes her eating habits not as the result of active decisions on her own part but as a result of external constraints. This is very apparent when she says, “I work in a bar and that’s why I have this rhythm, because I start working at a time where one normally has dinner. [...] Therefore, I usually eat at midnight, and only Burger King is open then.” Hence, one can reformulate a third explicit statement, which is: my labor-determined schedule makes me eat at Burger King. She presents a strong opinion on this habit (“I hate it”) that can be reformulated in a fourth explicit statement: I hate eating at Burger King.

Interestingly, she does not explicitly relate this strong judgment to the cause of this despised eating habit. This becomes apparent when reflecting on the relations between the third and the fourth explicit statement. After scanning the text for possible fill-ins that I might have overseen, I extracted an implicit conclusion that the speaker does not verbalize: *I hate my labor-determined schedule.* This time, the major premise and the minor premise are both explicit, but the conclusion is implicit.

Enthymeme 2

Major premise: My labor-determined schedule makes me eat at Burger King.

Minor premise: I hate eating at Burger King.

Conclusion: *I hate my labor-determined schedule.*

My interpretation of the implicit conclusion is that the speaker has to handle the challenge that her performance is based on structures of common sense and subject positions that contain hybrid, fragmented, and/or self-contradictory elements; a challenge that cannot be easily resolved in her everyday life.

In order to relate the identified enthymemes to the analytic components of the concept mode of living (in this case the individual appropriation of subject positions), I will now draw on the broader empirical research of the mentioned research project (see footnote nine). The quoted interview was – together with other narrative interviews – the basis for an analysis of the individual appropriation of sustainability discourses. Predominant was the fractured and ambiguous appropriation of the subject position of *the responsible and critical consumer* (Krüger and Strüver 2018). The assumption of an autonomous person that makes informed and rational decisions was – in the presentations of the interviewees – the most important point of reference and the main object of attributed responsibility. But at the same time, the shaping power of the responsible and critical consumer was (mostly implicitly) presented as being limited. Thus, the figure of the responsible and critical consumer could be interpreted as a counterfactual assumption with normative requirements (Krüger and Strüver 2018, 231) that (re-)produces the imperial mode of living as it – at least partially – is in line with the green growth strategies implemented by government and economic policies.

However, the less the common-good-promises of the imperial mode of living correspond in one way or another to the experiences in everyday life, the more acute become

its cracks and ruptures (Brand and Wissen 2017, 59f). When the common-good-promises of the imperial mode become unattainable for more and more people at least four further courses of action can be observed. First, hegemonic structures can confront the individuals as if they were an unchangeable objectivity. Such a pessimistic view of one's own formative power – that excludes the possibility of individual or collective self-empowerment – leads to a fatalistic adaptation to the compulsion of the circumstances, whose politicizing potential, at the most, shines through in practices of refractoriness (Krüger and Strüver 2018, 229). Second, a vague discontent with the given social relations – that can involve uncertainty and the fear of social decline (Brand and Wissen 2017, 173) – can lead to a passive withdrawal of approval. A third reaction on the precarious status of promised privileges are defense mechanisms and projection (Lessenich 2019, 19ff). The claim to receive or maintain the exclusive privileges of the imperial mode of living generally comes along with a denial of guilt and a discriminating projection of the responsibility for the harm to the harmed themselves – the people that suffer most from the destructive effects of the imperial mode of living, especially in the countries of the global South. A fourth option is the rejection of the imperial mode of living and the articulation of a counter-hegemonic subject position (Krüger and Strüver 2018, 229ff). Such a self-empowerment has a politicizing effect as it insists on the possibility and necessity of changing hegemonic structures, for instance from an imperial mode of living towards a solidary mode of living.

Now, one could further analyze the enthymemes (of the quoted and other interviews) and its relation to the (de-)politicization of the imperial mode of living. As this article focuses not on empirical but on methodological issues, however, I will stop here and make some general points about how the proposed method could provide essential background information for identifying strategic entry points for transformative politics – keeping in mind that such a task can only be successfully mastered in collective forms or transformative politics, for instance by civil society actors, whose potentials and restrictions (both steaming from their embeddedness within overarching structures) have already been addressed in the introduction.

Conclusion

The interpretation of enthymemes on the analytic components of the concept “mode of living” (institutions, infrastructures, common sense, everyday practices, and subject positions) can be made productive for an analysis of hegemony. The identification of enthymemes in empirical data can help to disclose practices of hegemony, as well as implicit assumptions and norms that form the hegemonic social consensus. These aspects provide insights into the dissemination, attractiveness, and stability of the imperial mode of living in certain socio-political milieus. Such insights give hints about processes of erosion of hegemony that could become a fertile ground for politicizing strategies. An important question in this context is to what extent the common-good-promises of the imperial mode of living correspond to the experiences in everyday life.

I propose to analyze under what conditions and in which conflict constellations certain discrepancies between the common-good-promises of the imperial mode of living and the experiences in everyday life lead to ambiguous appropriation of hegemonic subject positions, to fatalism and passive refractoriness, to passive withdrawal of approval, to defense mechanisms and projection, or to self-empowerment and counter-hegemonic practices.

When analyzing enthymemes, it is important to not only interpret each enthymeme on its own, but also the relationships between them. Phenomena of mutual reinforcement, non-simultaneity, and contradictions both within and between the analytic components of the concept “mode of living” can indicate whether certain hegemonic consensuses are relatively stable or rather fragmented. An important question in this context is to what extent the common sense values, subject positions, and everyday practices of different social groups correspond to the dominant responses to the socio-ecological crisis – the strategies implemented by government and economic policies that (re-)produce societal institutions and infrastructures. These insights can provide essential background information for identifying strategic entry points for transformative politics. In doing so, one has to distinguish between the prospects for success of a certain strategy, on the one hand, and its potential effectiveness, on the other hand. For both tasks, the interpretation of enthymemes can be made productive:

- (1) On the basis of identified non-simultaneities, contradictions, and non-correspondences (between common-good-promises and experiences in everyday life) within the imperial mode of living, one could derive strategies with good prospects for success (as they focus on fragmented settings that are favorable regarding the politicization of the imperial mode of living and the popularization of counter-hegemonic practices). A different starting point for defining strategies with good prospects for success could be to draw on the reasons for the dissemination of counter-hegemonic practices that such an analysis can detect.
- (2) On the basis of identified basic elements of the imperial mode of living that are stable, ubiquitous, and mutually reinforcing, one could derive strategies that have the potential to be very effective (as they challenge fundamental pillars of the imperial mode of living). Again, one could also derive strategies from an evaluation of existing counter-hegemonic practices and their constraints. Then, the focus would be on crucial points in infrastructures, institutions, subject positions or social norms of a certain milieu that determine whether certain individuals or collectives are willing and able to perform a shift from hegemonic practices to counter-hegemonic practices. Some authors suggest that working hours and income are such determining factors. From this, they conclude that a reduction of working hours and a redistribution of labor, as well as a minimum, a maximum, and an unconditional basic income, could foster the transition towards a degrowth society (Kallis et al. 2013; Knight, Rosa, and Schor 2013; Nässén and Larsson 2015; Pullinger 2014; Schor 2005). In this context, further research should be devoted to detecting such determining factors on the basis of empirical research.

All in all, my conclusion is that analyzing enthymemes – as one methodical approach alongside others – can contribute to identifying strategic entry points for transformative politics. This is important as far-reaching transformations of dominant structures do not just arise from some sort of modernization processes that are assumed to take place anyway (Brand and Wissen 2017, 39). It is evident that such transformations also require strategic actions that abolish privileges and attack prevailing power relations.

[A] viable trajectory of change will probably involve political agency and strategy responding to the opportunities opened up by changing (ecological) economic conditions. There is a need for “science” here: not science as a set of historical laws, but science as a systematic and coherent framework for analysing change. (Kallis 2018, 143)

Notes

1. The term “socio-ecological crisis” refers to the recognition that we are facing not just a few additional environmental problems (like climate change or the loss of biodiversity), but that these problems reveal that humanity’s relationship with nature is in crisis (Brand 2010, 143). It assumes that conventional responses (of established institutions) are unable to solve ecological problems (anymore). Furthermore, it acknowledges that ecological problems are closely linked to social injustice. The social structures that cause environmental damage are characterized by a high degree of social injustice, and the consequences of ecological problems exacerbate social injustice.
2. The term “transformation” is very important within the scientific and political debates about the adequate responses to the socio-ecological crisis. However, it is defined and used in very different ways. In the present article transformation stands for radical, far-reaching, and irreversible processes that change society as a whole and lead to a new social order. It is understood both as an intended and steered process, on the one side, and as a development which has a huge momentum of its own, on the other side (Jonas 2017, 122).
3. The critique of growth – articulated in the 1970s and recently revived in the degrowth movement – got integrated into the ecomodern notion of sustainable growth. The stated opposition between environmentalism and economic growth is transformed into the synthesis of “sustainable growth” by assuming that the two objectives don’t necessarily clash but can be harmonized (Huber 2011, 279). The ecomodern concept even goes so far as declaring economic growth as a condition of efficient environmentalism and vice versa.
4. The term “articulation” here has a twofold meaning. First, it refers to the dimension of expression. A social practice always conveys a meaning; it expresses something (of course the meaning can and will always be interpreted in different ways). Second, an articulation is a connection of two elements that can be uncoupled. It is a contingent link that is neither determined nor irreversible (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 105, 113; Grossberg 2016, 55; Sutter 2016, 67).
5. In hegemonic approaches consensus always means an actively developed consensus which is the result of struggles for hegemony. Thus, there are always particular interests that are – to a more or less great extent – inscribed in a consensus and other interests are excluded (Laclau 1990, 31).
6. The term “sink” refers to an ecosystem that is capable of absorbing emissions. The most important carbon sinks are forests and oceans.
7. The following explanations are mainly based on the cited literature on the imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen 2013, 2017, 2018), as well as on articles on the Gramscian term common sense and on the notions articulation and subject position within discourse theory (García López et al. 2017; Gramsci 1971; Hall and O’Shea 2013; Laclau 1990; Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Sutter 2016). Drawing upon this literature, I have converted the concept mode of living into the analytic structure of institutions, infrastructures, common sense, subject positions, and everyday practices.
8. In doing so, I will draw on the studies of Feldman et al. (2004) and Bedall (2013) as well as on my own experience (Krüger 2015, 2018). Feldman et al. (2004) put forward convincing proposals on how the interpretation of enthymemes can be made fruitful for empirical studies on change in organizations. Bedall (2013) picked up the idea, and implemented the method in his analysis of discourses and hegemonic structures. Feldman et al., as well as Bedall, combined the interpretation of enthymemes with the identification of “stories”. The stories were a tool to structure their empirical data, which consisted of qualitative interviews. When I adopted the interpretation of enthymemes for my own research (Krüger 2015, 2018) which was based on the analysis of documents, I skipped the step of identifying stories (it seemed to be unnecessary as my data was characterized by a structured and compressed language). Building on this experience, I assume that the method can be applied to all kinds of data – as long as the research interest focuses on the detection of implicit assumptions, values, and norms. Furthermore, I think that intermediate steps – like identifying stories – are not always essential, but can be useful, depending on the type of data one is working with.
9. The project is called “Relationale Geographien der Ernährung im Spannungsfeld zwischen Privatsache und Politikum”. It is directed by Prof. Dr Anke Strüver. For the first empirical results from the project, see Krüger and Strüver (2018).

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Eva Eichenauer and Dennis Eversberg for their very valuable comments to an earlier draft of this article. Furthermore, the author would like to thank Mary Beth Wilson for the excellent copy-editing of this paper.

Funding

This work was supported by the Leibniz Association (via the Leibniz Research Alliance on Energy Transitions) [ReNEW project].

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