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Habits of affluence: unfeeling, enactivism and the ecological crisis of capitalism

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Abstract

In this text, I discuss the role that a range of habits in affluent societies play in upholding as well as masking an unsustainable status quo. I show that enactivism, as a philosophical approach to the embodied and embedded mind, offers resources for bringing into focus and critically interrogating such *habits of affluence* and the environments enabling them. I do this in the context of a critical theory of *the unfelt in society*: the systematic production of lacunae of emotive concern in social collectives. The lack of proportionate affective and practical responses to the ecological crisis epitomizes this. The article starts with considerations on societal unfeeling, then reviews key elements of enactive approaches to habit, before a fuller picture of habits of affluence is developed, informed by Brand's and Wissen's concept of the *imperial mode of living*. Finally, two dimensions of habits of affluence are discussed in some detail, which will help flesh out a thematically expanded, politically engaged version of enactivism.

Keywords Affect · Emotion · Enactivism · Habit · The imperial mode of living · Social niche

1 Introduction

Attempts to understand the escalating ecological crisis in its political and ethical significance do well to begin with assessments of the entanglement of affluent modes of living with material conditions, infrastructures and political arrangements. Such conditions and arrangements are often detrimental to ecosystems and to the livelihoods and living conditions of large numbers of people, yet the destructive side of these life-enabling structures is often kept from collective reckoning and individual awareness. Many do not like to be confronted with the violence and destruction perpetrated in their name—violence and destruction, that is, in the service of enabling

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a life of comfort and dubious abundance for some. Institutions prefer to project a clean image, individuals tend to avert attention from suffering and from the painful effects of ecosocial devastation, and social collectives often police unwanted critical discourse, either explicitly or through all manners of small pressures and tendencies. These maneuvers of reality denial and evasion get effected through bodily comportment, become anchored in affective dispositions and socio-somatic affective arrangements.

In this text, I explore the potential of enactivism to advance the analysis of dispositions of organized reality denial, especially with regard to the ecological crisis of capitalism (Fraser 2021). Enactivism is an approach from the philosophy of mind that foregrounds the embodied, embedded and agential character of the mind, in opposition to cognitivist, representationalist and computationalist theories. It is based on the assumption of a broad continuity of metabolic life with higher mental capacities (Di Paolo 2009; Di Paolo et al. 2018; Thompson 2007; Varela 1999). A key ingredient in enactive approaches is a rich notion of habit that works in tandem with a conception of formative social niches, aligning an ecological view of the embodied mind with a perspective on the interactive constitution and societal shaping of mental capacities (see Maiese and Hanna 2019; Ramírez-Vizcaya and Froese 2019). The present text aims to showcase the potential of enactivist scholarship in general and enactivism on habit in particular to expand further beyond cognitive science and philosophy of mind into a critical perspective on social and political developments.

I will mainly circle-in on a notion of *habits of affluence*, with emphasis on their affective dimension, and then analyze these habits' role in upholding and masking an unsustainable status quo in the context of the global ecological crisis.¹ The enactive approach will enable an in-depth look at the bodily minutiae of habitual living in contemporary capitalist societies. It will also help understand these habits in their formative relations to socio-material environments and normative frameworks. The larger context for this is a theory of social affect, centered around the notion of *the unfelt in society*: the production of lacunae of emotive concern and sustained emotional disengagement in social collectives (Slaby 2023; see also Kohpeiß 2023a, b). The lack of proportionate affective and practical responses to the escalating ecological crisis epitomizes this (Norgaard 2011).

Here is the plan for what follows: First, I introduce a perspective on the unfelt in society, starting from the heightened or diminished sense of reality that inheres in emotive comportment (Sect. 2). Second, I discuss enactivist approaches to habit that fit this perspective and bring out their potential to move beyond individual embodiment to the social niche (3). Third, I draw a fuller picture of habits of affluence by illuminating the notion in relation to Brand and Wissen's concept of an *imperial*

¹ By "affluence" I do not mean the exceptional riches and exuberant lifestyles of the one percent, but rather the quotidian well-off-ness of broader social segments in late-liberal Western democracies: a comparatively moderate affluence that has been spread fairly widely through the social fabric of (mostly) the global north. Thus, I pick up on the meaning of "affluence" that in German would be referred to as "Wohlstand" (similar to "prosperity" in English) rather than "Reichtum" (wealth). Needless to say, such moderate abundance is highly unequally distributed.

mode of living (4). I then discuss two dimensions of habits of affluence that require enactivists to expand their approaches (5). I close with a brief outlook (6).

2 Theorizing the unfelt: affect and the art of facing reality

Part of the fascination of the affective realm lies in the way emotions can heighten or diminish an agent's awareness of reality (see Ratcliffe 2008). The same affective condition that intensifies someone's momentary uptake of reality might also be blinding. Take fear: Some impending event strikes us as detrimental, painning us in virtue of its being dangerous (Helm 2020), yet due to this quality it may also let us avert our gaze almost immediately. Instead of acknowledging in its full scope and consequence the looming mishap, we squint, and merely glance sporadically at the unwelcome scene, dosing our awareness of whatever might be out there. Many emotions present such a tipping point of reality-uptake: first they draw us near to their factual grounds, but then let us shrink back before it might get "too much". One can say that affective sense-making involves the *versioning of reality*. As Sartre has detailed in his *Sketch of a Theory of the Emotions* (2002 [1939]), switching from a challenging reality to a realm of useful fiction is a move that comes naturally in many emotional episodes. While the affective is the domain of being "touched" by what goes on, it also is inextricable from a capacity to manage, atone, and edit versions of reality to the measure of what we can comfortably deal with: the art of squaring the given with the livable.

On some occasions, the reality shock of an affective episode is so intense, impinging upon a situated individual so acutely, that a reflex-like evasion of manifest reality can seem like the obvious response. Such temporary blindness to unwelcome circumstances allows those concerned to go on with their lives mostly unperturbed. Accordingly, on such occasions, people manage to become affected in moderate and "buffered" ways, rather than being confronted—and potentially crushed—by the full significance of their situation. Such modes of *feeling less*—less intense, less deep, less long—in face of occasions that would merit *more* or different forms of affective engagement can be called 'unfeeling' (see Berlant 2015). In line with this, I propose to define the unfelt as an *apt occasion for emotive comportment in the complete or, more often, partial absence of the proportionate emotional response*, where this response-deficiency is not accidental but motivated. An occasion for a strong emotion might be glaringly obvious, but emoters nevertheless fail or refuse to respond according to the occasion's significance, even in light of standards they normally accept (Slaby 2017). It is a motivated failure to respond, likely because some benefit accrues to the emoting individuals: less pain, less stress, or less of a burden in taking on responsibility for their situation.

The import of the concepts of unfeeling and the unfelt comes to the fore when we consider the social dynamics that pertain to the production and stabilization of the unfelt in society. Individual inclinations to block out unfavorable aspects of reality

are echoed and intensified on the collective level.² Several tendencies are in play. In the course of social interaction, actors in a collective tend to imitate, censor and sometimes coerce one another so as to regulate and normalize emotional conduct. Myriad small acts and tendencies coalesce to produce, channel and stabilize emotive response patterns. The result is that, in a collective, some matters of concern are highlighted and attended to with intensive and nuanced affect, while other potentially significant matters are blocked out or taken up only sporadically. The unfelt in society is produced collectively over time, almost without anybody's notice.

At the same time, powerful societal actors exploit inclinations on part of individuals and also the conformist tendencies in a collective. Discursive patterns are deployed purposefully that deflect attention from complicity in harmful practices, shift blame to victims or third parties, and avoid or water-down compassion for certain populations marked as less worthy of collective concern. In this regard, we can further distinguish between the piecemeal discursive work of installing societal *frames* that differentially allocate, for instance, public grievability (Butler 2009), from direct actions that serve to deny or downplay the significance of certain matters. A striking example of the latter is the orchestrated climate change denial on part of the fossil fuel industry and right-wing populist parties (Oreskes and Conway 2010; Norgaard 2011; Malm and Zetkin Collective 2021).

It is important to let these considerations enter into theory construction in emotion and affect scholarship. In particular, attention has to be paid to the socio-somatic space where political atmospheres, collective affective climates and their discursive backdrop intersect with the emotional comportment, affective attitudes and sense of self of socially embedded subjects. This mixed zone or *entres-deux* (MacLaren 2017) of socio-political dynamics and individual experience has been brought into focus by adherents of cultural *affect theory* and theorists of political affect (Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2015; Protevi 2009), but has so far not received very much attention on part of philosophers of emotion.³ It is a province of our affective lives that is permeable to the cultural surround of collective feeling, where the social encroaches upon embodied orientations, comportment and demeanor of situated subjects. Enactivist approaches to habit are well-equipped to elucidate this dimension. On these views, habits are understood as bodily capacities keyed-in with environmental affordances, taking shape through longer-term processes of calibration of embodied subjects and their socio-material surroundings. In terms of theory design, it should accordingly be clear that individual actors are not the main units of analysis when it comes to affect and emotion. Over and above approaches to the *situatedness*

² This is not a point about causal or structural dependencies—the collective level likely comes early in the order of explanation when it comes to theorizing the unfelt systematically, as massive social calibration of affective responses is present from the earliest phases of ontogenetic development. Thanks to Jasmine Wanjiru Onstad for pressing me for clarification.

³ There are exceptions. Scholars of Merleau-Ponty in the mold of critical phenomenology have discussed the intertwining of the lived body and the wider surround of embedded agents, with increasing emphasis on the socio-political habituation of bodily comportment (see, e.g. Ahmed 2007; Al-Saji 2014; MacLaren 2017; Guenther 2019). The socially structured lived body is also the linchpin of Imke von Maur's work on situated affective intentionality (von Maur 2021).

of affectivity (see e.g. Griffiths and Scarantino 2009; Stephan et al. 2014; Colombetti and Krueger 2015; Krueger and Szanto 2016), it is crucial to zoom in on the power dynamics involved in shaping collective as well as individual affective and emotional repertoires (see Maiese and Hanna 2019; Mühlhoff 2018; Kohpeiß 2023a, b; Slaby 2016; von Maur 2021).

I want to briefly sketch an outline of a theory of the unfelt in society based on the considerations offered in this section. The approach needs to be attentive to the current shape of societal unfeeling in its most salient manifestations. Unfeeling is always specific, already in place, its institution lies always partially in the past while it is also still ongoing. This calls for attention to both, presently manifest formations of unfeeling, their specific shape and formative histories, and their continuous performative generation, renewal, calibration and intensification (see Slaby 2023, 73–4).

I distinguish two dimensions that, I think, encompass most of its predominant manifestations. The first is *structural apathy*: a ‘routine unconcern’ for the fate of those who suffer the consequences of destructive economic and political arrangements, due to the systemically imposed *distance*—geographical, epistemically and existentially—from the zones of destruction, pain, and suffering that usually lie “far away” in the capitalist periphery, constituting a shadowy “elsewhere”. Structural apathy is a baseline dimension of unfeeling as it reflects basic facts of geographical, social and existential distance, and the resulting lack of awareness and absence of relevant knowledge. It is a matter of global power relations and discursive and epistemic structures that coalesce to exempt certain events, actions, and people from realization, recognition and acknowledgment (see Slaby 2023).⁴

The second dimension is the theme of the present paper: *habits of affluence*. These habits are instances of unfeeling not so much because of their lack of an affective dimension, but *because* of their rich affective texture, as they fill up the horizon of day-to-day concern, desire and attachment. In relation to these habits, the unfelt is a byproduct of what is routinely felt, namely the various quotidian joys, pleasures, comforts of habitual living in affluent conditions (see Brand and Wissen 2020). Often, these are low- or medium-intensity affects that leave little space and energy for other modes of affective engagement. Habits of affluence are instances of unfeeling insofar as they clutter the affective horizon of everyday life. They facilitate structural apathy because they render sustained awareness and affective engagement with inequality, injustice, environmental destruction and other ills of the present global order less likely. But habits of affluence are also buffered against critique and transformative initiative by discursive operations that anchor them deeper within the fabric of subjective comportment and self-understanding, notably among them reflex-like defense-maneuvers that lead to aggressive rebuttals of challenges and putative opponents (von Redecker 2020; see Sect. 5.2 below).

In the following, I home in on such habits of affluence by first reviewing aspects of an enactivist approach to habit.

⁴ There are similarities between structural apathy and what is debated as structural or “white” ignorance (see Martin 2021; Mills 2007).

3 The appeal and ambivalence of enactivism on habit

I have hinted at a socio-somatic understanding of affective comportment, foregrounding a notion of the lived body that is permeable to the social, material and discursive environment. Pragmatist as well as enactivist approaches to habit likewise champion such an expanded and dynamic view of embodiment.⁵ Habits result from sequences of bodily habituation in an environment and thus manifest proximally as bodily capacities to skillfully engage and cope with particular surroundings. Such a view sees in habits two connected modes of chiasmic entwinement: first, an entwinement of (lived) time and space, and second, an entwinement of the individual bodily repertoire and its surroundings (see Fingerhut 2020, p.352). Over time, repeated actions structure an expanded body schema and thereby enable skillful practical engagement in the present, while such habituation calibrates muscular routines and sensory capacities to particular socio-spatial arrangements, or social ‘niches’—designed spaces propped with an assortment of architectural features, tools, media, technologies positioned in a coordinated, ready-to-use manner; in other words: landscapes of affordances (see Rietveld and Kiverstein 2014). The habituated bodily repertoire accordingly combines the sedimented past (regular, often-repeated action and experience) with an operative present of enactive potential (what the body can do, sense and cope with right now), while the embodied subject’s ‘zone of operation’ encompasses a specific socio-cultural niche. This latter aspect, the body-environment-nexus of habituation, is particularly important, as it breaks with an individualist orientation that would assume an ontologically significant boundary between the lived body and its surroundings. Instead, enactivism emphasizes a dynamic organism-environment-mutuality, a simultaneity of receptivity and spontaneity in a body that actively constructs or “brings forth” its “world”, that is, a socio-material domain of practical significance (Di Paolo 2009, p.12; see also Di Paolo 2023). In the more recent literature, this point has often been articulated in terms of a biological notion of niche construction (see, e.g., Sterelny 2014; Rouse 2023).⁶ Habituation always encompasses the shaping of surroundings, or social niches. This approach is closely aligned with enactivism-inspired work on situated affectivity that also emphasizes niche construction in coordination with, for instance, bodily-affective styles (see Colombetti and Krueger 2015; Candiotto and Dreon 2021).

On these grounds, what habit allows is the reliable transition from (mostly) passive receptivity to controlled intentional activity in a domain of practice. With a high degree of habituation to a domain, what is experientially available to the agent gets filtered according to its practical relevance and is thus directly conducive to ongoing competent conduct. One could say that habit decreases passivity (untrained

⁵ A helpful recent perspective on a pragmatist conception of habit in relation to situated affectivity is Candiotto and Dreon (2021); for a comprehensive review of enactivist approaches to habit see Ramírez-Vizcaya & Froese (2019). A well-argued combination of pragmatist and enactivist approaches is offered by Fingerhut (2020). A rich historical tapestry of philosophical views on habit is Bennett (2023).

⁶ Joseph Rouse’s new book *Social Practices as Biological Niche Construction* (2023) is an attempt to align scientific work on niche construction with philosophical accounts of social practices. Much of Rouse’s elucidations apply equally to habits as here understood, see especially his chapter 3 (“Postures”).

receptivity) and increases agency or composed action-readiness (Malabou 2008, x).⁷ If something novel and unexpected emerges, the habitual familiarity with the field of affordances and the available skills for dealing with localized variance make successful coping likely. In general, thanks to habit, goal-conducive activity gets easier, and less prone to being thrown off its tracks by novelty.⁸ Accordingly, habit can be described in terms of skillful conduct, as an expanded yet specifically circumscribed (and thus restricted) potential for action geared to a social niche. Scholars have therefore stressed the role of habit as backdrop or enabling condition of skillful, creative and virtuous agency (see, e.g. Malabou 2008; Fingerhut 2020; Noë 2009). We will see in the next sections that this has an important flip side: Habits ensure that a whole lot of what is “there” in one’s situation drops out of the ambit of reflective awareness, even at the heights of focused attention. Such lacunae of practical reality-uptake might be inevitable in the course of habitual conduct, but they are far from harmless if considered from a structural and political point of view.

As Ramírez-Vizcaya and Froese point out in their review article (2019), enactivist approaches focus on the integration of habits in the context of viable forms of life. The authors stress the importance of habits as ingredients of personal identity, which in part accounts for the existential depth and change-resistance of many individual habits (a point made often in the literature, see, e.g. Fingerhut 2020; Miller et al. 2020; Connerton 2010). Based on that, Ramírez-Vizcaya’s and Froese’s main consideration deserves attention: coordinated clusters of habits and their corresponding niches constitute “regional identities” (Di Paolo 2009, p.20) or “microidentities” (Varela 1991): “particular sets of habits will be regularly displayed by an agent depending on his current activities and context” (Ramírez-Vizcaya and Froese 2019, p.6). This can be concretized by way of analyzing collective habits of consumption, transportation, leisure and dwelling that characterize affluent modes of living. Among such habit-enabled microidentities are those of competent consumer, proud home or car owner, well-versed traveler, and all sort of combinations of these. Whatever else our practical identities revolve around, affluent modes of living constitute significant *regional identities*—routine patterns of consumption and lifestyle that the slow but steady force of habituation has engrained into bodily-affective postures, down to the finest details of the habitual body schema.

The fact that enactivist perspectives emphasize bodily repertoires of skill, posture and demeanor makes them ideally suited to advance the study of specifically *affective* comportment as a pervasive dimension of the embodied and embedded mind. Habits obviously integrate sensory, affective and cognitive dimensions. Finely calibrated routines and dispositions of perception, sensation, thought and feeling are integral to the overall comportment of habitual capacity. Habits go along with modes of attunement to environmental affordances, thereby drawing on sets

⁷ John Sutton makes this point in relation to expert cricket players: “the better you are, the less time you spend watching the ball, and the more you leap into the future” (Sutton 2007, p.770)—the future here equaling the stance of action-readiness in contrast to a mostly passive transfixation by the present shape of a situation.

⁸ A point stressed by nineteenth century philosopher Félix Ravaisson (2008) whose work on habit anticipates central features of later enactivist views.

of expectations as to the range of permissible environmental variation in a domain of habitual action. Affect guides these processes of embodied coping, for instance in the form of “directed discontent” in a particular domain (Rietveld 2008). Some of this has also been discussed in terms of notions of *body memory* (Sutton 2007; Fuchs 2012), a notion close to that of an affective disposition that has sedimented into an agent’s bodily repertoire over time.⁹

I emphasize the affective dimension because it is a key feature of habits of affluence. Besides the gearing of attention to salient patterns in the agent’s surroundings, what I think of is, first, the habitation of affectivity into an integrated repertoire of responses, which makes up a crucial dimension of the depth, stability and familiarity that turns habitual comportment into pillars of individual identities and practical self-understandings.¹⁰ Second, and relatedly, it is important to consider habit as a training ground for desire.

In her preface to Félix Ravaisson’s classic *Of Habit*, Catherine Malabou discusses desire in the following manner: “An impression coming from the outside, received with passivity, is gradually transformed into desire. The latter calls for the return of the impression, and thus of the activity. Indeed, for the same impression to be reproduced, the individual must seek it out” (Malabou 2008, x). Habit makes desire recognizable as a stable factor in the repertoire of embodied coping by enabling an agent to gradually turn inchoate and haphazard *impressions* into reliably recurring *experiences*. The competence that habit confers then enables—but also requires—its bearers to actively seek-out such experiences. And once the ability to reliably strive-for and reach satisfaction in a domain has been achieved, it can intensify the inclination to seek out such fulfillment repeatedly. At this point, the possibility arises that the skillful command of localized possibility, habitual capacity, might slide into an extreme: addiction. Hence the ambivalence of habit: Command over desire in a domain, hallmark of competence, unlocks the temptation to indulge and thus brings with it the danger of getting caught up. The ambivalence of habit thus stems, in part, from its connection to recurring, intensified desire. This is relevant with regard to the ethics of responsible living in the terrain of the global present. Habits of affluence are characterized by strong forms of pleasurable attachment to gadgets, commodities and designed environments—desires and attachments than can be hard to get rid of.

While Malabou emphasizes the ambivalence, seeing habit oscillate between “addiction and grace” (ibid), many contributors to the recent literature view habit predominantly in a positive light, as a dimension of human comportment that is

⁹ The rich literature on body memory—which goes by different names, such as habit memory, skill memory (Sutton 2007) or kinaesthetic memory (Sheets-Johnstone 2003), to name a few—is another important site for reflections about habit and skill that align well with the enactivist tradition. Much of it is directly relevant to the way that affluent lifestyles condition the minutiae of bodily coping in the life-worlds of late capitalism, laying down identity-constituting body memories and accompanying affective dispositions.

¹⁰ Paul Connerton expresses this connection as follows: “all habits are affective dispositions: (...) a predisposition formed through the frequent repetition of a number of specific acts is an intimate and fundamental part of ourselves, (...)” (Connerton 2010, 93f.).

mostly enabling, generative, creative. Some of this might be due to the superseding of earlier views of habit as mechanical, rigid, automatic and thus putatively “dumb” (Noë 2009 and Fingerhut 2020 are among those who make this point). Another reason for such positive views might lie in the relative disinterest in politics in much philosophy of mind and cognitive science, a tendency that has begun to change recently.¹¹ A symptom of this earlier apolitical orientation is that studies of habit that do focus on their potential pathologies tend to foreground addiction, taken as an individual affliction (e.g. Miller et al. 2020), instead of considering detrimental, blinding or destructive habits on the collective level, such as the rampant “carbon addiction” of contemporary capitalist societies (Redgwell 2011). In the following, I attempt to amend this situation by discussing a broader habitual complex prevalent in affluent societies.

4 Habits of affluence and the imperial mode of living

The shift from an enactivist approach to habit as such to the narrower perspective on habits of affluence involves a widening of the scope in terms of the structural position these habits occupy in the global landscape of eco-material relations. To get a sense for this, consider the following passage from John Vaillant’s book *Fire Weather*:

The Petrocene Age has enabled ordinary people to command energy in ways kings and sultans could only dream of, and with an ease hitherto unimaginable. Behind the wheel of a Chevy Silverado, a fifty-kilogram woman can generate more than six hundred horsepower as she draws a six-ton trailer at sixty miles an hour while talking on the phone and drinking coffee, in gym clothes on a frigid winter day. Prior to the Petrocene Age, only a king or a pharaoh could have summoned such power, and its equivalent would have required hundreds of enslaved people and draft animals. Today, with cheap and plentiful oil at our disposal, everyone’s an emperor. (Vaillant 2023, p.231)

I will return to the statement that “everyone” is an emperor and, if we take the author verbatim, a de facto slave holder, at the end of this section. But first, let us dwell for a moment on the Chevy Silverado. While this vehicle is exceptional, at least by European standards, in its tank-like enormity and fuel-thirsty demeanor, the acts described with regard to it are not: comparable feats are pulled off countless times every day by millions of private car users in affluent world-regions. Driving a car in order to get to work, to the gym, to pick up the kids, to meet friends, or to go shopping is an epitome of habitual agency in many regions belonging to the capitalist centers. What makes driving an automobile a paradigmatic habit of affluence is its taken-for-granted character as part of the most regular lifestyles in materially abundant societies. Despite the enormous, and objectively remarkable amassing of

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of this point and the proposal of a framework for a political orientation of philosophy of mind, see Tzima and Slaby (in preparation).

horse powers at an individual's fingertips, igniting your car to get from A to B is an utterly unremarkable element of daily practice. This practice has been normalized to the point of near-invisibility.

In each of these acts, drivers rely on a vast infrastructural network of roads and other sealed surfaces of asphalt and concrete. Above all, these acts put into operation a global fossil fuel extraction economy with massive implications for all aspects of life on the planet, a fact which is routinely ignored. This surely goes for all the lives, livelihoods and ecosystems negatively impacted by the extractive regimes of fossil capital. This is not so much due to a wanton disregard of environmental consequences but, in the first instance, because driving a car is nothing special, not all that different from sleeping in a bed or keeping food in a fridge. It is part of a way of life that has become second nature to most. Cars are part of the environmental niche inhabited by modern-day humans in several world-regions. In this way, it is understandable (on some level) that some of the most far-reaching, destructive and eco-invasive imperial practices do not so much as turn a head. They go along with a pervasive lack of awareness or, at any rate, lack of active concern for their consequences.

Habits of affluence epitomize a global regime of mass resource-throughput that is historically unprecedented. Fossil-fueled, privately owned cars are by no means the only example from this regime, but they crystallize the wider complex of habits of affluence to near-perfection. To get at the fuller picture, I will now focus on the entwinement of situated habitual comportment of individuals with global economic, political and social relations and show how this constitutes a profound dimension of societal unfeeling.

For this purpose, I turn to the concept of the *imperial mode of living*. Political theorists Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen have proposed this notion in order to analyze “a global constellation of power and domination that is reproduced—through innumerable strategies, practices and unintended consequences—at all spatial scales: from bodies, minds, and everyday actions, through regions and nationally organized societies, to the largely invisible and consciously concealed structures that enable global interactions” (Brand and Wissen 2020, 23). Material arrangements that are integral to the daily lives and identities of many consumers in the capitalist centers—either as quotidian reality or as realistic aspiration—such as car and home ownership; a meat-heavy diet and year-round availability of cheap foodstuffs from all over the globe; massive energy consumption; a broad range of options for leisure and travel and, in general, a never-ending amassing of resources and commodities for personal comfort; are connected to systemic practices and conditions such as industrial-scale resource extraction, exploitation of cheap labor and the externalization of negative environmental impacts on certain regions and communities, often, but by far not exclusively in the global south.

Brand and Wissen hold that the main mode of capitalist production, which enables the imperial mode of living for a significant minority of the global population, “reproduces largely destructive society-nature relations, which imply enormous transfer of biophysical material” (2020, p.24). At the same time, the imperial mode of living is and has been a means to ensure social consensus in capitalist mass democracies since the mid-twentieth century. Thanks to the availability of

commodities and increasingly cheaper goods and services, the standard of living for significant segments of the population in the Western centers could rise even despite stagnating wages and growing inequality (see Brand and Wissen 2020, p.51). A dirty deal, to be sure, but one whose unfriendly balance sheet has been meticulously kept from broader recognition, debate or contestation.

This is where the habits of affluence enter the picture. These habits belong to the homely “near side” of the imperial mode of living: routines and practices that make up the regular lives of many. Thanks to their normalized, by and large pleasurable and rewarding, and, for most, inescapable character, these habits contribute to keeping the grim backside of this arrangement out of view. Far away in a geographical sense, difficult to grasp due to the complexity of financial, geopolitical, technical and legal relations, but also highly unwelcome as painful reminders of detrimental, eco-destructive and structurally violent consequences, these systemic connections and enabling conditions of affluent modes of living face a high bar for crossing into individual and collective awareness. They constitute an “elsewhere” of which most have, at best, a fringe awareness.

What I have in earlier work analyzed as “structural apathy” (Slaby 2023) describes this systemic lack of awareness and emotive concern together with its enabling conditions: a constellation of geographical distance but also of discursive, ethical, and existential remoteness between those who enjoy the benefits of capitalist mass production and those (people, societies and ecosystems) whose labor, land and resources provide the usually cheap, often stolen material and energetic input to the global machine. The result can be a profound indifference, a disregard for the plight of those who have to live with the destructive consequences. This goes together with a blatant “forgetting” of one’s own complicity and structural involvement in the lethal arrangement. Such affective distancing is produced through a variety of systemic efforts to keep the environmental, personal and social costs of the transition from natural resources and raw materials to consumer goods out of view. Indeed, “invisibility” is a key feature of the imperial mode of production and living:

Many necessary everyday items are tied to a range of activities that are invisible during their purchase, consumption and use: the origin of the raw materials used in household appliances, medical devices or transport; water and energy infrastructures; the working conditions under which these materials are extracted or textiles and foods are produced; and the expenditure of energy required for these. (...) The invisibility of the social and ecological conditions is precisely what enables us to experience the buying and use of these products as a natural given. ‘Food from nowhere’ ... (Brand and Wissen 2020, p.40)

Many habits of the everyday accommodate, sustain or actively foster this invisibilization and the production of a nondescript “elsewhere” from whence, as if by magic, commodities, energy and foodstuffs materialize in our vicinity. The routinization of bodily comportment helps anchor such structural apathy, quite literally, in the tissues and bones of daily existence. It becomes part of an embodied common sense—something that is lived, from moment to moment, entrained into the minutiae of mundane coping. Thereby, dependence on—and a sense of entitlement to—a plethora of goods and services is routinized: seamless in its enactment, frictionless

in its acceptance. Accordingly, the imperial mode of living is “not distinct from the subjects”, but “shapes subjects and their common sense, normalizes it and enables their capacity to act” (Brand and Wissen 2020, p.42).¹²

Let me return to the remark by John Vaillant, according to which today’s car owners command energy on a scale formerly available only to emperors and slave holders. It can be helpful to remind ourselves that today’s imperial mode of living shares key features with slave holding societies. A plantation logic still operates as an unofficial organizational blueprint that informs global modes of production and distribution. One way to make this point in the context of the ecological crisis is by invoking the concept of the *Plantationocene* as a descriptor of the current geo-historical epoch, as an alternative to the much-criticized Anthropocene.¹³ As Malcolm Ferdinand argues, taking up proposals by Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway, the Plantacionocene “refers to the era when the pursuit of plantations dictates the orientations of public institutions, universities, state services, and even the tastes of consumers, (...) meaning it ordered how people live together and inhabit the Earth” (Ferdinand 2021, p.46). The organizational blueprint of a colonial plantation still lurks like a shadow behind present modes of production and consumer practices. An extractive, predatory, openly violent political economy sets the stage for the armory of habits, orientations, desires and identities in the capitalist centers. The vast distance, geographically but especially practically and “existentially”, between the sites of extraction and appropriation and the sites of consumption and enjoyment facilitates the invisibilization, the ignorance and apathy, perennial hallmarks of plantation regimes: “The violence of the Plantation is usually confined to some faraway place over there, while the finished products are consumed in some peaceful place here” (ibid). Better than the misleading term Anthropocene, “Plantacionocene” ties the dominant economic regime closer to the eco-social devastation engendered by global capitalism, thereby also shedding light on the root causes of denialism, evasion and slow-walking of change that characterize the ways present-day societies (fail to) respond to the ecological crisis.

5 Exploding the niche: for a more expansive enactivism on habit

I have drawn broad circles around the two main themes of this text, societal unfeeling and habits of affluence. It is time to bring the strands closer together, while also expounding the potentials of enactivism for critically engaging the eco-social crisis. In order to do this, I will now discuss two dimensions of habits of affluence in slightly more detail. For both of these, I show that enactivism on habit needs to be expanded and sensitized towards dangers and ambivalences that a properly

¹² For reasons of space, I can only offer glimpses of the subject theory that fits the approach to societal unfeeling and habits of affluence. A key source for a complex-enough view of the situated, compromised and complicit subject of societal unfeeling is Michael Rothberg’s study *The Implicated Subject* (2019); I have also learned a lot from Alexis Shotwell’s *Against Purity* (2016).

¹³ There are several well-informed rebuttals of the Anthropocene as epochal designator, I recommend Karera (2019), Pulido (2018) and Yusoff (2018).

embedded notion of habits evokes.¹⁴ The points under discussion are, first, a more expansive notion of the social niche that includes symbolic and normative aspects (5.1.), and second, the political weaponization of a reflexive dimension of the habits at issue (5.2.).

5.1 Expanding the niche

Much work in enactivism homes in on the proximate zone of bodily comportment, the near-sphere in which subjects of habit are, indeed, at home. There are plausible reasons for such a proneness to proximity. It is true that many paradigmatic habits rely heavily on bodily comportment in the agent's surroundings. Given the roots of enactivism in biology, emphasizing organismic adaptation and foregrounding human-animal-continuities makes good sense. Thus, it is understandable that theorists' study adaptive environments and ecological niches, often starting from the lower echelons of animal life. But modeling the "human niche" narrowly on niche construction in animals has downsides. The term "niche" as such already suggests a certain myopia. Considering today's built environments and infrastructural arrangements that scaffold daily life as we know it, there is always much more at work than the proximate and tangible. Indeed, the settings that make up affluent lifeworlds are interlocked with one another and with global economic, political and legal arrangements in manifold material, practical and normative ways.¹⁵

Theorists might look closely at the car and its drivers' routines steering it, but should not overlook the extraction economy that literally fuels it, nor the network of roads and sealed surfaces that makes driving viable. Consumer practices and their spatial settings in shops and malls are fine, as far as a study of bodily habits of capitalism goes, but only if due weight is given to supply chains, working conditions, origins of raw materials and the economic and legal arrangements that allow affordable commodities to be so widely available. This crucially includes status-conferring (and -confirming) dimensions of symbolic capital and prestige that many products and services yield in addition to their material use value. In view of all this, the scope of the human niche needs to be much expanded, geographically, materially, normatively, and symbolically, so that its study includes material flows of resources and equipment, institutional arrangements, legislation, international trade agreements, formally and informally coded power relations, prestige and status, and much more. Basically, when I refuel my car, I am putting a drinking straw into Nigerian, Arabian or Siberian soil, while the money I pay at the gas station flows into the pockets of oligarchs and portfolios of stockholders of fossil capital around the globe.

¹⁴ Sofia Tzima and I develop a similar perspective in slightly more detail in forthcoming work (see Tzima & Slaby, in preparation); especially the considerations about expanding the niche in Sect. 5.1 are informed by this collaboration.

¹⁵ While the original concerns behind the enactivist movement were always strongly political (see, e.g. Varela 1999), these broader concerns have often receded behind an orientation towards theoretical debates in cognitive science and philosophy of mind. I welcome recent tendencies to move back to the broader socio-political plane (see, e.g., di Paolo et al. 2018; di Paolo 2022; Gallagher 2020).

As my shiny electrical vehicle hums along a suburban street, I am silently counting on metals and minerals being extracted and lithium mined “elsewhere” for me to use and to feel good doing so, all the while I see my social prestige boosted as not only a wealthy and stylish person but also an ecologically responsible citizen. A lot has to be in play that is not tangible or in reach when I happily turn my car key.

The relative disinterest in these wider arrangements that endow and condition the proximate niche threaten to beset enactive approaches with a certain short-sightedness and political disregard. The proposal to theorize the unfelt in society in relation to habits of affluence is a reminder that routines of the everyday depend on far wider networks of relations than those manifest in agents’ immediate surroundings. Note how ‘depend’ applies doubly here: Not only do the routines of everyday living *depend* on these massive infrastructural arrangements, also individual consumers *depend* on these structures for the conduct and reproduction of their daily lives as, very often, no sustainable, less destructive and affordable alternatives are available on a broad enough scale. The imperial mode of living has been locked in systemically, and this is another strong reason to expand the purview of the niche construction account well beyond the sphere of individual comportment, enactment and decision-making (see Brand and Wissen 2020, ch. 3).¹⁶

The good news is that the enactive approach to habit has resources to deal with complex multi-level normativity and material entanglements. A growing number of theorists is pushing in this direction. Joseph Rouse, in his account of human-level niche construction, brings out the interdependence of world-shaping practices and their long-term consequences for how people live (Rouse 2023, p.277f.). This approach is instructive as it is thoroughly naturalistic and mindful of human-animal continuities, while it also discusses those “naturecultural” practices and socio-material niches that divert from their nearest analogues in animals, albeit against the backdrop of massive co-evolutionary interdependence (see Rouse 2023, p.283ff.).¹⁷ Closer to home, a growing number of enactivist-leaning philosophers of mind and cognition politicize the study of the embodied and embedded mind, focusing variously on political affect (Protevi 2009), harmful mind-shaping (Maiese and Hanna 2019), mind-extending or -impeding cognitive institutions (Gallagher 2013; 2020), oppressive things and their cognitive niches (Liao and Huebner 2021) or hostile scaffolding (Spurrett 2024). Aligned with this have been interventions against a supposedly depoliticising “dogma of harmony” in 4E cognition research (Aagaard 2020) and against the reliance upon an individualistic and neoliberal “user-resource model” (Slaby 2016).

In the light of the discussion of habits of affluence, it is possible to add another chapter to these critiques. Andy Clark famously condensed the point of his early extended mind approach as follows: “Our brains make the world smart so that we

¹⁶ Thanks to Maia Vige Helle for pressing me on this point.

¹⁷ Rouse’s concern is different from mine, as he strives to demonstrate, in the spirit of a naturalist metaphysics and philosophy of science, the naturalness of even the most sophisticated conceptual practices and normative orientations native to the human niche. On these grounds he also sporadically engages with political stakes that pertain to unsustainable modes of living and the global ecological crisis (see, e.g., 2023, 296).

can be dumb in peace” (Clark 1997, p.180). We can make this more specific now: Capitalist environments make the world not only smart, but also specifically short-sighted so that we can remain blissfully unconcerned and lighthearted when enjoying ourselves (affectively buffered against painful awareness). Thus, we can not only be dumb in peace but also ostentatiously innocent. We are cognitively, affectively and practically extended *and* shielded against unwelcome insights. The structures setting up habit-enabling niches can be extractive, unjust and violent, but these realities, from which many profit materially and symbolically, are kept from the purview of their users and consumers thanks to the shiny facades, the elegance of practicality and the discursive but also affective safeguards against criticism, doubt or calls for change. Such scaffolds can in some respects be “good” for the agents that habitually interact with them—practically useful, adaptive, pleasurable –, but they simultaneously spread misery in other parts of the globe.¹⁸ We deal with mind-expanding arrangements and technologies that double as machines of extraction. And if we realize it or not, they make us complicit in the destruction of ecosystems, livelihoods and futures.

As this emerging critical repertoire and conceptual armory shows, enactive approaches are beginning to amass the tools that help theorists analyze not only the blessing but also the curse of mind-expanding and habit-enabling niches.

5.2 Weaponized reflexivity

Habits of affluence are linchpins of microidentities that revolve around levels of comfort, material abundance, passionate attachments to homes, cars, tools and gadgets, and much else, tacked on to boons of class- and race-privilege, gender roles, and other institutional statuses. The intangibles that supercharge affluent social niches—especially markers of status and prestige—sediment as a dimension of the affective sense of self: not just feelings of belonging, at-homeness and ease in practical affairs, but a heightened sense of self-worth and entitlement to goods and services make up the affective backbone of affluent regional identities (von Redecker 2020). The depth and stability of such propped-up selfhood is put in stark relief as soon as historically accrued privilege is challenged or when accustomed services are abruptly withheld. When this happens, a reflexive dimension of habit-adjacent affectivity snaps into action. First, emotions such as indignation, anger and resentment signal the breach of expectation. Second, those challenging the current distribution of wealth and status will be attacked as morally corrupt, hypocritical or worse, their arguments rebutted, and the status quo defended, often with help from the institutional guarantors of historical privilege (such as police or security services, the law, higher-ups in institutions, and so forth).

Entitlement is key. The word alone is music in the ears of social theorists of affectivity, as it lays open the formative link between institutional status and affective dispositions. As an affective condition, entitlement is the metabolization of institutional

¹⁸ Thanks to Sofia Tzima for discussion of this point.

‘titles’ into embodied postural comportment. Property rights, academic credentials, the prerogatives of citizenship and other, more or less formalized privileges, expand into a recognizable affective complex, a bodily demeanor and affective style that lets its bearers assume the visible markers of the highborn. Institutional endowment extends seamlessly into an armory of self-feelings, such as outsized self-esteem, pride, a sharp sense of privilege, haughtiness. Ego-expansive traits manifest in a person’s gait, gaze, and air, and go along with patterns of perception, thought, and feeling. When their accustomed claims meet resistance, however tentative, the entitled are prone to strike back with force, moving swiftly from their hurt feelings to an assortment of well-rehearsed counters: complaints, insults, the threat of legal action, severe grudges, and a plethora of argumentative set pieces in defense of the status quo, and much else along these lines.¹⁹

In light of this, an enactive approach to habit does well to include this tendency to move from self-evident prerogative to aggressive defense. Not only do certain bundles of habits coalesce into microidentities of privileged subjects, but these habitual complexes constitute an affective sense of self with rich internal and external complexity. I suggest we call this added dimension “reflexive”, because, for one, it often manifests in a reflex-like manner affectively safeguarding a long-standing disposition.²⁰ It is reflexive also in a second, more substantive, sense insofar as it takes recourse to thoughts and lines of reasoning that all affirm the original claims.²¹ Sartre in a related context spoke of a “complicit reflection”: a proneness to reflect in such a way on one’s first-order emotional episodes that all one will ever come up with are grounds for their legitimacy (Sartre 2002, p.61). Not unlike the concept of rationalization in Freud, complicit reflection will affirm one’s spontaneous inclinations, one’s affective tendencies and desires and fabricate fitting reasons and backstories. The epistemic landscape of the privileged subject has been skewed (Goldie 2004), usually in the direction of safeguarding material interests at all costs.

It is again key to consider the social scaffoldings of this reflexive dimension of habits of affluence. Bearers of habitual privilege are usually not alone in their insistence on its merit, and will rarely have to make up conducive lines of reasoning on their own. Instead, others with a similar social positionality stand ready to be the sounding board of these claims, and well-tested ideologemes are available for swift deployment. Accordingly, an enactive analysis and critique of habits of affluence should pay attention to public discourse and adjacent practices, parsed into milieu-specific, social sectorial and institutional variants. This can include the study of

¹⁹ It would be worthwhile to deepen the discussion of defensive self-feelings by also considering resentment. Cynthia Fleury’s (2023) work is exemplary of the type of study that I have in mind, as it interweaves the personal with the political in a timely manner.

²⁰ Note that this is not the sense of the term “reflexive” that plays a role in some enactivist texts, where it is considered to characterize purely automatic, simple and reflex-like responses (e.g. Varela 1999). Thanks to Laura Candioto for pointing this out.

²¹ Elsewhere, I have described everyday affectivity as “at once smooth, seamless, a matter of flow and habit, and a complex configuration of knowledge, self-awareness and practical reflexivity, which merge to form a defensive capacity ready to fend off challenges to its prevalent outlook” (Slaby 2023, 77). I also made a link to Gallagher’s (2013; 2020) concept of a mental institution.

political dynamics and lifestyle trends that respond to the current situation in society. In the context of today's debates about sustainability and decarbonization, it is key to observe the reactionary backlash against challenges to material privilege: for instance, individuals' doubling down on deleterious practices, such as ostentatiously driving the biggest and dirtiest cars (Daggett 2018), installing new gas heating systems, flying and buying like there is no tomorrow. Social milieus and domains are endowed with discursive and practical repertoires, stocks of phrases, associations and behavioral patterns that find expression intuitively once an apt occasion arises. These repertoires are moreover constantly refined and expanded, their effectiveness is probed and optimized. Such transformative dynamics are well in need of study if the aim is to understand the broader discursive and practical niche of affluent modes of living.

This also brings us back to the considerations made above, about the social shaping of societal unfeeling. A collective sense of reality and unreality is instituted practically and discursively through social interaction, and this collective work of response calibration normalizes emotional reality-uptake, often inflected with shared concern for longstanding social privilege. Earlier studies of collective denial (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1967) as well as more recent work on climate skepticism (Norgaard 2011) reveal the constant societal efforts of reality-shaping in its different epoch- and place-specific varieties—excellent starting points for further studies.

The affective dimension of possessive and entitled ways of life can function as a hinge between individual self-relations and political practice. Eva von Redecker (2020) has shown how a long-standing affective disposition she calls “phantom possession” might drive former subjects of property and privilege into a frantic insistence on their superiority and entitlement to service, even—or even more so—in the de facto absence of any noteworthy material possessions. What von Redecker calls a “mad place” in the former subject of dominion (2020, p.35) can be freshly fired-up by vile rhetoric and mobilizing initiatives so that the possessive mind might briefly beam in the shine of its former glory. Reactionary politics of the hurt self is in full swing in many regions of the Global North, and is a hallmark of neo-authoritarianism. Right-wing political populists across the Western hemisphere have specialized in targeting the affective self of phantom owners, harnessing and weaponizing its reflexive, defensive dimension (for a broad analysis see Malm and Zetkin Collective 2021). As has been pointed out repeatedly, *whiteness*, as a dimension of historically accrued privilege, plays a central role, not least because it historically came to function as a symbolic currency, paying out “wages” in the form of various social privileges (Roediger 1991), and thereby inflating the sense of self of members of comparatively poor and underprivileged segments of the population.²²

Such work provides useful models for the type of philosophical, historical, social and political analysis that can structurally illuminate the complexity of these

²² Besides von Redecker (2020), who draws on historical studies of whiteness as property by Harris (1993) and Bandhar (2018), I think of work by the critical phenomenologists Ahmed (2007), Al-Saji (2014), and Guenther (2019), and of the work on habits of white privilege by Sullivan (2006).

socio-somatic mindsets and explain their political sway in the present. Philosophers of mind and cognitive science can find inspiration in this type of contextualizing work on situated mental capacities, while they need not be shy to put forth their own conceptual and methodological repertoires for probing deeper into the socio-somatic sphere between self and society.

6 Outlook: enactivism and the ecological crisis

Normativity receives ample consideration in enactivism. In fact, the biological normativity of organismic functioning and adaptive viability in an ecological niche can be seen as its guiding principle (Di Paolo 2009). A lot of work then considers putatively “higher” types of human functioning, cognitive, affective as well as practical, that are governed not just by biological norms but respond to the demands and constraints of social norms and cultural modes of living. In this text, I have sketched *one* possible path through this theoretical terrain. I have developed an enactivist concept of habit that is applicable to modern consumption and lifestyle practices and combined it with an expansive approach to the social niche as habit-inducing developmental milieu. With these two foundational elements, an enactivist perspective on the full range of biological *and* social normativity has taken shape.²³ However, in this text, such theoretical concerns about the explication of multiple layers of normativity have been less central vis-a-vis a pressing practical and critical agenda, an engaged account and exemplary showcase of habits of affluence.

To conclude this text, I want to point out a troubling development that brings the complementary normative spheres, the biological and the social, even closer together in practice. The ecological crisis, epitomized by an escalating rate of atmospheric warming, is indicative of a massive feedback loop between human practice (social normativity) and ecosystems (biological normativity). Human practices at the industrial scale—and here one should immediately qualify “human” into “western bourgeoisie”—have left an indelible imprint on natural habitats, pushing many to the brink of destruction (Fraser 2021). The inertia of affluent modes of living and the reluctance of ruling elites to change their business models contributes to this fatal feedback loop through fabricated denial, the seeding of doubt, slow-walking of environmental policies or other obstructive acts organized increasingly on the global scale. There is little that can better illustrate the ways that social practices, discourses and mind-sets “backfire” into the material composition of ecosystems than affluent habits, their structural enabling conditions and the armory of political means to safeguard both against transformative initiatives. This shows how important enactivist scholarship can be to critical social theory: Its perspective on embodied coping, environmental affordances, sense-making and niche construction pinpoints with precision the social metabolism of human collectives in its imbrication

²³ Various well-developed proposals for a scale-spanning account of multi-dimensional normativity of human life forms are on offer. I have learned much from Di Paolo et al. (2018), Gallagher (2020), Hutto et al. (2020) and Rouse (2023).

with socio-cultural practices at the systemic scale. Thereby, enactivism succeeds in managing the massive complexity that the integrative study of the ecological crisis involves.

Over and above these general points about enactivist's critical relevance, I hope the following is the main message of this text: Habits of everyday comportment in affluent lifeworlds instruct us on the nature of the current global regime of extraction. What is so unremarkable on its practical near-side has an insidious backside of violence, exploitation and destruction, paired with neglect and dereliction—all normalized into a dynamic yet persistent tapestry of bodily-affective routine whose daily exercises are often homely, pleasurable, and comforting; and also, importantly, often without alternative, as domains and infrastructures for more sustainable practices and modes of living are usually lacking. Habits of affluence turn out to be prime instances of societal unfeeling: As the warp and weft of most our days, they fill up lived space and time, consume energy and jam attention, clutter thought, and in the longer run train our bodies, hearts and minds on the lethal normality of global capitalism. The unfelt in society is thus incessantly instituted and upheld—notably, but not exclusively, in the form of climate denial and other modes of neglect of ecological devastation and its many brutal and deadly consequences. While the clock runs out on combating the main drivers of the ecosocial disaster, the collaborative study of what got us and what keeps us there has only just begun. I hope this paper can be a step in what will soon be a much larger philosophical and interdisciplinary endeavor, one to which philosophers of mind and of cognitive science will contribute substantively.

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Conflict of interest The author has no competing interest to declare that are relevant to this article.

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