A (green) wave of the future?

Exploring the discourse of self-sufficiency in Sweden

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Abstract

During the last years, Sweden has seen the rise of a new green wave (NGV) consisting of people who move to rural areas in a strive for self-sufficiency and alternative ways of living. The point of departure for this thesis is that radical changes in lifestyle is a result of discontent with some aspect(s) of mainstream society. Through unstructured interviews and a discourse analysis inspired by Carol Bacchi's WPR-approach, I investigate discourses present in the NGV through inquiries into the respondents' practices and motives. The study shows that the respondents' daily practices and life choices are motivated by their ideas about our economic system, social change, food production and sustainability. The findings are then placed in the context of ecomodernism, degrowth, the crisis of democracy and an economic system based on growth, consumption and paid labour.

Keywords: The new green wave, back-to-the-land, environment, agricultural practices, social change, degrowth

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Abbreviations

NGV	The new green wave (Translated from *Nya gröna vågen*)
WPR	What's the problem represented to be? An analytical approach by Carol Bacchi.

1. Introduction

1.1 Problem statement

We are currently facing a series of interlinked threats to the wellbeing of humans and ecosystems; from increasing gaps between rich and poor (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020; World Bank Development Research Group 2022) and rising numbers of people in hunger (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP & WHO 2017, 2022), to climate change, loss of biodiversity, land use change and alteration of biochemical flows (Steffen et al. 2015). There is an urgent need for new ways of structuring human societies (Ibid; Jackson 2009) and global organizations and national governments alike have been vocal about the need for swift action (e.g. Government Offices of Sweden 2018-06-14; Lövin 2019; European Council 2020; UN General Assembly 2015). The predominant idea of solving our environmental problems by "greening" the current system (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Regeringsbeslut N2016/08073/RTS; Regeringsbeslut N2019/02162/RTL) has, however, been critiqued as unsubstantiated (Dale et al. 2016; Hickel 2019; Hickel & Kallis 2020; Zysman & Huberty 2013) and as a way of maintaining the status quo of growth capitalism (Browne 2018; Dale et al. 2016; Hickel 2019; Hickel & Kallis 2020).

Despite this apparent lack of visions among political leaders, there are recent trends to suggest that people who long for another way of living. Social media has seen "Cottagecore" trending as people gathered around aesthetic imagery of the simple life on the countryside. This trend consequently gave rise to "Pettsoncore", in which the life of the Swedish children's' book character Pettson was portrayed as ideal. A related pattern has been visible in Swedish television, with several shows centered around small scale farming in rural settings airing from 2013 and forward (e.g. "Mandelmanns gård", "Hjälp, vi har köpt en bondgård!", "Drömmen om landet", "En bondgård mitt i stan", "Hundra procent bonde"). This trend has also affected Swedish folk high schools, which has experienced a significantly increased interest in courses in small scale farming, self-sufficiency and permaculture (Person 2017). Some believe that Sweden is experiencing a "new green wave" (translated from Swedish: *nya gröna vågen*) in which people move to rural settings in search of alternative ways of living, often involving small-scale farming or some degree

of self-sufficiency (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences 2021; Vlasov 2020).

This thesis takes interest in the people who are part of this "new green wave". This phrase refers to people relocating to rural areas in search of alternative ways to structure life in relation to consumption, work and social relations (Wilbur 2013). Central to the new green wave is food production and the idea of becoming self-sufficient (Sørensen 2020; Vlasov 2020). "The new green wave" (NGV) refers to a Swedish context, but similar trends can be seen in other parts of the world; according to Vlasov (2020: 25) it has become a "global movement with many local actualisations". In research, similar phenomena have been discussed in a variety of terms, such as *back-to-the-land movement*, *new farmers* or as part of the anti-urbanization or pro-rural movement (e.g. Ngo & Brklacich 2014; Wilbur 2013). None of these terms describe a clearly defined group of people, and neither does "the new green wave". The terms rather points towards a revitalization of interest in small-scale farming, self-sufficiency and rural living.

Albeit few, there are previous studies into the motivations and practices of the Swedish NGV. With the exception of Sørensen (2020), these studies have been conducted by students. If one broadens the scope to include other Nordic countries we find the research by Backa (2018, 2020), who has studied the motives and practices of Finnish back-to-the-land practitioners. While there are previous studies examining this topic, it is fair to say that the field is still sparsely studied. This study therefore seeks to contribute to the knowledge on NGV by investigating the phenomenon in relation to wider societal processes.

1.2 Aim and research questions

The point of departure for this thesis is that radical changes in lifestyle is a result of discontent with some aspect(s) of mainstream society. Through unstructured interviews with people who have all decided to live in rural areas and strive for self-sufficiency, the study investigates what those aspects might be and what alternatives are striven for as a way of exploring a particular discourse. Guiding the research are the following research questions:

1. *What practices do the actors see as central to their way of life?*
2. *How does the actors motivate their choice of this particular way of life?*
3. *Is it possible to distinguish a common discourse in the findings related to the previous two questions? If so, which?*

1.3 Limitations

This thesis has people of the NGV as its focus for investigation. As is stated in the introduction, the term NGV refers to the Swedish part of the multinational back-to-the-land movement and thus hints towards the scope of the study being limited to a Swedish context.

It should also be emphasized that the conclusions drawn in this thesis cannot be generalized. NGV is a phenomenon consisting of individuals or groups who choose to live life in certain ways, but there is no clear definition of who is part of it and who is not. This makes it impossible to determine whether or not the respondents in this interview are typical of the NGV. Indeed, no effort has been put into securing or evaluating the representativeness of the sample as generalizability is not the purpose of the study. Rather, the thesis should be read as an attempt to map aspects of a social critique that makes people choose a rural, self-sufficient way of life.

1.4 Thesis outline

Here, I present the outline of the thesis. Chapter 2 is dedicated to methods and includes information on how data has been collected and analysed. It also presents the analytical framework which guides the exploration of discourses in subsequent chapters. Chapter 3 contains a review of previous research on NGV and the back-to-the-land movement in other countries. It also presents background and theories to allow for contextualization and examination of the empirical material. The empirical material is in turn presented in chapter 4, a chapter that is separated into two sections. Section 4.1 provides an account for the respondents practices, while chapter 4.2 integrates the empirical material on practices and motives in an analysis aiming to uncover discourses in the material. The discourses are further examined in chapter 5, where they are discussed in relation to previous research and theories as presented in chapter 3. Last of all, chapter 6 summarizes key findings and suggest areas of interest for further research.

2. Method

2.1 Epistemological positioning

This thesis is built on the recognition of the world as multifaceted and socially constructed and experienced. This leads to the adoption of the phenomenological view that peoples' views, emotions, actions and experiences are important subjects for research since the lived experience of the world is as real as any other attempt to represent its essence (Inglis 2019; Kvale & Brinkmann 2014). This view is guiding the aim of the thesis as well as the research questions, which are dedicated not to finding an objective truth but to explore the *respondents' truths* regarding their actions, thoughts and motivations.

2.2 Method and methodology

The purpose of this thesis is explorative, which means that it seeks to understand a phenomenon rather than to confirm a hypothesis. The first two research questions are concerned with experiences and motives. The aim of these two questions is not to get an exhaustive account for the respondents' practices and the circumstances that led them to live as they do, but to explore what aspects the respondents themselves see as most important. This information is necessarily subjective. Therefore, it is deemed important that the interviews were guided by the respondent's experiences and values as opposed to being dictated by an interview guide developed beforehand. Not least is this of great importance for the possibility to accurately answer the third research question (*Is it possible to distinguish a common discourse in the findings related to the previous two questions? If so, which?)* as an interview following themes that are determined based on my own preunderstanding might force statements that the respondents would otherwise not have thought to mention.

Following the above reasoning is the choice to conduct unstructured interviews. This type of interview is characterized by open-endedness and non-standardization (Robson & McCartan 2016: 293). While the researcher can still bring a limited set of questions or topics to the interview, the purpose is to allow the respondent to

speak freely about whatever they find interesting or important in relation to those topics or questions (Ibid; Lofland et al. 2006). For this study, two main questions were prepared to provoke answers corresponding to the research questions concerning practices and motives for the respondents' way of life:

1. *Tell me about how you live!*
2. *Why have you chosen to live this way?*

Follow-up questions were then adjusted to the particular answer given by each respondent, so to allow deepened understanding of their lives and views.

Eleven interviews were held as part of the study. Two of the interviews had two respondents and in both cases these were partners who lived together. Thus, the study has a total of thirteen participants. The respondents are people who have chosen to live in a rural area and practice farming, generally with the goal of increasing their self-sufficiency. They were identified as possible respondents through their involvement in a forum for self-sufficiency and alternative living and contacted through e-mails which stated the general interest of the study, the reason for why they had been chosen as possible respondents and practical information about the interview and data management.

After permission by each respondent, the sound from the interviews were recorded and saved for the subsequent analysis. Each recording was carefully reviewed and sequences of interests for the research questions were transcribed into text. The interviews were held in Swedish, as that is both my and the respondent's native language. To preserve information and meaning from the respondents' statements to the largest extent possible, the transcription and analysis was also carried out in Swedish. Segments of texts were translated from Swedish to English only to allow the usage of quotes to illustrate my findings.

2.3 Carrying out interviews during COVID-19

This study was planned during December 2021 and January 2022. During this time, there were great uncertainty regarding the development of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Sweden, restrictions on movement and gatherings were still in place. The interviews were first planned to be carried out in person on the farms where the respondents live and work, but as the situation began looking worse, the decision was made to conduct the study through online interviews. This way, the method was "pandemic-proofed".

Conducting interviews online requires certain considerations. People who are not comfortable using computers or digital tools will be difficult to reach through this method, and the researcher has less control of the participant's environment than in face-to-face interview situations which makes disturbances more likely.

There can also be technical issues, which, if they occur on the side of the respondent, might be difficult for the researcher to help sort out. Despite this, the online interview also has several advantages. For a study with a small budget, it removes geographical imitations in searching for potential respondents. It is also time efficient. Regarding the interview situation, the use of video means that the issues present in telephone or e-mail interviews are largely remedied. Not being able to read body language might otherwise result in the respondent missing out on ques that hint to the need for further explanation or time to think (Bryman 2011: 210), and there are research to suggest that respondents who are interviewed by e-mail or phone are less engaged in the interview than in face-to-face interviews (Ibid.). Being able to see each other, body language again becomes available for the researcher and a personal connection between the responder and researcher is established (Gray et al. 2020). This leads, in turn, to respondents engaging in the study (Ibid.). Added to this is that the respondent can participate from a location of their own choice, making them feel more at ease with the interview (Ibid.).

While it was not the initial plan to conduct Zoom interviews, this method allowed me to access participants throughout Sweden and offer a flexibility that made it easy for the respondents to find the time to participate. Additionally, Zoom allowed for easy recording of the interviews. As generalizability was not of importance for the study, the potential risk of not having a representative sample was not a concern.

2.4 Analysis

The transcribed segments of text were first analysed through thematic coding analysis according to the following procedure: the transcribed material was read through while parts that were of relevance for the research questions were given a code corresponding to its central contents (e.g., *environmental concerns, employment, agricultural methods)*. These codes were then arranged in themes that were representative for both the included text segments and the larger dataset. The themes and the material included in them were examined for similarities and discrepancies. This analysis resulted in material that responded to the first and second research question.

As mentioned above, the third research question is answered through material relating to the first (practices - *what?*) and second (motives - *why?*) research questions. Statements related to *why* the respondents have chosen this particular way of life tell us about what they perceive as the most important factors in their choice of lifestyle. This type of data can therefore provide insights into their ideas about the world and how to best navigate it. To further deepen this understanding, data related to both *why* and *what* was also analysed using Carol Bacchi's WPR approach (WPR standing for *What's the*

problem represented to be?). This approach provides a tool for critical interrogation of policies and other discursive texts (Bacchi 2009). According to Bacchi (2012), it is based on the principle that "what one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic" (p. 21) and its practical application is guided by a six questions that aim to interrogate various aspects of a text or statement. All six questions are not, however, useful for the purpose currently at hand, namely to investigate and map discourses among the statements made by the respondents. Therefore, I have chosen to conduct my analysis using the following three questions (selected from Bacchi 2012: 21–22)

1. What's the 'problem' […] represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the 'problem'?
3. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?

The first part of the analysis is carried out in chapter 4.2, where empirical findings on motives and practices are interwoven into answers to the three questions above. The discourse analysis then continues in chapter 5, where it is further explored in the context of the background and theory presented in chapter 3. Key terms in these to chapters (Such as *freedom, meaning* or economic growth are words that were explicitly used by the respondents. In those instances where such terms are not present in the material but constitutes my analysis, it is clearly expressed that so is the case.

3. Background and theory

3.1 The new green wave

The process of urbanization has been in progress in Sweden for over 200 years (Statistics Sweden 2015). While they have not been numerous enough to sway the statistics, people have continuously moved in the opposite direction as well, i.e. from a city or town to a rural area. There can of course be many reasons for doing so, but work and social relations have been shown to be key factors for many people (Niedomysl & Amcoff 2011). Others have been searching for alternative ways of living. One example of this is the so called "green wave" (translation from *gröna vågen*) which took place in Sweden in the late 1970s. This term generally refers to people who moved to rural areas in search of thriving social communities, harmony with nature and increased self-reliance in the face of global threats (Jonsson 1983). While the movement was limited in scope and heterogenous in its practices, it was held together by a common dissatisfaction and disbelief in the capitalist system and consumption society, as well as a scepticism about states' abilities to tackle important issues (Jonsson 1983; Wessling 1983).

As we have seen, a similar trend seems to be on the rise today. The NGV shares some of the key characteristics of its predecessor; just like in the 1970s, these are people who more to rural areas in search of an alternative life and self-sufficiency (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (2021). How this looks in practice has been examined in a previous master thesis; the respondents in Nitschke (2019) planned their farms with place specific conditions at the centre, and took careful consideration of the environment and sustainability when choosing agricultural methods. While their study was conducted in Canada, Ngo & Brklacich has also shown the centrality of sustainable food production to present day back-to-the-land practitioners.

The NGV is a relatively new phenomenon and research on motives are currently sparse if one limits oneself to a Swedish context. The only study conducted in Sweden is by Sørensen (2020). She investigated peoples' experiences and motives for self-sufficiency in Swedish rural areas and found that they saw their way of life as an "answer to the problematic sides of modernity" (p. 136) as it provided a way out of an obsessive consumer society which has devastating effects for the

environment and offers individuals limited control over their time. Similar results have been found among Finnish practitioners of rural self-sufficiency, who motivated their choice of lifestyle with deep concerns about the impacts of modern society on nature, animals, and human wellbeing in the present and the future (Backa 2018). In regard to practices, most of the Finish practitioners of self-sufficiency either kept or had previously kept animals for meat. For the actors in Backa's (2020) study, living side by side with the animals and carrying out slaughter was seen as a way of reconnecting with what it means to be human and to live in a world built on interdependencies.

Broadening the scope to include Europe and Northern America increases the amount of data available on the back-to-the-land movement. Referring to the back-to-the-land movement as a whole, Calvário and Otero (2014) describe it as rooted in a "critique of materialist mainstream culture, modern farming practices, and the globalization of the agri-food systems" (p. 143). Benessaiah and Eakin (2021) has found that Greek back-to-the-landers have been strongly motivated by economic instability and vulnerability. Others saw it as an act of political dissent that allowed them to reduce their dependency on a dysfunctional economic system (Ibid.). Similarly, Wilbur (2013) writes about the movement as characterized by political radicalism in relation to issues of economy, environment and food systems.

Over the following sections, we will try to understand these topics in further detail.

3.2 Development and growth

For the last 200 years, the economic system of liberal capitalist market-economy has expanded both in scope and in intensity (Thiele 2013). According to Thiele (2013: 144), this expansion can be explained by four main factors: access to cheap fossil energy; development of technology allowing us to use that energy for transportation, resource exploitation and production; growing human populations; and incorporation of previously unexploited land and people into the production system. This had led to unprecedented rises in economic productivity (Ibid.), which is usually measured in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This measurement sums up all economic transactions taking place within a country over the span of a year. If the value of what is bought and sold in Sweden increases from one year to the next, we have economic growth. Since the mid-20th century, GDP (Gross National Product) has become the primary measurement not only of economic growth, but also of development (Peet & Hartwick 2015). The main reason for treating economic growth as development is that more economic activity means that more goods and services has been bought and sold that year, which implies that more needs have been met and that the average person has increased their standard of living (Jackson 2009). But since states tax salaries, goods and services, economic

growth also means that the state's budget is growing, and hence more money is available for spending on schools, health care or other public services (Ibid.). Today, economic growth is an economic goal that is taken for granted (Ibid.) and expectations of continued economic growth is intrinsic to important functions in current society; economic loans, the housing market, the pension system and for-profit corporations are all based on the assumption that the economy will grow – that there will be more money tomorrow than there is today (Bank of England 2020; Hartley & Kallis 2021; Jackson 2009). Indeed, capitalism itself is built on the continuous expansion of profits, and thus of markets, production and sales (Clark et al. 2018; Moore 2015; Schumpeter 2008; Weber 1978).

3.3 Labour society

Paid labour is central to GDP for several reasons. Firstly, salaries are payment for one's services as a worker. Salaries thereby contribute directly to GDP. They also give people the economic capacity to consume other services or goods which in turn adds further to GDP. Apart from their importance for economic growth, both goods and salaries are target of taxation and are thereby essential for financing the public sector (Government Offices of Sweden n.d.).

However, this is only one of the functions that paid labour has in Sweden today. We have already seen that salaries enable consumption. Additionally, paid labour usually means that one has access to a workplace which or many people is an important social arena. Unemployment conversely excludes people from consumption as well as everyday social settings, and furthermore bundle them up into a group which is not seldom talked about as if they live in misery or off welfare paid for by others (e.g. Klepke 2021; Swedish Moderate Party 2021: 46–47, 65; Motion 2013/14:Fi308 p. 20). Currently, people who are engaged in paid labour consider their lives more meaningful than people who are unemployed (Brülde & Fors 2014). As noted by Björk (2020) and Paulsen (2017), it is all but strange that people consider paid labour to give life meaning if being unemployed means that one loses both economic security and social esteem.

We have now established that the current system puts paid labour as a crucial cog in its own workings as well as in the lives of individuals. But the actual work carried out under paid labour constitutes a contribution to society in itself as well. According to Mankiw and Taylor (2011), work generates payment when it produces goods or services that others are willing to pay for. By this logic, salaries function as an incitement to carry out work that is in demand from society and its citizens. But there are other propositions regarding the functions of salaries: Mankiw and Taylor (2011) also write that stratified salaries motivate people to work hard to advance to higher positions and pay. Davis and Moore (1944) in turn suggest that stratified pay is an important social function that makes certain that society's most

important positions are assigned to the best qualified and motivated candidates. That important positions should be rewarded with high salaries is an idea that can be seen also amongst liberals such as Milton Friedman (1972) and, in everyday life, in demands that health care workers should have higher salaries because of their great importance for society (e.g. Sveriges Radio 2015; Wiberg 2020). This logic can of course be reversed; if important work is rewarded with high salaries, then your salary becomes an indicator of your work's worth to society. Smith (1759) align with this idea in thinking that people strive for high incomes as a way to confirm that they are appreciated by society and their fellow humans. Swift (2014) on the other hand suggest that the primary function of salaries is that they persuade people to do any work at all. There is research to suggest that he might have a point; a recent Gallup report (2022: 115) found that 79 % of Swedes are not engaged or actively disengaged in their work (meaning that they are either mentally unpresent or actively working against their employer, respectively), a number that has actually gone down from 86 % in 2017 (Gallup 2017: 81). Similarly, a meta-study by Paulsen (2008) showed that most Europeans would work less, elsewhere or not at all if they won or inherited a large enough sum of money. So while most people find paid labour to make their lives more meaningful, we do not seem to assign the sense of meaning to the tasks that we carry out. The conclusion must be that paid labour is not contributing to people's sense of meaning in itself, but indirectly through providing a social arena, dignity and money.

3.4 Issues with consumption and growth

Previous sections have shown that economic growth is intimately connected to paid labour and consumption and that it is a fundament for the current economic system and for the workings of society as a whole. Economic growth has nevertheless been all the more debated during the past few years. The practice of measuring development through GDP has been criticized, and there have been an increasing interest in the idea of abandoning targets of economic growth altogether. This chapter will not cover the entirety of this discussion but focus on the parts that are relevant for understanding the findings in the following chapter.

Let us begin by examining the objections to equivalating GDP growth and development. Even most critics seem to agree that this way of measuring has some extent of merit for countries with low standards of living (Jackson 2009: 23; Hickel 2021). The problems accounted for here are nevertheless applicable to countries both rich and poor, as it concerns the fundamental design of GDP. The first line of critique regards the fact that it assumes that all economic activity is assumed to contribute equally to the development of a country, i.e. that economic activity means that needs have been satisfied which is inherently good. However, this view of economic activity overlooks the fact that even things that damage people or

society can produce economic growth. This can be exemplified by a healthy population consuming less medicine and health care than an unhealthy one. Environmental disasters may also increase GDP temporarily because of the material and work required to rebuild what has been destroyed (Thiele 2013).

This leads us to the second line of critique of GDP that this text will attend to. As we have seen, GDP grows when the value of consumed goods and services increases from year to year. As long as this increase does not consist exclusively of services, this means that larger quantities of energy and resources have been used to produce and transport the consumed goods. Given the sustainability issues that we face, this is of course deeply problematic. The next section is devoted to examining a common stance on how this can be tackled.

3.5 Ecomodernism

There are different opinions about how to handle the fact that our economic growth causes environmental problems. This section will attend to the ecomodernist approach. Ecomodernists agree that society is unsustainable in its current form but think that it can be made sustainable through technological innovation and further development. Here, this view will be represented by An Ecomodernist Manifesto (Asafu-Adhaye et al. 2015) whose authors are prominent researchers in the fields of economy, ecology and sustainable development. A central theme in the manifesto is precisely the idea that sustainability essentially is a question of developing and implementing new, sustainable technologies. The manifesto highlights the role of technology in expanding agricultural yields globally as a way of illustrating its ecological and humanitarian accomplishments. It also states that intensified agriculture has decreased the land area globally used in agriculture and thus allowed reforestation of previously cultivated land (Ibid.: 13).

The ties between economic activity and consumption of resources and energy are framed by the authors as being a problem of underdeveloped technology and societies. They point to the fact that the consumption of energy and materials per unit of GDP is decreasing and predict that this process will continue and eventually decouple GDP growth from resource use all together (Ibid.: 11). There are two key components of this decoupling. Firstly, more efficient technologies must be developed and implemented; we need to be able to produce goods as efficiently as possible. Secondly, all states must reach a certain level of economic development. The reason for emphasizing economic development (i.e. GDP growth) is that wealthy nations are better able to protect nature within their territories and tend to shift the orientation of their economies from production to services and knowledge, and that rising living standards in itself leads to decreased resource use, for example due to lower birth rates (Ibid.: 14–15; Kopnina et al. 2018). Therefore, GDP growth

is not only seen as compatible with sustainability but as an essential component in achieving it.

A common argument against ecomodernism is that earth has a fixed amount of resources and that this puts a limit on what humans can achieve with regard to technology as well as to human living standards (e.g. Hickel 2019). The authors agree that earth's resources are finite but reject the idea that this in itself puts a meaningful limitation on human civilization. The truly decisive factor is what technology we can develop; if we manage to develop fusion power, for example, we will be able to provide the world with energy for a long time to come (Asafu-Adhaye et al. 2015: 10).

Today, ecomodernist ideas are central to goals for sustainable development in Sweden (e.g. Regeringsbeslut N2016/08073/RTS; Regeringsbeslut N2019/02162/RTL) as well as globally (Wiedmann et al. 2020); documents like the UN Agenda 2030 contains foals for sustainable growth and decoupling of GDP from resource consumption (UN DESA n.d-a; n.d.-b), and the European Union Environment Action Programme has put technological innovation and green growth among their key goals (European Commission Directorate-General for Environment 2014; Official Journal of the European Union L 114/22).

3.6 Criticizing ecomodernism

Counter to ecomodernism, we find those who believe that society need to be fundamentally transformed if we are to achieve sustainability. In this section, we will refer to this view as system critical. System critics consider the growth-based liberal capitalism to lie at the root of sustainability issues and see this system as fundamentally incompatible with a sustainable resource use (Kallis 2018; Moore 2015). Prominent system critics like Parrique et al (2019) and Hickel and Kallis (2020) has shown that economic growth will lead to large increases in consumption of energy and resources even if more efficient technology is implemented, prices on fossil fuels rise dramatically and states act forcefully on environmental issues. Studies by Haberl et al. (2020) and Vadén et al. (2020) have concluded that there is no scientific basis for the assumption that absolute decoupling of GDP from resource use is possible. Vadén et al. (2020) therefore conclude that "In the absence of robust evidence, the goal of decoupling rests partly on faith." (quote from study highlights).

In a response to the Ecomodernist Manifesto mentioned above, a number of scientists point out that the intensive agricultural methods that the manifesto mentions have been shown to have its disadvantages; intensive agriculture has led to soil degradation and nutrient leakage, in turn leading to over-fertilization of waters and large underwater zones void of life (Caradonna et al. 2015). They also concur with other system critics in questioning the idea of putting sustainability in

the hands of technology that is yet to be developed and tested (Ibid.; see Hickel 2019 as well) – especially since emissions are still rising in all sectors (IPCC 2022) while the carbon budget in 2018 allowed only ten more years of greenhouse gas emissions (at 2018 levels) for a 67% chance to stay below 1,5 °C (Climate Watch 2020; Rogelj et al. 2018). The idea that rich countries reduce their emissions by shifting towards economies based on knowledge and services is refuted. Rich countries scale down production but not consumption, meaning that the goods they consume is simply produced elsewhere (Jackson 2015; Thiele 2013). Instead, system critics draw attention to statistics showing that wealth is intimately connected to high rates of emissions. In 2021, the richest 1,2 billion people emitted 33 times more greenhouse gases than the poorest 700 billion (Peet & Hartwick 2015; World Bank 2022a, 2022b).

Because of the many arguments pointing towards the ecomodernist optimism about growth and technology lacking a stable empirical foundation and potential for the drastic changes that are needed, the ideology has been accused of prioritizing the economic status quo over actual sustainability (Browne 2018; Dale 2015; Hickel 2019; Hickel & Kallis 2020; Stuart et al. 2021). Figure 1 and 2 visualize this. Figure 1 shows a common model for imagining sustainability as dependent on sustainability of social, economic and ecological systems alike (Thiele 2013). The core of the critique of ecomodernism is that it puts the economy first, while social and ecological sustainability measures can be taken only of the economy is not compromised (Giddings et al 2002; Hickel & Kallis 2020; Hurrell 2006; Stuart et al. 2021). This view is represented by Figure 2, in which social and ecological aspects of sustainability is fitted into the frame of the economy.

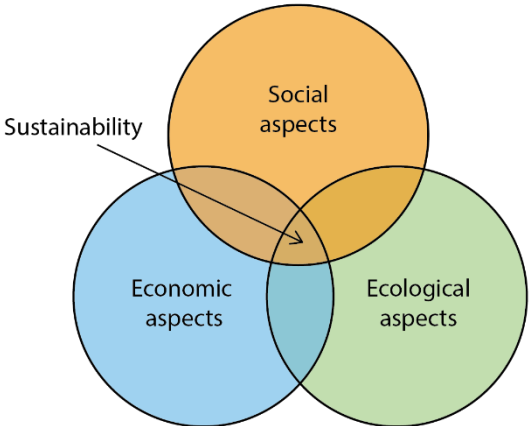


Figure 1. Common model of the three aspects of sustainability.

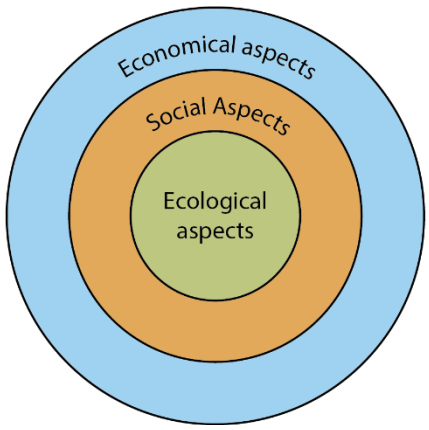


Figure 1. Ecomodernist practice according to critics.

3.7 A crisis of democracy?

The view that we must change the structure of society to be able to successfully address the multifaceted environmental problems has gotten increased attention over the last years. In Sweden, we have seen news articles arguing for a new way of structuring society (e.g. Liedman 2022; Ternby & Alvén 2021; von Seth & Alvén 2021) the rise of the system critical organization Extinction Rebellion and a new system critical party (Partiet Vändpunkt 2022). While no similar studies have been conducted in Sweden, large surveys have shown that 55 % of Americans, 64 % of Britts and 77 % of Germans find capitalism to be an unfair system (Montgomerie 2015). Worldwide, 56 % of people think that capitalism does more harm than good (Edelman 2020). A study conducted by scientists at Yale university has found that 70 % of Americans think that environmental protection is more important than economic growth (Marlon et al. 2018), and Havas (2014) concluded that less than 1 in 6 people across 29 countries worldwide think that our current economic system is working, and that a majority of them (70%) believe that overconsumption puts society and the planet at risk. In 2018, a meta-analysis conducted by Drews et al. found that when asked, people generally prioritize environmental protection over economic growth.

It is clear that there are large groups of people who are in favour of finding a path forward that is fundamentally different from the reformed capitalism that is advocated by ecomodernists, and which currently dominates among international organizations and states alike (Wiedmann et al. 2020). But if there exists a widespread desire for a new system and new prioritizations, how could it be that such voices are not represented in western parliaments?

One important clue might have been given in 2007 by Alan Greenspan, former chair of the American central bank the Federal Reserve, when the Swiss newspaper Tages-Anzeiger interviewed him about the American election of 2008.

> "[we] are fortunate that, thanks to globalisation, policy decisions in the US have been largely replaced by global market forces. […] it hardly makes any difference who will be the next president. The world is governed by market forces." (Tages-Anzeiger 2007, see Eaton 2021; Tooze 2018)

While the quote refers specifically to American policies and elections, the globalized neoliberal market forces have a similar grip on other states as well. As Flint & Taylor (2018) writes, states are geographically fixed while corporations and capital are not. In the current hunt for jobs and economic growth, this leads to an imbalance in power in which states need to provide a good "business climate" in order to attract corporations and capital to their territory instead of the neighbour's (Ibid.). And so during the last decades, we have seen cuts in taxes on capital and corporations all over the world (de Vylder 2013). Sweden is no exception, with

abolished wealth taxes, lowered capital tax and company taxation down from 52% in the late 80s to 20,6% today (Ibid.; The Swedish Tax Agency n.d.).

It is important to emphasize that the Swedish democracy is political and not economic; citizens are able to vote on political policies that affect the economy, but neither citizens or workers have the right to influence operative decisions of corporations (Björk 2020). The trend in question here, as clearly seen in the Greenspan quote, is that corporate power is increasingly affecting the functioning of the political democracy by restricting political room for action. If a state is dependent on capital and corporations for its economic system (and by extension all the public sector) to keep going, then it has little choice but to adopt policies in line with the wishes of those private actors (Hurrell 2006; Flint & Taylor 2018). As is pointed out by Björk (2020), we have then found ourselves in the undemocratic situation where capital can buy political influence – directly opposed to the idea of everyone's voice being of equal weight.

This is one piece of a broader phenomenon that has been referred to as "the crisis of democracy" (Cilento & Foliti 2016). While democracy is an ongoing process requiring constant attention to implementation and pitfalls (Ibid.), the crisis in question here is the dwindling public trust in politics and politicians as well as a weakening belief in citizens abilities to impact the general development of their societies (Stoker & Evans 2014). Apart from the private actor influence discussed above, this trend has also been traced to other aspects and processes in western contemporary democracies. One such process is that states have increasingly joined multinational organizations such as European Union (EU), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, all of which demand that member states adopt certain policies (Thörn 2012). This connects to another process contributing to the "crisis of democracy", namely that globalization has brought with it an increasing number of issues that have local implications but simultaneously cannot be properly addressed or solved by individual states (Ibid.) – the most obvious example being climate change. Moreover, having elections every fourth year discourages politicians from making difficult decisions in favour of a seemingly distant future, as dissatisfied voters might react to the costs of such decisions by voting for another party (Ibid.).

Let us return to the impact of neoliberalism. As we have seen, neoliberalism has resulted in new relations between states and corporations, but this is not its only impact on the state of democracy. In Flinders & Wood (2014), we can read about the concept of "depoliticization". Over the last decades, political parties in western states have all endorsed the neoliberal market economy with the result that ideology has been eradicated from political debates (Ibid.). Brown (2015) concurs but focuses her work on the workings that are behind the depoliticization. Her argument

is that neoliberalism has transformed common sense[1] and core tenets of social and individual life. This, Brown writes, has happened through the incorporating of ever more aspects of everyday life into the market, recasting public services as commodities for consumption, and a shift from politics as a forum for visions and conflicts of interests to technical problem solving. Corresponding to these changes is the transformation of the citizen into an individual consumer of politics and goods (Ibid.). According to Brown, this is the context in which depoliticization has occurred and political alternatives vanished.

Nevertheless, it should be remembered that neoliberal capitalism is by no mean natural. It began as an active shift in political strategy in the 1970s and is still dependent on state power to be maintained (Thörn 2012). It was states that begun adopting policies on privatization, deregulations, strategic tax cuts and austerity that marked the beginning of the neoliberal era (Ibid.; Björk 2020) and for the neoliberal market to work it still requires that the state uphold a stable monetary system, protect private property and enforce laws (Mankiw & Taylor 2011). While we do currently experience a kind of "lock-in" in relation to our economic system, this perspective can work as a reminder that the legislative power is still in the hands of states. Organizations such as the EU or WTO (World Trade Organization) influence legislation and policies only because the member states have chosen to join. The power that these organizations exercise is power that states have freely delegated to them, and as such it can be revoked. The intention of this passage is not to argue for withdrawal from any or all supranational organizations but to again point out that states have unique powers in determining their own policies. As we have seen, doing so would undoubtedly be challenging. It can still be done.

3.8 A theory of change

The previous sections have treated "the state" as a distinct entity made of agencies and government. Another way of seeing the state is as a process resulting from the interplay between civil society and political society. This is the fundament of Gramsci's (1971) theory of the *integral state*. The state as agencies and government with the power of legislation and enforcement is what Gramsci refers to as political society. Civil society does not have the same powers as political society but is rather consisting of social institutions like families, NGOs and unions (Ibid.). Also of interest here is Wright (2009) and his model of strategies for social change. Wright suggests the following three types:

[1] *Common sense* is used here in the Gramscian meaning of the term, meaning "the uncritical and largely unconscious way(s) of perceiving and understanding the world that has become 'common' in any given epoch" (Gramsci 1971: 322).

1: The **ruptural** strategy is revolutionary. It involves direct attack on the state and aims to create new institutions.

2: **Interstitial metamorphosis** is cultivating alternative ways of living and structuring society in the cracks of the predominant system.

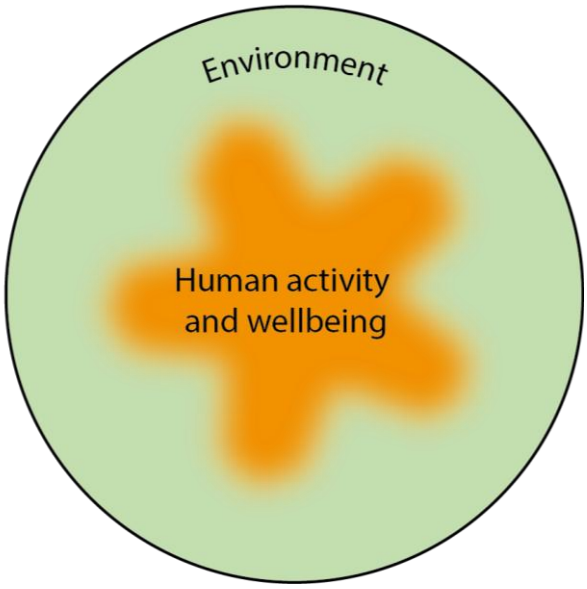
3: **Symbiotic metamorphosis** is struggle for change through reformation of existing state institutions.

Building on the Gramscian understanding of the state and Wright's strategies for change is D'Alisa and Kallis (2016, 2020) and their theory of social change. They suggest viewing social change as a coevolutionary process of simultaneous changes in ideas and everyday practices (interstitial metamorphosis) on the one hand and institutions (symbiotic metamorphosis) on the other. Social change is thus a process wherein changes in worldviews or practical ways of living begin to affect how state institutions operate (or vice versa). The new workings of state institution might in turn reinforce further changes in practices and worldviews, and so on. D'Alisa and Kallis (Ibid.) writes that this way of thinking of change highlights how deliberate social change comes about through a combination of interstitial metamorphosis and symbiotic metamorphosis; change requires that efforts are made in civil society and political society alike, in unison top-down and bottom-up action. On their own they do not suffice. Interstitial metamorphosis in civil society is constrained by institutional obstacles (D'Alisa and Kallis [p. 6] exemplify this by alternative food networks not being able to afford land) and symbiotic metamorphosis alone will be constrained by lack of public support. However, initiatives like alternative food networks challenge predominant ideas about the way society is structured and can thereby contribute to an increase in support for shifts in the operation of state institutions (Ibid.). Similarly, D'Alisa and Kallis follow Gramsci (1971) in the view that ruptural strategies are deemed to fail if they do not have public support that is built through other change strategies.

3.9 An alternative

The previous sections have taken us through the workings and problems of the current economic systems, two different approaches to the possibility of reaching sustainability through reformation of that system and a review of a theory for social change. Here, we will explore an alternative way of structuring society: degrowth. While there is extensive overlap between the system-critics and the degrowth movement, system critics are not automatically for degrowth. This is the reason for using separate terms for the two sets of ideas.

Researchers and others who do not believe that ecomodernism is a solution to sustainability issues often suggest that those issues are better tackled by decreasing our use of energy and resources in a controlled shrinkage of the whole economy. This concept is called *degrowth*. While Giddings et al. (2002) does not explicitly mention degrowth, their article pinpoints the core tenets of the concept. They argue that the division of sustainability into equally important economic, social and ecological aspects (as shown in figure 1) is a result of human alienation from the natural environment that we are in fact depending on, and of viewing the market economy as indispensable despite it being a relatively new phenomenon. Recognizing that humans and nature are not mutually reliant on each other – nature would surely live on without us – Giddings et al. suggest a new model for thinking about sustainability which places human activity and wellbeing within limits set by the environment (figure 3). Their model does not include economy as a distinct sphere with value in itself but amongst other human activities and as a tool for achieving human wellbeing. Also of importance to this model of sustainability is the fuzzy limit between environment and human activity and wellbeing, mirroring the constant interaction between humans and the environment as well as the many ways they mutually influence each other (Ibid.).



Referring to limits set on human activities by nature (e.g. as shown by Steffen et al. 2015), degrowth is "*a planned reduction of energy and resource throughput designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being*" (Hickel 2021: 1106). That it is planned is important, as it is what distinguishes it from a recession (Ibid.). Furthermore, degrowthists do not advocate for downscaling everything; sectors such as agriculture, renewable energy, health care and education would still flourish in a degrowth scenario while advertising, private transportation and other environmentally destructive non-necessities would be scaled back (Ibid.; Kallis et al. 2015). Even remaining sectors might nevertheless undergo changes in orientation or practices as their precondition change. Education might for example refocus from reproduction of the workforce to education on subjects that are valuable in themselves for people or for the world (Kallis 2018). Thus, degrowth

aims to shift the orientation of society from efficiency to sufficiency and conviviality, and from globalized systems of production to more localized ones (Research & Degrowth 2022). The suggestion made here is not that small villages should isolate themselves completely, but that localized production results in less waste and shorter transports (Ibid.; Kallis 2018). A growing interest for buying locally produced goods has already been observed in some sectors, most notable food. This will be further investigated in the next section.

3.10 Agriculture and food

Vital to a sustainable society is the production of food. Access to food has been declared to be a human right (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2010) and the UN Agenda 2030 has set a goal to end hunger and make food production sustainable (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs n.d.-c).

We have some way to go to get to a sustainable food system. The increased agricultural productivity from the mid-19th century and onwards was made possible by fossil fuels and chemical fertilizer, both of which emit greenhouse gases (Ferranti 2016; Foley et al. 2005). Overuse and leakage of chemical fertilizer also contributes to over-fertilization of waters which has negative effects on biodiversity (Gomiero 2019). Biodiversity is also lost because of pesticide use (Lüscher et al. 2014). But agriculture can also make up an important contribution to sustainability; biodiversity is often high on grazed lands, on land where many different crops are grown together (intercropping) and in ecotones between cultivated land and its surroundings (Kumm 2003; Lüscher et al. 2014). The possibility to use soil as a carbon sink has also become a target for intensive research, even if its potential is debated (Meurer et al. 2018). It might be superfluous to mention that agriculture also sustains human life. As agriculture is essential to us, we must find a way forward that unites food production with sustainability. According to IAASTD (2008) this means that we have to find other ways of growing food than the business-as-usual of conventional agriculture.

There are a number of conceptions of sustainable agriculture. Organic certifications like *KRAV* and *EU Organic* is the most common ones in Sweden, both including requirements on crop rotation, abolishment of pesticides and chemical fertilizer and limited use of antibiotics (KRAV 2022; Official Journal of the European Union L 189/1). KRAV certification also requires that renewable energy is used and that measures are taken to reduce nutrient leakage and improve energy efficiency (KRAV 2022). All of these are measures that have been shown to have positive impacts on factors like the biodiversity and nutrient levels of soil (Venter et al. 2016) and prevalence of pests and disease among crops (Chiras 2015; Liu et al. 2016).

The primary drawback of organic agriculture is usually considered to be that it is less productive than conventional agriculture. If one measures yields per energy unit put into managing a farm, organic methods are more productive than conventional ones (Lynch et al. 2011), but the opposite is true if one measures yields per area unit; one meta-analysis showed that organic farms produce around 19-25% less per area unit than conventional agriculture (Seufert 2019). This is a problem, particularly against the backdrop that human populations are projected to reach 11 billion by 2100 (United Nations 2019).

Nevertheless has the vast discrepancies between conventional and sustainable agriculture led to several studies emphasizing the need to find new ways of growing food (e.g. Rockström & Karlberg 2010; Rockström et al. 2017; Steffen et al. 2015). Rockström et al. (2017) has also pointed out that the agricultural sector is not only the largest contributor globally to processes of biodiversity loss, altered nutrient flows and climate change, but also the sector that will face the most serious consequences of these processes.

4. Findings and analysis

This section presents the findings related to the three research questions. Section 4.1 gives an overview of the practices reported by the respondent, thereby corresponding to the first research question. Because of the close ties between motivations and discourse, section 4.2 then engages with both the remaining research questions. To "get at" the discourse, section 4.2 combines empirical findings with an analysis based on Bacchi's WPR approach.

4.1 Practices

4.1.1 Scale and methods

All respondents live in the countryside, outside of larger villages. Their farms range in size from about 1,5 to 5 hectares, although there are exceptions; one respondent owns over 30 hectares of land while another owns land comparable to a large garden, about 3000 square meters. All respondents use parts of their land to produce food. Most respondents (7 of 10) are self-sufficient on "growable" foods, such as vegetables, fruits, berries and potatoes. While households' vegetables are mainly self-produced, they do buy foods that they cannot produce or process themselves, such as bananas, rape seed oil or flour. Even though these households are currently not self-sufficient on vegetable foods in a strict sense, I have chosen to regard them as such because of their marginal reliance on stores for vegetables and the relatively small changes that would be required to allow complete self-sufficiency on vegetable foods. The rest of the respondents (3 of 10) also produce a large share of their vegetable foods but currently rely on stores for a large part of their food. The difference between these two groups is that the first grow close to everything that they are able to grow themselves, why the latter grow "only" a large proportion of their foods themselves. Two of the respondents in the latter group express a wish to increase their level of self-sufficiency but find it difficult for reasons relating to workload or available time.

Several respondents keep animals. Among them they have sheep, horses, goats, ducks, hens, pigs and cows. Every species has their own function on the farms, but all of them (except for the horse) make up an important contribution to a healthy diet; they provide eggs, milk and meat, and bones that can be boiled to make broth.

6 of 10 respondents are completely or almost completely self-sufficient on animal source foods. Furthermore, the animals can be of help with specific tasks on the farms. For example, pigs that are let to root can prepare new arable land, grazing sheep will keep the land open, and one household uses a horse to pull heavy loads or equipment. Apart from the nutritional aspect, there is one more factor that all respondents who keep animals mention, namely the role of the animals in the farms' local nutrient cycle. The animals mainly eat fodder originating on the farm. Their dung is then used as manure and nutrients are thereby returned to the soil.

> "[…] we get a sort of closed loop system. So the animals, like, we use the manure in our garden, everything goes around. We need the animals to be able to grow things and we need the animals to be able to eat." (Respondent 8)

The respondents generally keep small numbers of animals. For example, the respondent keeping horses only have the one because of the large amounts of fodder that it requires. Another respondent says that their household currently have eight goats. Several respondents specifically mention that the animals they keep only landrace species. This is motivated by the view that they produce better milk and meat at the same time as they are better adapted to the non-industrial farming practices that the respondents utilize. One household tells of the experience they had while keeping one cow of a beef cattle breed together with their five landrace cows:

> "They became fat while she [the cattle breed cow] lost weight because there are such differences in how much food they require and their ability to search it out themselves. But I get it, it's about production. I get it. It is not profitable to sell our meat even if it is much better tasting, in our opinion." (Respondent 11)

The small scale is a characteristic that is seen in other areas of practice as well. The respondents practice different types of space-intensive farming, i.e., methods whose purpose is to produce a lot of food in a limited area. Several respondents practice sequential cropping, meaning that an area is utilized for several types of crops every season; when one crop has been harvested, another one takes is planted in its place. Another common method among the respondents is agroforestry, which means that trees and bushes are introduced on agricultural land. For the respondents, this has been a way of reducing the workload (as perennials does not require being replanted each spring), increasing resilience (as many perennials are more drought resistant than annuals) and supporting biodiversity among crops and insects. Furthermore, the respondents stress the importance of finding methods that work *with* the land and natural environment instead of trying to establish control over it, in order to encourage healthy, living soils and biodiversity. Apart from seeing the wellbeing of soils and ecosystems as a value in itself, rich soils were considered important

also for the purpose of ensuring that the food produced on them were rich in nutrients.

As mentioned above, one household has a horse which is sometimes used to pull tools in the land. Apart from this one household, one other household mentioned that they sometimes use a quad bike for plowing or other heavy tasks. This household also expressed their wish for a tractor, but their economic situation did not allow for such a big investment. The rest of the respondents (8 of 10) reported that their farms were managed by manual labour with the occasional help of hand tools, such as chain saws or small rotary cultivators. Apart from the economic aspect, manual labour was also said to be better suited for the smaller scale and diversified farming practices used by the respondents than heavy machinery, which are most useful on large monocultural fields. One respondent mentioned that their small scale and their reliance on only manual labour allowed them to choose to grow landrace and heritage varieties of peas and lentils. As they do not use a combined harvester, which require that crops have specific heights, they have a larger set of crops to choose from.

Widening the scope, we can see that the respondents are actively looking for ways to minimize their resource and energy consumption also outside of the strict agricultural sphere. Several respondents have solar panels, one talks at length at the work they put into isolating the house when first moving in, three respondents mention efforts to collect rainwater or greywater, and yet another talks about a toilet which allows you to reuse the waste as compost.

4.1.2 Employment and economy

The economic aspects of the respondents' practices have been touched upon at a few times in the text. Here, we will look further into it. None of the respondents who live alone currently have full time employments. One is retired, others earn their livelihood through a set of activities in which wage labour and farming makes up two important pieces. The situation is similar in the households where there are two adults. Among them, we find cases in which one person having a full-time employment while the other one works on the farm, another where both adults are involved in part time wage labour and work part time on the farm, and still others where no one has a fixed employment but rather gets on by incomes from the farm and art projects combined with shorter project employments relating to their experience in small-scale farming systems. One household earn their incomes solely from their farm and relating activities, such as courses in plant propagation. While the details of the arrangements vary, the common factor is that there are no households where all adults are full time employees. All respondents express that these are deliberate decisions made with the intention of freeing up time for other things, such as growing food or doing other chores around the farm.

> "We try to do as much as possible ourselves instead of like, you know, the traditional package of working as much as possible and then paying someone else to do things for you. But we've tried to like, peel off as many such layers as possible to be able to do things ourselves, because… well partly because it saves money and partly because we like to do things ourselves. […] We want to have time to spend on the things that we think are interesting and meaningful and that might not always be the same thing as what you get paid for." (Respondent 6)

Several respondents explicitly mention that their low level of consumption is an important factor in being able to opt out of full-time wage labour. One respondent, whose household gets by on one person's part time wage labour combined with incomes from the farm, says that they are able to invest all their money in improvements on the farm since "[…] it doesn't cost anything to live like this. We don't buy anything." (Respondent 7). Several respondents sell vegetables through local markets, farm shops or vegetable bag schemes, however this is not a large source of income:

> [Quotes from a conversation between two participants in the same interview]:
> –But were not making any profits, so to speak. We put a lot of private money into it every month. (Respondent 11).
> –Yes, but at the same time we get a lot back. But you notice also that meat in the stores, or vegetables, it is ridiculously cheap! Its unreasonable. And you have to get to such a scale today to make a profit. And our farm and the way we live, it's not really made for making money then. (Respondent 8)

While these two respondents actually lose money on their food productions despite selling parts of their produce, others say that they generally profit. However, two of the respondents express worry regarding the financial situation. One of them, who lives exclusively of the incomes from their farming, says that their unpredictable financial situation is a constant source of stress. The general respondent does not, though, feel stressed or worried about their personal finances but rather expresses a dissatisfaction with the larger workings of the economy. The details of this dissatisfaction will be investigated in depth in the next sections.

4.2 Motives and discourse

4.2.1 (Un)sustainable agriculture

An important aspect of the respondents' discourse is the critique of industrial agriculture. Respondents critique several aspects of "mainstream" agricultural production, which we will go through here.

The most common critique of the mainstream food system is that it is unsustainable. Respondents point out monocultures, use of fossil fuels, pesticides and chemical fertilizer as well as the often long distances that food is shipped, either to be processed or simply because it is grown in other parts of the world.

> "When you go shopping, you just want to put the cart away and leave. It's only the large transnational who has taken over and it's just stuffed full with emissions. So I don't want to support that. Then I'd rather grow things myself." (Respondent 3)

All of this is seen as unsustainable use of resources which contribute to the problem of climate change. Using pesticides and chemical fertilizer is considered unsustainable also for its direct impact on biodiversity both in and above the soil. Instead, the respondents favour a food system that is far more localized than is the case in our current conventional agriculture. Chemical Fertilizer is replaced by manure from the same farm, they rely on manual labour or very small amounts of fossil fuels and the food is consumed by the producers or sold to people in the local area. This localization allows resource consumption to decrease in several links along the production chain.

None of the respondents mention any efforts for pest control, but they are clear that they do not use chemical pesticides. Apart from their strive to produce food without having a negative impact on wildlife, the choice not to use pesticides should also be understood as an expression for openness about variation in harvests depending on factors that are not within their control:

> "The first time we were going to harvest 10 000 carrots, so we started pulling them up and there were only leaves and maybe half a centimetre carrot, then nothing. A vole had run back and forth and eaten every single one, and when I got to the end of the row I just cried. It was such a difficult harvest our first year. But by year five, then I just felt that this is how life goes. It doesn't bother me. So loss became something normal for me. That's something that I otherwise think we are very afraid of in society as a whole. To lose things. But that's the changing way of nature, everything begins and everything ends." (Respondent 4)

> "It varies so much between years how much we get. Like some years are better for cucumbers and other are better for kale or… but I guess that's the upside of growing a lot of different things, we always get a lot of something. We never know what in advance but that's just the way of nature I guess." (Respondent 2).

The quotes above show us that they accept that factors out of their control, like herbivores or weather, will impact on what they harvest and that this is considered to be all right. In short, there is an acceptance for not being in total control of the harvests. It is seen as natural to have variation in what grows well and not between years, rather than as a problem that needs to be fixed.

While there is an acceptance for variation in yields varying between seasons, several respondents worry about the consequences of climate change for food production, as it brings with it more frequent droughts and frosty night in late spring. Some of the respondents have begun tackling this risk by constructing ponds to collect rain or greywater. One family has also installed a toilet that does not use water, and one respondent says that they have made sure to have several potential sources of clean water in case their primary well would run out. Several respondents

also says that one of the reasons why they have chosen to grow cultural varieties is that they are often more resilient:

> "[…] and already now as it seems, last summer was not an extreme summer but the farmer here who grows ordinary wheat had a bad harvest, the other one who grows Dalavete [a cultural variety of wheat originating from Dalarna; writer's remark] where the roots go much deeper, she had a great harvest. So we see already now how these old varieties often tolerate it much better." (Respondent 13)

Understanding their agricultural practices as a proposed solution as suggested by Bacchi, it is clear that the respondents understand conventional agriculture as a problem; the reliance on a small variety of crops makes it vulnerable to disturbances and requires that it is managed with chemical fertilizer, pesticides and machinery driven by fossil fuels. It is understood as something vastly different from the place-adapted and highly environmentally aware agriculture practiced by the respondents.

4.2.2 Quality of food

The respondents all think that the food they produce on their own, both vegetable foods and animal source foods, are better tasting and more nutritious than the food one can buy in stores, and they link this to the different methods of production and distribution. Their own food is as locally grown as it possibly gets and the varieties used are often chosen for reasons of quality and biodiversity rather than their yields. The respondents have also intentionally worked to maintain and build soil health, often using manure from their own farms and completely avoiding chemical fertilizer. All of these are factors that respondents believe play a role in why they hold such a strong preference for their own products.

> "If we take potatoes, if you heave chemical fertilizer on it, it will draw in water and that shows in the quality of the final product. And I have milked so many cows that I know there is a difference between milk from Holstein cows [a breed held mainly for its production of milk and meat] and from Unique Mountain cattle [a Swedish landrace]." (Respondent 1)

> "[…] to see very clearly how I fertilize and care for the soil, it makes such a difference in the taste of the vegetables, how they grow, how I feel when I have eaten. Because I really get all nutrients I need. And I believe that soils in general are very exhausted today." (Respondent 4)

Similarly to the analysis made in the previous section, we can see here that the respondents perceive the higher quality of their own food to be a result of the less intensive and more environmentally friendly agricultural methods that they use compared with conventional farming. Current conventional agriculture therefore is not only seen as unsustainable, but also incapable of producing food that does what it is supposed to do: to provide us with the nutrients that the human body needs.

4.2.3 Social change

Another reoccurring theme in the interviews is related to the respondents' ideas about societal problems and the possibilities and ways to bring about change. We have already encountered the respondents' engagement in issues relating to climate change, resilience and biodiversity and it is central here as well. It is clear that the respondents have taken environmental factors into careful consideration in decisions both small and large. For all respondents, concerns about environmental were a primary reason for choosing to live as they do:

> "What's most important for all of us is to reduce our footprint to, so that we stay within the planetary boundaries and contribute to rebuilding the planet, so biodiversity issues are key for us, and carbon sequestration and such." (Respondent 13)

> "So what we see is that our economies are dependent on fossil fuels and that we can't keep that up with the whole peak oil and all. There won't be enough fossil fuels to keep things up the way we do and even if there was, that would have devastating consequences for both humans and all other living things." (Respondent 7)

> "Like, I really like food so naturally you start getting interested in growing your own food. And I'm really concerned about the environment and the state of the world and where we're going with it. So part of it was also kind of, just my way of protesting." (Respondent 9)

These concerns can also be seen in the practices utilized on the farms; the choices of methods and species (of both animals and plants) are made with concerns for their resilience, requirements for agricultural inputs and their impact on soil and biodiversity.

The empirical material also offers insights into the respondents' views of *how* social change is best achieved. One could assume that one way of working for one's own vision of a better world would be to get involved in political parties or non-profit organizations sharing one's values. However, only one of the respondents mention that they currently have such an engagement. The majority instead talk about contributing to change through their ways of life and methods for growing food. They see their lifestyles as having a direct, positive impact on the household's carbon footprint, the local biodiversity, food system resilience and preservation and spread of knowledge about small scale farming methods. One of the respondents explicitly says that they view their way of working for change as more effective for social transformation than engaging in politics or advocacy:

> "Before I moved out, so I was often at demonstrations and were angry and yelled and stuff, and I felt that this doesn't help at all. Instead, like, you have to do what you can in your life and then everyone else get to do… I mean, I have to do what I can and if someone changes because of that then… I guess that's good." (Respondent 12)

The quote above expresses resignation about the possibilities of a public opinion to influence political decisions. As advocating for political change is considered meaningless, it is deemed more constructive to live as sustainable as possible in one's own life and hope to inspire others while also functioning as a small but important contribution to a more resilient, diverse and resource-efficient world. While none of the respondents apart from Respondent 12 explicitly talk about political engagement as opposed to their self-sufficient lifestyles, it is implicit that the view is broadly shared. All respondents express deep concern and worry about climate change, biodiversity loss, food security and future energy supply and state that these are central factors in their choice to live as they do:

> "That has been some kind of key for me, that if we have a climate crisis, then I want my children to know that I do everything I can in my small, small life, to… to counteract it." (Respondent 10)

Additionally, several have previously been involved in environmental organizations but have given up that engagement. We must therefore conclude that they view individual action for sustainability as having a greater potential to change the world and prepare us for an uncertain future than to act through political or environmental organizations. We should notice, however, that none of the respondents express anything to suggest that they think collective, political solutions are undesirable or ineffective. Instead, they talk about political decisions and development as not primarily driven by ideological conviction, public will or careful considerations, but by money and profit:

> [Talking about the root of sustainability issues] "Well it's money isn't it. Money, money, money and money again." (Respondent 1)

> "I mean, it's the economy that dictates things now nowadays. And not the sensible values, maybe." (Respondent 11)

The respondents see true change as unattainable as the economy is built around perpetual economic growth, something that they themselves see as fundamentally unsustainable and at the root of the sustainability issues we are currently facing.

4.2.4 Ideas about consumption, work and society

In the previous section, we identified the implicit assumption that systemic change towards sustainability is not possible as long as society is devoted to continued economic growth. This assumption is present not only in the respondents' thoughts on social change, but also in the way they relate to work and consumption. We have already established that they grow large portions of their own food, but they have also chosen to draw down or minimize their consumption of other goods as well. From clothes to cars to exotic fruits, the respondents criticize the extensive

consumption of unnecessary goods and the negative environmental impact of producing and transporting them.

Paid labour is referred to only as an enabler for consumption. It is seen as something we have to do in order to keep up the high level of consumption that we have been accustomed to. However, the respondents believe that excessive consumption and the idea of an eternally growing economy is fundamentally unsustainable and they therefore wish to limit or even minimize their own consumption of both goods and services. While some of them have mortgages or other expenditures that forces them to engage in paid labour to some degree, the lack of interest in consumption of non-necessities means that the respondents generally lack incentives for full time employment. Some of them even stive to work as little as possible:

> "So how can I avoid working full time, living in the city? And I thought, well, then I need to cut expenditures so that I don't need to make money." (Respondent 3)

> "No but we, we would have liked to get out of that rat race. We would have wanted to, if it hadn't been for loans and all that we would have wanted to be home and work with being self-sufficient." (Respondent 8)

Only one of the respondents mentions being conflicted about not working full time. They refer to the fact that paid labour is the main source of income for municipalities, which are responsible for providing several services that are crucial to the functioning of our current society. That respondent mentions their engagement in civil society as another way of contributing than by paying more taxes:

> "[I am] in favour of a strong state and strong welfare systems. And I have in some way chosen to contribute less as I work part time. But I see that I have chosen to contribute a bit more in civil society and I think that is… good enough." (Respondent 5)

While none of the other respondents talk about this conflict, we can assume that their reasoning is similar. This conclusion is reached through applying Bacchi's questions to the situation at hand. For the respondents, the main problem that they are responding to is related to urgent issues of sustainability that is deeply entrenched in the functioning of society and its economics. Their solution is a radical shift towards localization, environmental awareness and decreased resource use through altered patterns of production and consumption. However, this solution is not compatible with our current economic system in that the work the respondents do is not possible to monetarize in the same way as paid labour is. But as we have seen, the respondents are highly critical of how the current economic system works and the behaviours that it incentivizes, and they believe that it needs to change. They talk extensively about how to change the world for the better, and we must therefore assume that they believe that the work they are doing – contributing to

biodiversity, soil health, food system resilience, decreased consumption – make up a greater contribution to the long-term wellbeing of society than would the money that they could have otherwise paid in taxes to a system they consider fundamentally flawed.

4.2.5 Sense of meaning and quality of life

A final aspect of the material that is central to the respondents is the quality of life that their way of life gives them and their strive for meaning. One example of this is found in the way they relate to work. As discussed in the previous section, the respondents see paid labour mainly as something one has to do to pay bills. Despite the vast span of professional backgrounds among the respondents, from truck driver to civil engineer, none of them express anything that suggests that they view their paid labour as meaningful or important.

> "Before this I had a job where I made a lot of money and I was really unhappy with it. So I think that was also a reaction to that, being like 'wait a minute, I'm making all kinds of money but I'm really unhappy with it'". (Respondent 9)

The respondents instead see meaning in actions and work that aims to increase their self-reliance and freedom while being in line with their view of truly sustainable ways of living. It would therefore be false to assume that they work less than others. Rather, they do different work. To do one's best to contribute to a positive change brings meaning to their everyday lives; even if they do not believe that their actions will change the world, they can feel that they are no longer part of the problem and find joy in their work:

> "[…] I get my hope from the soil when I plant a seed and then I see it grow and bloom. That force of life gives me hope." (Respondent 4)

> "It might sound like a lot of work when I tell you but you immediately get so much back. […] After the first year, I remember that I was like, 'this is worth everything' because it was such an incredible richness of insects. You could've counted all kinds of bumblebees there are, and butterflies, and… they were all there, and it was such a small space and it still made such a difference." (Respondent 13)

To conclude, the respondents see meaning in their lives both for themselves and for the world at large, and they report high quality of life. They feel deeply satisfied with being able to contribute to a slightly better world, to eat nutritious food that tastes good, and to live close to the natural world. One could note that there is a silence in the material regarding material standards in relation to quality of life. Instead, the respondents see quality of life as resulting from living a life full of meaning. Given their critical attitudes towards consumption and the paid labour that is required to be able to consume, there actually seems that the respondents hold an

implicit view of excessively high material standard as a potential obstacle for meaning and quality of life.

5. Discussion

This chapter is dedicated to placing the findings presented in the previous chapter in a further context. This is done by comparing it to the background and theories presented in chapter 3. The discussion also adds further to the analysis through applying Bacchi's framework to aspects of the empirical material that can only be properly understood in relation to facts or theories presented in chapter 3.

5.1 On food, sustainability and the place of humans in nature

Seeing the respondents' practices through a Bacchian lens makes it clear that their view of sustainable agriculture is not one of efficient technology but rather of place adaption, manual labour, soil health and far-reaching environmental considerations. While one family has a quadbike and several others use hand tools, most work is still carried out manually. This is partly for economic reasons, but far more importantly because it is environmentally friendly. It is also the method best suited for managing small areas or land on which different types of crops are grown, which is the case on all the respondents' farms. Taken together, the respondents' agricultural practices points towards an understanding of conventional agriculture conventional practices being rooted in intensity, dependency on fossil fuels, and being in combat rather than cooperation with the natural world. This is the unsustainable practices that the respondents are positioning themselves in opposition to.

Also regarding sustainable food production is a potential Bacchian silence. As we saw in section 3.9, organic agricultural methods produce about 19–25% lower yields per area unit than conventional agricultural methods (Seufert 2019). A global shift towards organic agriculture might therefore result in food shortages. It is of course possible that the respondents are not aware of the efficiency of different agricultural systems. However, it could also be a silence. If we treat it as a such, then the respondents have prioritized environmental sustainability over societal sustainability. Put differently, they have then chosen to put issues of climate change, biodiversity loss and soil health before making sure that we produce

enough food to feed all people. This is a harsh statement that must be put in a context. As seen previously in this text, we are facing dire sustainability issues. Rockström et al. (2017) have pointed out that agriculture in its current form not only contributes greatly to these issues, but that agricultural production in any form will be far more difficult in the future if we do not limit our environmental impacts immediately. Seen through this lens, putting environmental sustainability first can be an attempt to safeguard life supporting earth systems that are currently under pressure, so that the conditions for food production are preserved for future generations. This would be a position that is in line with the model of sustainability presented by Giddings et al. (2002; See Figure 3), in which the environment and natural systems set the frames that human activity must stay within.

A further example of alignment between the model by Gidding et al. is the fuzzy line between the environment and human action and wellbeing. The respondents express that they experience genuine wellbeing when working on their farms or when they get to see their work result in increased biodiversity. They have also deliberately chosen methods that are adapted to the specific conditions on their farms, and stress the importance of working with nature to sustainably produce food. Several respondents have taken action to secure their access to water, and those who keep animals use their dung to fertilize crops that will later provide them with energy and nutrients. Throughout these processes, the respondents show a deep concern for how their actions affect nature on and around their farms. As in any agricultural system, they are also depending on natural systems in order to produce food. The line between the environment on the one hand and human activity and wellbeing is impossible to establish here, and this understanding of the world is present at the core of the respondents' practices.

In chapter 3, I let the sustainability model by Giddings et al. (2002) illustrate the foundation of the concept of degrowth. The alignment between the respondents and Giddings et al. therefore hints that their overall view of sustainability is oriented towards a degrowth approach rather than ecomodernism. This is confirmed by multiple aspects of the empirical material. One such aspect is the favouring of practices based on tradition and place-specific knowledge over high-tech. The respondents use animal dung for fertilization instead of chemical fertilizer, strive for efficiency through sequential cropping or agroforestry rather than specialization, and often choose landrace and cultural breeds over crops and animal species produced specifically for high yields. However, this does not imply scepticism about technology as a whole; several of the respondents have solar panels or other forms of new technologies at their homes. Instead, they seem to avoid technology that they do not see as sustainable. They can also not be accused of scepticism of innovation or "all things new". These are people who have chosen to step outside of the mainstream society in search for a better life, who produce

food using a combination of traditional knowledge, new ideas, and trial and error. It might not be high-tech, but it is innovative.

The respondents' views of the world are incompatible with ecomodernism also on the issue of economic development, i.e. growth. According to the Ecomodernist Manifesto (Asafu-Adjaye et al. 2015) referenced earlier in the text, economic growth is incremental in the struggle for sustainability. The respondents take on a detrimentally different view. For them, the growth imperative in the current economic system is a driver behind current environmental problems as it demands that unsustainably high levels of production and consumption are upheld (or even increased). It is also seen as standing in the way of true action on sustainability, because of the view that economic considerations come in the first room. As seen in chapter 3, this is a view they share with several critics of ecomodernism and sustainability action that is informed by ecomodernism, and which is illustrated in Figure 2. It is also well in line with previous research into the motives of the back-to-the-land movement.

5.2 On social change

We will continue to examine the respondents' views and practices of social change by turning to Gramsci (1971), Wright (2009) and D'Alisa and Kallis (2020). Beginning with Wrights three types of action for change, it is uncomplicated to fit the respondents into the category of *interstitial metamorphosis* – to cultivate alternative ways of living and structuring society in the cracks of the predominant system. This is precisely what the respondents are doing. They all carry concerns about the environment that are deep enough to influence everyday choices and lifestyle alike, yet only one of them is active politically. Others have previously been engaged in environmental organizations but have ended that engagement. Before continuing this line of reasoning, we should point out that a process of social change will almost certainly involve more people than the thirteen respondents in this study, and that it is not possible for everyone to do everything. I should also be clear that this study specifically targets people who have chosen to cultivate an alternative way of living. The silence on political engagement – *symbiotical metamorphosis* – is nevertheless interesting. Put together with statements on previous political engagement and how society currently prioritize economy above all else, we must conclude that there is an underlying view of political change as being unattainable. If that is the case, then the respondents' way of life might not only be a strategy for change but a strategy for survival: a way to attain the feeling that whatever other people do, what happens in the future or in the rest of the world, I got to have a positive influence on a small part of it.

If we were to subscribe to Gramsci's, D'Alisa's and Kallis's view of social change, we might want to consider the implications of people not believing that

political change is possible. If they are right in that social change is a process of interaction between interstitial metamorphosis and symbiotical metamorphosis, and if disbelief in the political system makes people with certain views withdraw from political arenas, then their cause is automatically lost. The resignation about substantial political change is interesting to think about also in relation to the studies showing that large groups of people in the western world do not support the current economic system or prioritize environmental sustainability over economic growth. Based on theories presented in chapter 3, I want to suggest two possible explanations for the lack of belief in change among the respondents. One possibility is disbelief in the ability of democracy to free itself from the limitations that is currently put on it. As we have seen, these are limitations originating in the corporate sector as well as in the current model for financing the public sector. A second possibility is that the hegemony of neoliberal common sense is so solid that even those who actively oppose it do not truly believe that it can be defeated. If the latter alternative is accurate, then open displays of dissent might be of the highest importance in challenging that hegemony.

5.3 On work and consumption

Despite the varied professional backgrounds among the respondents, no one talk of current or previous employments as meaningful. Paid labour is seen strictly as a way to make money. On the other hand, the respondents spend long hours for relatively little pay on tasks that they find full of meaning and joy. That people must have a salary in order to work, as claimed by Swift (2014), can therefore be established as untrue. The great willingness to work despite limited pay (sometimes even economic loss) also collides with Mankiw & Taylors (2014) understanding of salaries as crucial to motivate people to work hard. For the respondents, to feel that what one does has meaning for oneself and the world is a far stronger driving force than money. Even though several of them are officially counted as being without a job, a status that statistically leads to lower sense of meaning than being employed, the respondents do experience great meaning. Reiterating my consensus with Paulsen (2017) and Björk (2020), the necessary conclusion is that it is not the actual employment that contributes to people's sense of meaning. This is not least true for the respondents, whose attitude towards paid labour, the fulfillment that they get from their unpaid work, and the fact that they would rather stop working all together if they could, goes to show that they find meaning elsewhere. Thus, paid labour is not a requirement for meaning if one only has something else to do with one's time – preferably something that one truly believes in.

The respondents' view of work can also be contrasted with the idea that one gets paid according to the utility for society. Needless to say, "utility" is subjective. In a time when the dominating methods for producing food has considerable negative

impacts on environmental systems that are crucial for sustaining human life, one must nevertheless consider efforts to explore alternative ways of production to be of value to society. Since we have very little time to cut emissions if we are to limit climate change to manageable levels, it might not be unreasonable to assume that this supposed value increases with the fact that the respondents grow food with little or no input of fossil fuels.

However, one silence in the material as it relates to work is the implications of people choosing not to engage in paid labour. In accordance with Bacchi, we equate the respondents' views with policy suggestions and look at the issue from a societal perspective. The problem becomes obvious; the more people who choose not to work, the less money is paid in income taxes. Large amounts of people choosing not to work will thereby result in financial issues for the state and its operations. This would of course include public welfare services that the people who opt out of paid labour will still have access to. This is touched upon by one respondent, who consider their contribution to the local community an alternative way of contributing to society. While this is mentioned by only one person, it demonstrates a view that societal contributions can take on other forms than money. As for the other respondents, this is a silence. They do not acknowledge that their choice to engage in paid labour part time (or not at all) is possible while still upholding the welfare sector only because most other do not make the same choice. One can speculate in why this is, and I want to suggest a twofold explanation. Firstly, it is possible that they agree with the idea that one can contribute to society in different ways. One could imagine that the work of sustainably growing food while restoring soils and local biodiversity might qualify as one such contribution. A second explanation could be that they do not believe that this will be an issue, as it requires that many people opt out of paid labour. If one finds this highly improbable, then there is no need to put together an alternative way of financing the public sector. However, if this explanation has any merit, then it also means that they do not believe that their own philosophy speaks to people – they do not truly believe that what they do will inspire any greater changes.

At this point, I feel that it is appropriate to make a comparison between paid labour and consumption as a similar logic can be applied in the latter case. As states tax consumption as well as income, refraining from buying things will also affect state finances and, in the case that consumption drops enough, the everyday functioning of our common welfare systems. Putting it this way makes the conflict apparent: it cannot possibly be a civic duty to consume for the sake of public finances if that means that the strain on our already pressured environment thereby increases further. A system with that kind of contradiction between short-term and long-term wellbeing built into it is essentially suicidal.

5.4 Relating the study to previous research

While previous research has not given much away about the everyday practices of the NGV or even the back-to-the-land movement as a whole, the results of this study is well in line with earlier findings. Just as shown by Nitschke (2019) and Ngo and Brklacich (2014), the respondents in this study take careful consideration of nature and sustainability in decisions regarding their food production – indeed, in most decisions. As in previous studies on motivating factors, the respondents in this study are highly critical of several aspects of present-day society. Present day Sweden provides a different societal context than Greece why personal economic vulnerability was not a factor for the respondents of this study. However, they align themselves with both Benessaiah and Eakin (2021) and Wilbur (2013) in their general critique of the economic system and the activities that it incentivizes. While previous research has also suggested that environmental concerns are at the centre for the back-to-the-land movement, this concern has been found to be more prominent in the studies conducted in Sweden and Finland as compared to the movement globally. As the respondents of this study puts environment front and centre, it supports the emphasis on environmental concerns and how sustainability issues are currently (not) being managed as key factors in the Nordic the back-to-the-land movement and particularly in its Swedish branch, the NGV.

6. Conclusion

This study has sought to explore the discourses present in the NGV through inquiries into the practices and motives of people who strive for self-sufficiency in rural Sweden. Throughout the thesis, we have seen how the respondents' daily practices and life choices are motivated by their ideas about our economic system, social change, food production and environmental issues – views that are interwoven into a coherent worldview, a discourse. At first sight, their everyday practices entails managing small-scale, alternative agricultural systems, yet it would be equally fair to portray it as embodied opposition against contemporary society. While the impact of their opposition remains unclear, it is certain that they propose alternative ways of relating to human well-being and the natural world alike.

Given the urgent need for structural social change to tackle complex environmental challenges, such propositions are desperately needed.

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