Enlightened false consciousness: Why climate consciousness is not followed by action

Abstract

The article discusses enlightened false consciousness by focusing on the denial of the climate crisis. It approaches this idea by first emphasizing the role of emotions in connection with actions, arguing that a classical rationalist perspective falls short of grasping this. The article is divided into four parts. First, it focuses on the relationship between emotions and knowledge in relation to the climate issue. This leads to a discussion of the ways in which cognitive dissonance can be managed, i.e., the ways in which recognized but uncomfortable knowledge can be bracketed so that it is not felt as disturbing. This is the background for the third part, which singles out the importance of maintaining normality or, more technically, protecting one's habitus from challenges. We conclude by asking how, despite this insistence on normality, one can understand and present oneself as progressive and climate-conscious.

Keywords

Climate crisis * enlightened false consciousness * emotions * denial * cynicism

> We live in one way, and we think in another. We learn to think in parallel. It's a skill, an art of living (respondent in Nørgaard, 2011: 5).

With the climate crisis, we are facing a colossal challenge, perhaps the greatest in human history, and we must acknowledge that, until now, we have systematically failed to find a sustainable solution. Explanations for this can be sought at the macro level—for example, in the interests of the oil industry, free-riding by states, the primacy of the growth paradigm, and much else—but there are also a number of micro-sociological explanations. In the 1960s and 1970s, a slogan was that "the personal is political," and this slogan became a lever for, among other things, politically thematizing gender roles and women's "double work." The slogan also makes sense today, but now as a thematization of the political significance of individual consumption choices and, more generally, of ways of life. There are many analyses of citizens'

political attitudes in relation to the climate issue, but here we seek to go a step further and add an additional layer of explanation that is more sociological and thus focuses more on lived life than on reflexively formed and explicit political attitudes.

Resistance to climate adaptation can be discussed at two levels. First, individuals might reject participating in climate adaptation because of conscious preferences and choices. This is the level we normally consider political. Such an attitude may be based on material interests or on incomplete and selective information. In either case, though, the starting point is conscious choice. In either case, it is a matter of explicitly addressing sustainability issues, or rather rejecting, circumventing, or avoiding them. Secondly, there is resistance that is more indirect, i.e. barriers that relate to lifestyle and do not necessarily involve an active and conscious rejection of sustainable solutions. It is primarily these barriers that we want to focus on in this article. Such barriers are so deeply rooted in our habitual everyday practices that we often do not reflect upon on them. In this context, we also discuss a number of social-psychological patterns relevant to individuals' relations to the others and to the world. Three of them are particularly interesting: our ideas and expectations of normality, of normal, everyday life; our individual (political) identities based on ideas of "us" and "them"; and our construction and legitimization of practices related to pleasure, enjoyment, and desire.

Sociologist Karen Marie Nørgaard's 2011 study, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*, stands out as a classic in this context. Nørgaard claims that the residents of "Bygdaby," a fictional name for the Norwegian town she studied ethnographically for a year, were well-informed about climate change. Among other things, they could see that there had been a lack of snow on the slopes for several years, putting pressure on the ski industry, and they followed the media and often heard about the serious consequences of global warming. The problem, in other words, was not that they lacked or had distorted information, but rather that they "suffered" from what German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (1988) has called enlightened "false consciousness," the formula of which is knowing but doing anyway. One can know very well that climate change is serious, and one can also know that one's practices contribute to the problem, but one can still insist on living as one always has. It was Slavoj Žižek (1989) who popularized this concept, and in this article we want to unfold it in relation to individual responses to climate change.

Analytically, there exist three groups of individuals relevant to climate change. At one extreme, we have the climate deniers who refuse the existence of the problem and therefore do not act to solve it. At the other extreme, we have those who both acknowledge the problem and act on it,

such as climate activists. And in the large middle, we have people who accept that climate change is happening and that it is very serious but do not act accordingly. They continue to live as if this challenge did not exist. It is this group that we focus on in this article.

The article is divided into four parts. First, it focuses on the relationship between emotions and knowledge in relation to the climate issue. This leads to a discussion of the ways in which cognitive dissonance can be managed, i.e., the ways in which recognized but uncomfortable knowledge can be bracketed so that it is not felt as disturbing. This is the background for the third part, which singles out the importance of maintaining normality or, more technically, protecting one's habitus from challenges. We conclude by asking how, despite this insistence on normality, one can understand and present oneself as progressive and climate-conscious.

Knowledge and emotions

In climate crisis, as in other political contexts, reason could potentially be a unifying factor. But somehow emotions always lead to dissent. And reason is in itself impotent to bond subjects who do not think and behave in accordance with the demands of reason (see Spinoza 1951: 289, 294–95). But does this mean that we are condemned to the irrational in the context of the climate crisis? One thing is sure: emotions exist and this must be taken as a given, as a point of departure in all political debate. Deploring, ridiculing or despising emotions can only lead to their "abuse," to which Spinoza famously juxtaposed "understanding" (1993: 82). Understanding involves, firstly, accommodating the fact that the human beings are "always necessarily liable to passions" (145). Secondly, however, understanding enables one to moderate and check them. Servitude is, in fact, nothing else than the "lack of power in moderating and checking the emotions" (139).

To be sure, expressions such as "global warming" and "climate change" evoke strong emotional responses. The same is true of related images such as those of flooded villages or starving polar bears (Lorenzoni et al., 2006: 266). And there are undoubtedly many reasons for this: a feeling of discomfort at being confronted with something threatening, a feeling of powerlessness and paralysis, or a feeling of fear for the consequences for oneself and one's family. But the question here is whether such emotion translates into action. In general, emotions can both support and block necessary action. For instance, the strong emotional reactions that information about sustainability issues provokes can lead to political mobilization and action in a macro perspective, or to lifestyle changes toward more sustainable ways of life in a micro perspective.

But they can also, and probably more often, lead to apathy or anxiety and result in attempts to avoid “unpleasant” information.

That was exactly what Lorenzoni (2006) and her group found in their study. Their respondents were able to relate to sustainability issues and demonstrated an awareness that these issues exist, but those issues never became anything more than abstract problems for them. Nørgaard (2011), likewise, reaches the same conclusion: people disconnect locally experienced problems, such as a lack of snow on the ski slopes, from general climate issues. While the (local, concrete) “weather” preoccupies them intensely, they avoid (general, abstract) questions about the “climate,” which are now seen as transnational or national political issues and not as a matter of local and individual lifestyles. The practical conclusion is obvious: others must take care of those abstract, general problems.

If we look at climate research from the 1980s onwards, and in particular research that focused on people’s attitude towards and participation in climate adaptation, a central idea has been that the problem was the lack of information, which always goes hand in hand with other problems such as selective information gathering, cognitive bias, an inability to comprehend complex and abstract scientific material, and difficulties in dealing with uncertainty and long-term effects (Nørgaard, 2011: 64). If only they knew, i.e. had the best knowledge about sustainability issues, people would reduce their electricity consumption, travel less by plane abroad, buy more local goods, and so on.

To be sure, the thesis that there has been a lack of knowledge about sustainability issues cannot be entirely dismissed. Thomas Brewer (2005) and Matthew Nisbet and Teresa Myers (2007), for example, conclude on the basis of surveys and opinion polls that in the 1980s in the US there was a widespread tendency to confuse the issue of global warming with the hole in the ozone layer (which attracted a lot of attention in the 1980s). If we fast forward to our present, we often see a conflation of issues relating to the weather and the climate. However, much has happened since then, and if we disregard the deniers, there is widespread agreement that global warming is happening and that it is the result of increasing concentrations of CO_2 in the atmosphere due to the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, livestock farming, etcetera. The question here is perhaps not so much whether we have this knowledge, but rather whether we understand its seriousness, i.e., the scope and depth of the problem, and whether we have the ability to think through the necessary implications of this knowledge, including the consequences for the individual.

The paradox that interests us in this regard is that climate concern does not seem to correspond to the scale of the problem. Concern should have been growing throughout the period as information about the increasing seriousness of the problem became available. That is what one would expect in rational terms. However, this is not happening. How to explain this paradox?

Rosenberg (1991) emphasizes that people choose or rather regulate which emotions they will allow to affect them. There are three rationales for such "choice" of emotions. First, people can choose emotions that are instrumental, i.e., that enable them to achieve what they want in life. Second, they can decide in a hedonistic manner and choose enjoyable emotions and avoid those that cause discomfort. Third, and finally, people can choose emotions that are socially acceptable and reject or suppress those that are not. There is thus a normativity that influences what one feels and, not least, where and when one allows oneself to have these emotions. This third aspect is precisely what Hochschild (1983) calls "emotional norms," norms that define which emotions are socially acceptable. More precisely, they say something about what these emotions can encompass, how intense one can allow them to be, how long one can have them, and, not least, in which contexts. An emotional norm frames what one should feel in specific contexts and situations.

In what contexts is it appropriate or inappropriate to express concern about global warming? Nørgaard records that questions about the climate challenge are avoided where they cause discomfort, that is, where they become a question of individual responsibility and obligation. Talking about these topics is only appropriate when it is kept abstract and non-committal, without direct consequences for the individual. She writes about Bygdaby that it is considered inappropriate to discuss the climate as a general political issue in small talk and in local politics. Where small talk should preferably be non-committal and insignificant (its function being not the information conveyed, but the formation of social bonds) and not cause discomfort, the norm in the political life in the town is that one should not take a political stance on anything that cannot be addressed locally (Nørgaard, 2011: 99).

A more radical take on emotional norms comes from Langer (in Nørgaard, 2011: 91). We don't just choose to have feelings that are pleasant and appropriate; we also change our view of reality so that these feelings can be maintained. Consider optimism. If it is considered as an emotion rather than a prognostic assessment of the future based on sober knowledge about it, it can be argued that some people are optimists precisely because it allows them to cultivate positive and pleasant emotions and suppress negative ones. Ultimately, optimism enables a feeling of being in control, a belief in a happy future, and, fundamentally, a joy in life. Where reality, both past

and present, exerts a certain resistance and can act as a corrective, our view of the future is more malleable. Optimism and pessimism are thus not so much a way of assessing the challenges of the future as they are expressions of mental states. And in Bygdaby there was pressure to be optimistic. The opposite, being pessimistic, was to put people in a bad mood. One respondent, a primary school teacher, told Nørgaard that she herself was pessimistic, but emphasized that she could not allow herself to be so in front of young people (Nørgaard, 2011: 101).

Recall, apropos of such pressure to be an optimist, an anecdote which Zygmunt Bauman, known to be a rather pessimistic sociologist by many, used to tell: "The optimist," he would start with saying, "is the person who thinks that the existing world is the best possible world." "The pessimist, in turn, is the person who thinks that the optimist might be right." And he would conclude: "On this account, I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist for I believe another world is possible." Optimism can indeed be an emotional stance that forecloses the possibility of a different world. Further, we must note that optimism and pessimism are emotional categories that "have nothing to do with thought" (Agamben 2014). As a matter of fact we refer to categories such as optimism or pessimism only when we run out of (rational) thoughts.

Cognitive dissonance – and how we resolve it

We live, so to speak, in two worlds or with two sets of information and ideas. With our own selectively imagined reality and then with the reality we are confronted with when information about sustainability problems reaches us. But both realities cannot be true and valid at once. This double and opposing pressure is what Leon Festinger (1957) calls cognitive dissonance. Dissonance is unpleasant, and people therefore usually try to avoid it. And they do this by turning a blind eye to one set of cognitions. This active ignorance of something that we know well about its existence is fragile and therefore never completely successful.

> The psychology of "turning a blind eye" or "looking the other way" is a tricky matter. These phrases imply that we have access to a reality, but choose to ignore it because it is convenient to do so. This might be a simple fraud: the information is available and registered, but leads to a conclusion which is knowingly evaded. "Knowing," though can be far more ambiguous. We are vaguely aware of choosing not to look at the facts, but not quite conscious of just what it is we are evading. We know, but at the same time we don't know. (Cohen, 2001: 5)

Information is registered, but nothing more than that. There is a filtering process that relegates the information to another register so that it does not conflict with the cognitions we choose to

let guide our thoughts and actions. The social psychologist Albert Bandura (1998) describes this process as moral disengagement. In relation to Festinger and Cohen, one can say that Bandura relates to special cases of cognitive dissonance, namely those where an ethical-moral pressure is placed on the individual. To be human is to constantly face moral demands. To one's family, friends and loved ones. But also to people further away. We cannot, and especially not in the contemporary global and mediatized society, avoid being challenged by events further away, which we could also do something to alleviate.

For Bandura, moral disengagement falls into four main categories of rhetorical tricks. First, one can excuse morally problematic actions by, for example, claiming that the problematic action is necessary to achieve a higher goal, by claiming that others do worse things, or by referring to one's actions using euphemistic terms. Second, moral disengagement can take the form of a denial of responsibility. For example, by claiming that others have greater responsibility – e.g. the state or other countries – or that responsibility is shared and therefore diluted. Third, one can downplay the effects of one's actions by minimizing their significance, ignoring that there are problematic consequences, or distorting the consequences. And fourth, one can blame the victim. It is the person's own fault. Or one can de-humanize the other and claim that he or she has no claim to moral status at all. The filtering out of unpleasant cognitions can therefore be done in many ways. Let us now outline a number of approaches that are central to the issue of (lack of) action in relation to sustainability problems.

The present and the future

A frequently used trick to reduce cognitive dissonance in connection with sustainability problems is to distinguish between cognitions that are essential here and now and those that are only relevant in a future perspective. For example, we all know that we are going to die, and some of us will die a painful death; we can see this when others around us die, but these thoughts are put on hold because we think that this death, our death, is not imminent. Similarly, we can see and hear about the increasingly rapid melting of ice sheets, we are confronted with stories of floods, hurricanes and forest fires, i.e. radical weather, we are told that coral reefs are dying, etcetera. But these cognitions are not necessarily seen as related to threats to us here and now. We can see them as signs of upcoming challenges and then trust that we will have an adequate response by then. Perhaps, following Maslow (1979), one can speak of a hierarchy of needs where people are so preoccupied with solving urgent problems that they have no energy to deal with problems with a longer time horizon.

The anthropologist Ann Nielsen (1999: 190) interviewed a number of young people in Bergen and she found that these young people had great difficulty relating to the future. Thoughts about climate change were discussed with the same distance as dreams. They therefore never became personal concerns. The ability and willingness to relate to the future as a concrete coming reality may be strengthened with age, but even here it is true that people often think that the degrees of freedom are greater in relation to dealing with future problems than they are in relation to problems that are experienced as immediate. In this way, we can maintain our optimism. Cognitive dissonance is reduced if the present and future are not seen as closely connected.

The local and the global

As mentioned, we have cognitions that point towards severe sustainability problems. And the emotions they give rise to are unpleasant. But you can distance yourself from them by emphasizing that this is something that is happening in other countries. So climate change is registered, but it is filed away in. The cloudbursts and flooded basements are registered "here," too, but they are seen as an expression of the weather.

The construction of distance can take place in several different ways or in several registers: It can be immediately *physical* (what happens happens far away, and therefore does not affect us here), *mental* (what happens far away seems foreign and less understandable than what is closer) and *moral* (we have a greater obligation to those we know, closely, and in relation to it). Finally, distance can be created in relation to a notion of our *capacity for action*: we do not have the opportunity to help and influence things that happen far away from us.

There is a large body of research that supports the thesis that our attention is largely directed towards the local and familiar. But how is moral action at a distance possible in a mobile world? What realistic chance does action have when the spectator watches distant problems in the media? Boltanski (1999) is a significant name in this respect precisely because he tries to understand whether ethical action is possible at a distance and what its conditions of existence are. He focuses on real situations, in which people have knowledge (of suffering in distant places), and then investigates what form of commitment and action follow from their knowledge, that is, how people react to distant suffering. The crucial moment in this context is the moment of transformation from the state of being a spectator, a receiver of information, into the position of an actor. A transformation, which is "the political moment par excellence" (ibid. 31). Watching suffering on television, people can be shocked, yet this need not have a consequence and the spectator may refuse commitment. Considering that people can only ingest

a certain amount of horror before they switch off the television at a point, or that indifference to distant others is an easy communitarian option, commitment often has a weak chance (see Ibid. 10).

That this is also a problem in relation to the climate challenge is emphasized by Nørgaard's field study. People were generally aware of the challenge of global warming, but conversations about it quickly died down; it never really became a global problem, but more of a thematization of derived local consequences (Nørgaard, 2011: 112). Ann Nielsen (1999) finds the same pattern in her interviews. Young Norwegians see global warming as a very significant problem, but do not feel involved and committed. There is so much to worry about. Dissonance arises here through overexposure. We must relate to the local, including our families, but at the same time there is also a concern and a responsibility in relation to what is further away. Our resources are limited, and one can therefore choose to spend one's energy in the local, as one's potential for action in relation to these global problems is assessed as limited.

The manageable and the unmanageable

One can lose one's keys in the dark basement and look for them in the bright sunshine. Regardless of its irrationality, the relevance of such a situation to the issue of cognitive dissonance is obvious. We throw ourselves at the problems we immediately think we can solve and let them, even if they are pseudo-problems, take over, while the more unmanageable problems are pushed aside. Simple problems with easy solutions trump complicated problems.

Jon Krosnick and his colleagues (2006) found that people stopped addressing climate change because they could not immediately see an (easy) solution to it. And Nørgaard (2011: 58) found that the inhabitants in Bygdaby sought to keep information about global warming at bay, while they were very active in solving local, manageable problems. Thus, one of her respondents states: "Despite my knowledge of the wider climate issues, I am still living the same life" (Ibid. 4). What we have is here is not so much a matter of rejecting knowledge, but of failing to integrate it into one's everyday life and make it actionable. The climate issue is seen as an unmanageable problem.

Morally relevant or not

One of the best examples for moral disengagement is provided by Nørgaard's study of Bygdaby. Let us therefore briefly return to it. Importantly, Nørgaard reminds that Norway is one of the world's largest producers of oil. At the same time, Norway is one of the countries that emits the most CO_2 per capita. Such information is of course inconvenient and therefore requires moral

disengagement. This happens in myriad ways. The first is not to thematize the problem in terms of emissions per capita, but as total emissions. Against this background, one can argue that Norway's emissions are just a "drop in the ocean" and thus nothing to compare with the emissions of larger countries, especially the USA (Nørgaard, 2011: 142). There are also arguments that Norway produces oil in a more environmentally friendly way than other countries, and that the consequence of limiting this production will simply be that more polluting producers will increase their production and take us even further away from a solution to the global problems. Another form of moral disengagement consists in arguments that Norway is an exceptional country with a high level of ethical capital. It awards Nobel Prizes, has a tradition of acting as peace negotiators during international conflicts, etcetera. It is known for standing for humanistic values. It also sees itself as a country where the people are in closer contact with nature. For example, people like to go to the mountains (even if they have to drive 100 km in their big Volvo to get there). With the notion of being "people of nature" also comes the idea that they live a simple and humble life. And such self-perception helps them to ignore the accusations about theis participation in the climate crisis (Nørgaard, 2011: 142).

The rhetorical strategy at work here is about taking the burden of decision, responsibility, and autonomy away from the actors. It enables the actors to perceive what they are doing as morally neutral. Such ethical neutralization, or, "adiaphorization" as Bauman (1993: 125-128) called it, renders taking a moral stance irrelevant.

These strategies for moral decoupling that we have described are intended to protect the individual. In all the cases mentioned above, the cognitive dissonance is eliminated or at least reduced. The individual can be seen as exposed to a storm of cognitions. If it is not to collapse, some of these must be ignored or made harmless. Anthony Giddens (1991) had called it "ontological security:" the individual must weave a cocoon around himself that can function as a protective layer. If it is woven too tightly, one's relation to the world is destroyed, if too loosely, one burns out. The cocoon makes it possible for the individual to maintain a sense of normality. But why is normality so important?

Normality

Facts and rational argumentation do not in any simple way determine people's attitudes and actions. Instincts and emotions – habit, trust, fear, desire, etc. – play a crucial role in how arguments, circumstances and events make an impression on us and possibly drive action (Medina, 2014). Thus, dry facts or research knowledge about, for example, climate change or

loss of biodiversity cannot in themselves be expected to spur action. Only if knowledge and concrete personal experiences give rise to an emotional response in the form of fear, anger, guilty conscience, etc. in the individual can it be expected that significantly different actions will follow.

Spinoza has underlined that reason cannot restrain an emotion (1993: 150). An emotion can only be held back or eliminated by another, stronger emotion (146). However, if reason itself produces an emotion, which is stronger than the one in question, it can restrain it (150). From knowledge itself, after all, "necessarily arises desire", and this desire is active, belonging to our power of acting (150). Yet, there is no guarantee that this desire emanating from reason will be stronger than the emotion it seeks to restrain. One possibility is the domination of emotions over reason, a despotism of passions; another their agreement with reason. The latter of course seems to be a rather "chancy" matter.

Significantly in this context, Elizabeth Shove (2003) has explored the significance of the notions of and expectations for normality that are inscribed in everyday practices in modern societies. Analyses of these connections are essential to take into account if one wants to understand lack of action. The clash between the consideration for sustainable social development and unreflected expectations for a good life can express itself in quite contradictory ways. For example, one can observe that a significantly increased political prioritization of climate action in a society goes hand in hand with increasing consumption of private cars, air travel, electronic devices, etc. in individual households. Such consumption, which indisputably has serious consequences as to the climate, is closely linked to people's ideas about a "normal" life is exempted from moral or political critique.

This explains why many individuals are actually largely satisfied with symbolic "pseudo-activism" of little or no real significance for the development of the climate and biodiversity. One can for instance purchase a Tesla electric car and drive for holidays rather than flying (see Morgenthaler, 2017). Consequently, one can feel good about oneself for one has done something effective and worthwhile. This new form of vacation is certainly less climate-damaging, but how big is the gain? A Tesla Model S' total CO2 footprint is large from a life cycle perspective. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology found in a study from 2017 that a small gasoline car in certain contexts has a smaller total footprint per kilometer than this particular Tesla model (Smith, 2020). A large part of the electricity that a Tesla-driving family "fuels" on its holidays is produced, for example, using coal and other climate-damaging forms

of energy. This type of action can, thanks to their symbolic coding, be suitable for giving the individual a pleasant experience of having "done something."

So, certain actions or certain objects can create a pleasant feeling, make one feel good. But there is more to say in this context. Already Aristotle marked that there is a distinction between the pleasant and the good, between feeling good and being good: what is pleasant is not necessarily good, feeling good is not the same as being good (see Aristotle 1915: 1221a5-8). In Plato, too, the distinction between the good and the pleasant is of central importance. But he gives the distinction a twist, which is significant to our topic. This comes into view in *Gorgias* (1884: 461b-466a) where Plato juxtaposes *techne* (art) to *kolakeia* (flattery): while *techne* expresses a form of activity which demands insight and exercise aiming at excellence, the latter, flattery, signifies its distortion. Politics, for instance, is an art, but demagogy is a sign of its distortion, a form of flattery. While *techne* can bring forth the useful and the good (*kalon* and *agathon*), *kolakeia* is harmful and bad (*aischron* and *kakon*). Indeed, for every *techne*, there is a corresponding *kolakeia*, which functions as a distorted version of it; each *kolakeia* wears the mask of a *techne*, pretends to be a *techne*, and aims at the pleasant rather than the good (see Sløk 1987: 68-69, 73-4).

On this account, the "feeling good" industry surrounding the climate issue cannot be considered innocent. Above all, it indicates simulation-dissimulation of a truth (the necessity of political action in the context of the climate crisis) in a straightforward fashion. But it also, and more importantly, implies a strategic field of formation which involves appropriating, abusing, accommodating, twisting, and thus emptying out and "flattening" ideas and principles related to the politics of climate. One could claim that such "feeling good" activism deepens the problem which it claims it tries to solve. Ours, after all, is a world in which "truth does not do so much good … as the pretense of it does harm" (Rochefoucauld 2008: LXIV).

Another psychosocial pattern we must highlight is modern people's coding and legitimization of consumption partly in terms of pleasure, enjoyment and desire. Parts of consumer behavior around the world can with considerable justification be described in terms that are otherwise used to thematize addiction to drugs, alcohol, and so on (Reith, 2019). To be sure, advertisement industry, mass culture and the society of the spectacle all play significant roles here by increasingly commodifying a promise of consumption-based limitless enjoyment. Indeed, contemporary society has no principled notion of limits to individuals' legitimate accumulation of private wealth, no language for a principled self-restraint. If you have money, you can buy and consume, and can do so without self-limitation.

Herein lies the attraction of Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, the passive clerk who answers his boss" demands systematically by saying "I would prefer not to." Bartleby's gesture of withdrawal, which has an ethical, aesthetic and anthropological precedence at once. The social is, as Freud (1960) observed, held together by the totem (the father figure) and the (incest) taboo. But there is a third taboo, cannibalism, which Freud only partially discusses. However, as Lars-Henrik Schmidt (1991: 86-92) remarked, withdrawal from cannibalism, preferring not to eat the other, might be the first step for humans to share a *bios*, a form of life. Thus, through withdrawal from cannibalism, one achieves the possibility of being two, togetherness. Later, through withdrawal from incest, the two overcome sexuality (the apple, the snake) and create the family/group. And through withdrawal from murder, family expands, becomes a society (Schmidt 1999: 16). However, the secret of withdrawal does not lie in its content (cannibalism, incest, murder) but in its form; at each step, what makes humans social is their ability to *prefer not to*, an exercise of taste. Thus, we must take "I prefer not to" as a form, or rather as a *form*ula. The formula is that which enables the repetition of the form. And every repetition is an exercise of freedom. Freedom is being capable of saying " prefer not to."

In order to protect our *bios* today it is necessary to protect the planet (the mOther Earth). One of the problems in this context is that we actually see ourselves to a large extent as doing something good for the climate. But this is most often a form of pseudo-activism that supports a pseudo-identity. Such "green" identity does not interrupt but rather sustains the normality that we have described. It does so by simply adding another layer of green consumption on top the older ones. It goes without saying that moral engagement in this sense can support passivity as much as moral disengagement.

Interpassivity – or why we love the fantasy of rural life

Can one, as a modern person, live a good life in a stable balance with the natural environment, using tools and artisanal techniques that have long characterized rural life? Is returning to an original, healthier and more sustainable lifestyle is a realistic possibility? What is thought-provoking in this context is that such an image of an apparently "self-sufficient" life can today only be maintained with the help of considerable economic, social and cultural capital. The simple life as it is marketed today is a construction; it is always altready woven into the surrounding society with media, mobile phones, healthcare, schools, gas stations, tax returns, and so on. Such a fantasy presupposes and is made possible by the efficiency of the modern society. It is, namely, a modern fantasy. As if modernity allows what it destroys to reappear as a fantasy construction.

Fantasies create objects of desire, but they create these objects as being out of reach. Through fantasy, the object of desire is transposed to another space. This is also to say that the social bond has two sides (Žižek 2001: 93). Life within the domain of the law, that is, life organized by the separation of powers (the separation of the political and the domestic, male and female…) is sustained through fantasies of transgression. Such fantasies form the "downside" of the social bond that guarantees the strength of the upper-side. In this sense, living in a world marked by the climate crisis (the upper side) and its dark, "phantasmatic" downside, or social life as usual and the fantasies of escape, are parts of the same economy. The downside however has to remain disavowed, "fantasized", for the whole economy to be able to function. Therefore, perhaps, the fascination of a self-sustaining lifestyle is greatest among those for whom it seems a distant fantasy. And as such the fantasy becomes an outlet for (lack of) commitment.

Robert Pfaller's (2017) concept of interpassivity can take us a step further here. We are all familiar with the concept of interactivity. We can be activated by, for example, applauding a performance or commenting on an article that a newspaper or a blogger posts on social media. We are not part of the main interaction, but we are offered an opportunity to participate. It is not that we ourselves are active in the sense that we take the initiative ourselves. We are activated through the other. The opposite is the case with interpassivity. Here the other is the agency that makes it possible for us to remain passive. Classical examples are the chorus in Greek tragedies, which cries for us, or the canned laughter in comedy series, which relieves us of the "burden" of laughing.

The relevance in relation to the fantasy of the rural and the climate is obvious. Through such fantasies, we can feel like part of a story about sustainability and biodiversity. The point is not that we actually want to live a rural life. Rather, on the contrary, it is that the fantasy of the rural life makes it possible for us to continue living as we do. An important distinction here is between action and consciousness. The fantasy of the self-contained rural life, and the climate-friendly self-perception that comes with it, make it possible to refrain from acting. In this regard interpassivity must not be confused with cynicism, an attitude where we are ironically distanced from the "official truths" (which we then maintain in our practice). Interpassivity is the exact opposite. In interpassivity, we recognize ourselves as active all the while our actions express indifference.

Although Nørgaard (2011), which we referred to above, does not use the concept of interpassivity in her study, there are plenty of examples of it. She points out, for example, how Norwegians celebrate purism when they enjoy outdoor activities: "In the Norwegian

context, *friluftsliv* (outdoor activity) has an explicitly purist element. One often sees older "tried and true" equipment in use for hikes in the mountains, from the simple backpacks to red parkas, wool pants, and even wooden skis […] Nils Faarlund, one of Norway's best-known promoters of *friluftsliv*, refuses to wear "modern clothing" such as gortex or polypropylene. Although many consider his particular position "extreme," it comes out of a context in which simplicity is emphasized" (Nørgaard, 2011: 150). One can identify with the green and natural by swearing off Goretex products, but the feeling of having done something for the climate thereby is false. Through identification with those who live "the simple and easy life in old Norway," one can maintain passivity in relation to the climate issue.

Something similar can be observed in virtually all globalized cultures today. You see more and more people walking around in casual outdoor clothes, even though modern city life does not require reinforcements on the elbows and knees. The fashion is called "gorpcore." Or another example: No city dweller really needs a four-wheel drive Land Rover, which may signal a green lifestyle but emits CO2 like almost no other car. Such clothes or cars enable an identification with those who live the individual and "natural" life, but it is precisely this identification that actually prevents us from getting further than that.

With the concept of interpassivity, we can add another layer to the analysis of moral disengagement as a way to avoid cognitive dissonance. We can avoid responsibility towards a sustainability agenda by seeing ourselves as "already green". This has two implications. First, it implies that an ethical rule-set that enables the moral actors to perceive themselves as "already ethical" exists. But morality is not reducible to a codex, a rule-set, the obedience to which guarantees being moral. For the same reason, the moral actor would never feel *certain* with respect to being moral (see Bauman 1993: 92-4). And second, "already" green implies that there is nothing more to do. Recall a dystopic scene in *Brave New World*, where one of the characters is asked whether she does not to be free. She answers: "I don't know what you mean. I am free. Free to have the most wonderful time. Everybody's happy nowadays" (Huxley 2004: 78-9). But freedom has nothing to do with "feeling" free. In the same way, feeling green is not necessarily being green.

Conclusion: Enlightened false consciousness

Marx described and criticized a situation where workers were radically alienated from the practices they were engaged in. They suffered from false consciousness, and the critical move was therefore to enlighten them about their true interests. Perhaps the notion that one can be

out of step with what is one's true interests is worth holding on to. As a species, we have an interest in actively combating global warming. Few would deny that. But nevertheless, we see that all nations are constantly underperforming in relation to the emission targets they have set for themselves. Part of the explanation is undoubtedly that the support for effective climate change is not there. Opposition to wind turbines, higher petrol prices, or whatever other argument is on offer is quickly mobilized to this end. This article itself has articulated a suggestion as to why.

The problem is no longer false consciousness, but enlightened false consciousness. There is solid scientific evidence that the situation is very critical, and this information also reaches us through the media. We know it. Marx thought and hoped that enlightening workers about their problematic situation would enable a new state of consciousness and, on the back of this, involvement in revolutionary activity. With Sloterdijk and Žižek's concept of "enlightened false consciousness" we can put our finger on a weak point in this chain of argument. There is no necessary connection between consciousness and action, at least not anymore. This link seems to be broken in our society.

In liquid modernity, a world characterized by increasing mobility, growing unpredictability and escalating unaccountability of global powers, many are losing the faith in the effectiveness of political speech and action. In this world, global interdependencies have increased, but this is not followed by democratic apparatuses (Bauman 1999: 2). The technologies of mobility do not one-sidedly constitute a bridge between knowledge and action, between *vita contemplativa* and *vita active* (Bauman 2000: 43).

We have approached this idea by first emphasizing the role of emotions in connection with our actions, and how a classical rationalist perspective falls short of grasping this. This initial orientation formed the basis for our discussion of different strategies through which information that contradicts our emotional basis and disrupts our "normality" is sorted out. But in a way where we are aware of these cognitions. We are not uninformed. We simply selectively govern information. The third part of the argument was about why we need this sorting. The answer is twofold. We are basically ruled by notions of normality and an encoding of this normality through psychosocial patterns. We reject cognitive dissonance because we can maintain our normality through this rejection. And finally: this behavior becomes all the stronger when normality can be coded as already green. An identification with the green makes it possible to relate passively to the sustainability agenda through a pseudo-activity and pseudo-identity.

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