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POLIT-POP SUSTAINABILITY: POLICIES, BUSINESSES, AND MEDIA HEROES FOR A ‘GREEN’ LIFESTYLE

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Abstract: The paper presents some of the results of an ongoing anthropological study on the socialization of “green” and “sustainable” practices, both in business operations and in citizens’ daily lives. We shed light on controversial aspects of sustainability through presenting and analyzing examples of Bulgarian businesses and their leaders, including freelancers, all of whom explicitly link their work to sustainability. The article focuses on the role of consumption as the main channel for transmitting “green” messages and policies, thereby altering individuals’ attitudes and behavior, and on how these processes unfold in a digital environment, particularly, and in the broader context of the implementation and socialization of the European Green Deal - a set of political initiatives of the European Commission launched in its efforts to lead the continent to climate neutrality by 2050.

Keywords: sustainable lifestyle; consumer cultures; green transition; social media; EU

We are all environmentalists now – or are we?
Publisher’s note to the fourth edition of “Green Political Thought”¹

Introduction

What do Vincent van Gogh, Stonehenge, a Tesla “Cybertruck” and a football game have in common? A painting by the Dutch artist, Britain’s famous prehistoric structure, a model of the car, as well as dozens of other objects of different nature around the world have been vandalized in the recent years by activists of the group “Just Stop Oil” who advocate for phasing out fossil fuels. Some of the “targets” were sprayed with orange paint, van Gogh’s “Sunflowers” was drenched in tinned tomato soup, while during a match between Everton and Newcastle in March 2022 a pitch-invading climate activist protested by tying his neck to one of the goalposts.

The messages are clear: questioning the relevance of symbols of what modern society perceives as valuable, sacred, while truly fragile and priceless is actually our planet Earth; exposing individuals, businesses and institutions perceived as

somehow responsible for current environmental and social problems; challenging all those who live their lives as they are used to and remain silent witnesses to our civilization's (self)destruction.

Today, more than ever, environmental protection is seen by more and more people as a socially significant and not merely environmental problem, and an increasingly significant element for the political, economic, and cultural transformations of the modern world. In just a couple of decades (from the end of the 20th to the early 21st century) "environmental concern has moved from the margins to the mainstream of political life" and "no serious candidate for political office can afford to buck this trend" (Dobson 2007, p. 2), while the so-called sustainable development and sustainability are perceived as pillars of the existing eco-political framework. Consequently, the volume of "green" legislation is increasing dramatically. According to "The Climate Change Laws of the World" online database there are currently more than 5,000 climate laws and policies worldwide². Although the recent European elections were unsuccessful for the Green party – an outcome that itself warrants detailed analysis – the European Parliament saw record "green" representation, and it was during this time that the so-called European Green Deal and a series of accompanying legislations and policies were adopted.

As a result, established companies around the world are hastily "going green"; the number of start-ups with an environmentally friendly approach to business is also increasing; and "ordinary" people are trying out new or rediscovered old methods to make their cities, homes, and lifestyles "greener". More and more actors are invoking *sustainability* as a core value and a guiding principle for their actions – although it is not entirely clear what exactly each one understands by sustainability, or how it is actually implemented in practice. Furthermore, the effects of adopting this concept as a dominant model for *global change*, and making it a norm, do not appear to be unambiguous for societies worldwide or for individuals.

While addressing these last tensions is the task of researchers, indeed, the understanding and the very implementation of "green" and "sustainable" practices, both in business and in everyday life, also appears to require the intervention of relevant specialists. A great number of new actors are emerging to facilitate the transition, and these are not only manufacturers of innovative technologies, such as carbon capture and storage systems or solar panels. Software companies creating tools for businesses to measure their negative impact, consulting agencies that "translate" and monitor "green" legislation for companies, developing strategies for implementing specific measures and tracking and reporting their effects, training their staff on how to comply with new standards, but also on how to bring sustainable practices into their homes and families, and so on – all of them are flourishing. Part of this whole new industry also includes businesses (and their leaders) whose goal is to socialize sustainability precisely at the individual level, in the way people live. They do this primarily by promoting particular lifestyle

products and services, and consumption practices more generally, wrapped in a moralizing discourse on responsible and conscious behavior towards nature, vulnerable social groups, oneself, and future generations. Producers in various fields, retailers, software companies, content creators, and so on, who, with the help of social media and through their personal everyday life experiences, explain complex and abstract concepts such as climate change and guide people towards alternative means for them to meet their daily needs and facilitate their everyday activities such as cleaning, waste management, eating, commuting, etc. Towards *the right* means.

Methodology

The paper presents some of the results of an ongoing anthropological study on the socialization of green and sustainable practices, both in business operations and in citizens' daily lives. We address sustainability not as a normative guiding principle, but adopt a reflexive stance towards the concept and its implementation. The article sheds light on controversial aspects of sustainability through presenting and analyzing examples of Bulgarian businesses and their leaders, including freelancers, all of whom explicitly link their work to sustainability. According to Schaltegger and Wagner's (2010) categorization, "sustainable entrepreneurship" refers to entrepreneurship that aims not only to contribute to the sustainable development of the organization itself, but also to the sustainable development of the market and society as a whole—an understanding that we also adopt here as an ideal type.

To contribute to the construction of a possible image of the sustainable entrepreneur, the research seeks answers to the questions: What are their perceptions of sustainability, and what meaning do the products and services they sell bring to the notion of sustainability? How do they practically apply the concept in their daily lives? What motivates them to integrate sustainability into their business? What kind of change do they envision, and how do they communicate about it?

On the other hand, the article focuses on the role of consumption as the main channel for transmitting "green" messages and policies, thereby altering individuals' attitudes and behavior, and on how these processes unfold in a digital environment, particularly. The study also traces and analyzes how, through emphasizing personal example and using social media, green consumption values are manifested and potentially constructed—"the tendency to express the value of environmental protection through one's purchases and consumption behaviors" (Haws et al. 2014, p. 337) – and how this leads to the creation of new role models. Throughout the text, attention is given to how the subjective perceptions of the respondents relate to official European narratives and policies on environmental protection.

A total of 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted between May 2023 and October 2024 with respondents working in different fields. These included: co-

owner of a company producing bio-based foil; co-owner of a company producing reusable plant-based bottles; co-owner of a software company developing a digital app that enables users to buy unsold food from restaurants at a discount, which would otherwise be thrown away; co-founder of a natural cosmetics brand; co-founder of a sustainable fashion and home decor brand; co-owner of the Bulgarian branch of an eco-friendly detergent brand; owner of a bulk store for cleaning products and cosmetics; owner of an online “zero-waste” shop; two eco-bloggers – one defines herself as a “content creator”, while the other is a director of sustainability at an investment fund and also runs her own consulting company; founder and chair of an ecological NGO. Most of the respondents are between the ages of 25 and 38, with only one being 49. They are referred to as R1, R2, and so on throughout the text. A number of informal conversations were also held during exhibitions and other public events. The conclusions are based on additional online observations, including publicly available content on social platforms (Instagram, Facebook), secondary analysis of media publications, sustainable lifestyle manuals, thematic reports, and normative documents.

Despite the growing interest of Bulgarian academia in sustainability and green businesses (e.g. Ivanov, 2021), the in-depth study of the process of “greening” of both business, politics and citizenship, the study not only of how to better implement sustainability, and what social tensions and cultural and economic changes arise from the (top-down) implementation of that model has enormous potential for development, and we consider this report to be a contribution in that direction.

Sustainability, sustainable development and the EU Green project: the context in short

As concepts, “sustainability” and “sustainable development” were raised to prominence in the late 1980 by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development through the notorious “Brundtland report” (WCED 1987). The report was seen as an “urgent notice based on the latest and best scientific evidence” (ibid) explaining the (human) nature and the seriousness of the pressing environmental and social problems of the time, suggesting that both national governments, international bodies, businesses and individuals should take responsibility and contribute together for a better future for all mankind. Among other measures, altering peoples’ attitudes towards adopting a more conscious way of living, including changing mass consumption behavior, has become crucial to achieving sustainability.

The European Green Deal – a set of policy initiatives by the European Commission which main purpose is to make Europe “climate neutral” by 2050, is perceived as an integral part of the 2019-2024 European Commission’s efforts to implement the United Nation’s 2030 Agenda and the UN sustainable development goals (COM(2019) 640 final). Some of its specific measures, which directly target

individual citizens are aimed at fostering recycling, re-using and repairing and thus reducing (plastic) waste - for example, through banning particular single-use plastic products; a great deal of the main document is focused on the importance of raising public awareness regarding climate change etc. In summary, along with the set requirements for business, large infrastructure projects, and investments in innovative productions, etc., what and how individual citizens of the Union consume turns out to be key.

Over the years the concept of sustainable development has met with some criticisms from researchers and green civic movements (e.g. Blühdorn 2016; Dobson 2007; Neckel 2017). Instead of leading to structural change in the socio-economic order, as some have obviously expected, sustainable development has provided conditions and tools for the emergence of new markets, invention of new products and services; it has, some argue, reduced issues such as climate change or pollution to a matter of “nudging individual behavior, nurturing eco-technological change, and re-arranging or producing new institutional configurations and managerial apparatuses” (Paul & Swyngedouw 2023). The EU Green Deal, on the other hand, is, after all, is, after all, a growth strategy (COM(2019) 640 final) that follows this managerial approach to environmental problems, which is generally how the concept of sustainable development can be defined (Dobson 2007), but it equates green transformation to a top-down process anyway. Thus, the institutionalization of nature conservation, and specifically existing European green policies could be regarded as an interference in the free market, endangering competitiveness, which in fact “stifles entrepreneurship”³ and limits consumers’ choices; as an excessive intrusion into people’s daily lives, burdening them with new responsibilities and obligations, and restricting their freedoms.

Versions of sustainability

From the standpoint of business (new green) regulations can indeed put more financial and bureaucratic burden on them, or even wipe out certain industries, but can also create market niches to be filled (or at least make some of the existing ones more attractive). If a single-use plastic store, for example, is in danger of disappearing unless it reorients its business, then manufacturers and sellers of reusable products and packaging have a serious chance of success. Here comes the question of whether the driving motivation behind sustainable businesses is the genuine desire to respond to a particular social issue or a manifestation of entrepreneurial spirit. Respondent 1 shared that in her business project the innovation came first and only then its practical application (and social implication): “we saw that a change was happening in the direction of reusing”. With the launch of their product, she also gained “an even greater awareness, of the problem, of how important it is for everyone to do the right thing on an individual level” and now even tries to pay attention to the people around her about reusing. It is similar with

another informant: “[...] rather, my love is for food. But after I started working [...], I realized, you know, how big the problem with food waste is, and I was able to look at food from a completely different perspective” (R7, interview).

On the other hand, R2 and her business partner were driven first and foremost by an interest to find out what could replace some of the raw materials used in the printing industry with something “more sustainable”, and this gradually led them to start their own business venture. It is noticeable that the businesses discussed here started around the same time (2018 – 2022), and it is also during this period that bloggers began to appear. In other words, shortly after the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, an international treaty on climate change which outlined the trends in global politics.

Generally speaking, green practices in business and in everyday life are typically aimed at reducing the use of natural resources, decreasing air, soil and water pollution. But the pursuit of big goals such as keeping the temperature’s rise below 1.5 C might be problematic for individuals. Because of their large scale and because their supposed effect is situated somewhere in the future they are by some perceived to be unattainable. This can lead to psychological distress and reduced well-being, and thus make people with pro-environmental behavior feel angry or sad. Therefore, in order to make people still feel that their contribution can be worthwhile, behaviorists explain, big goals can be reframed into smaller, attainable sub goals (Venhoeven, Bolderdijk & Steg 2013) like reducing household waste; switching to plant based diet or at least reducing meat and dairy. These measures are practically linked to embracing particular consumer practices, products, and services, and rejecting others. It could involve buying local, shopping in bulk, thrifting, trying “do-it-yourself” methods instead of purchasing something new, and so on. It might also include choosing reusable products made of natural materials, such as bamboo toothbrushes, cotton bags, metal razors instead of plastic ones, reusable menstrual products instead of disposable ones, eco-friendly cosmetics and detergents (perceived as “clean” and “higher quality” compared to mass-market alternatives), and more. This is essentially what one would find in eco-friendly stores for home goods. And here lies the apparent paradox – to reduce consumption and waste, one must first acquire new things.

The intentional avoidance or purchase of products due to political, social, or ethical concerns is seen as a form of political behavior (Kam & Deichert 2020) which becomes more and more popular, it seems. The practices and values associated with green consumerism mentioned above can be viewed as examples of such behavior, also known as the principle of “boycotting” and “buycotting”, respectively. But being “green” may also be expressions of following a trend – whether we are talking about a lifestyle or a business model. According to the informants, in the end, it doesn’t matter whether a particular sustainable business is motivated by its founders’ sincere concern for the environment or they do it simply

because it is fashionable, as long as it leads to the desired results. However, this does not make the implementation of green practices in both business activities and individuals' daily lives any less controversial. And it's not just about infamous practices associated with big corporations, like "greenwashing" – the dissemination of misleading information about a company's environmental credentials or its products, or like the emissions trading schemes. Research shows that the expression of green consumption values may be motivated not only by the conservation of environmental resources but also by the conservation of personal financial and physical resources (Haws et al. 2014). Owners of hybrid cars, for example, actually tend to drive *more* because it is cheaper⁴. It is common knowledge that every technological solution carries some form of "harmful impact" itself – just like the app for "rescuing" unsold food, which requires the maintenance and use of thousands of electrically powered servers, computers, and mobile devices. Thrifting may be driven less by environmental and ethical considerations and more by the desire to discover the next great find. Buying second-hand may not necessarily reduce consumption but could lead to the opposite (R10: "when shopping second-hand, you are very tempted to buy something [...] one can very easily go to extremes"). And so on.

When it comes to implementing sustainability in their lifestyles, it doesn't seem to be universal, nor as limiting as it might seem at first glance. R10 is vegan but can use plastic products or fly from time to time and (interview). R6 has tried not to eat meat, but for medical reasons she had to give up vegetarianism. However, she passionately campaigns for the use of reusable menstrual products. R5 says that she and her business partner are very strict in their requirements that the ingredients in their cosmetics be "natural", "Bulgarian", and vegan, that she likes to shop for herself directly from local farms but admits that she does not use a bicycle to get around, for example. Temptations are not unknown to informants either: ("[...] of course, I can't say that I always manage to escape from the trap of consumerism, I also sometimes buy things in a moment of weakness, etc.," R9, interview). Most informants admit openly that they are not "perfect" in implementing "green" practices in their everyday lives and business activities ("There is always something to improve," R2, interview), but also that it's not necessarily required to be perfect. In any case, being honest about their impact strengthens the sense of transparency ("We tell things as they are," R1, interview), which is necessary for building trust, but at the same time raises doubts about the entire meaning and effect of "greening", especially when it is not a voluntary gesture, on the moral grounds of sustainability advocates to push for change.

It can be said that a common viewpoint among all the respondents is that, both personally and through their businesses, they help people ("I myself, with the blog and Instagram, try to make it easier for people" R9; "[...] we wanted to set some kind of example" R4, interviews). R5 shares that she sees her business as a

way “to educate people that when you invest in quality, it ends up being cheaper.” A common belief among respondents is that being sustainable is a matter of informed choice, and that a sustainable lifestyle only seems more expensive because many mass-market products are actually “falsely low-priced,” as they do not account for the harm done to nature and workers. “To a large extent, these products are directly harmful to us, and what we save when buying them, we will end up spending on medicine” (R4, interview).

If we had to summarize, it appears that living sustainably is a highly individual and selective activity, and to a large extent, it is self-directed. Green practices often conflict with each other. A picture emerges of sustainable entrepreneurs as enlightened pioneers (“I tread paths that have not been taken before,” R8, interview), role models, and myth-busters – people who have deliberately chosen to walk the hard path, while others simply “don’t like making an effort” (R10, interview).

The “twin” transition as a scene: This is how we (and how you should) do it

While the green transition is taking place, another one is happening – digitalization, the two reinforcing each other. Alongside tools designed to cover corporate needs more and more digital instruments are coming to life with the aim to help *individuals* to monitor and calculate their harmful impact on nature. While transforming banal everyday activities like doing the laundry in the form of cubic meters of water or tons of carbon dioxide hundreds of smartphone applications helpfully offer both data and recommendations on how to revert wasteful behavior and be more environmentally responsible. However, this focus on efficiency and optimization often actually means buying new, albeit energy-efficient, appliances. Other platforms provide digital means for people to share their “climate positive” actions online (for. ex. planting a tree) and accumulate reward points, turning themselves into true climate champions while measuring becomes a sort of gamified fetish.

The digital turn also presents an opportunity for people to interact with each other, exchange know-how, and transfer knowledge for various reasons. Observations show that informants actively use social media, but also blogs and online podcasts, to explain and promote the benefits of sustainable products and practices, as well as to inform themselves. Obviously, manufacturing companies focus their online content on their own products, and sellers strive to present as much as possible of the range of goods they offer in their stores. Meanwhile, the content of eco-bloggers and influencers is the most diverse. The latter can choose from the entire, inexhaustible palette of environmentally friendly practices according to their personal preferences (and the interests of their audiences) as well as the available opportunities for publishing paid content. Photos and videos of healthy food and drink, travel footage with an emphasis on natural beauty, and casual shots of the author are often accompanied by

some of the “mandatory” items such as reusable bottle or food container, cotton shopping bags, and so on.

Key are their advices and personal experiences: what do they do and how, what they don’t, what are their achievements, fails and “sins” and publications of the type “Did you know...?” or “Have you ever thought about...?” For example, how to make some kind of product (such as detergents) at home and using natural ingredients instead of buying it; how to read information and labels on product packaging; where to dispose of hazardous waste like expired medicines and paints; but also where to find stores, brands, venues, appliances, tools, and other products approved by the authors, as well as online apps—how to use them and what their benefits are for nature and for us; how to go on vacation with minimal impact; statistics and general information on topics like “fast fashion” and its environmental and human rights impact, air pollution and global temperature rise—its causes and potential countermeasures; why we should vote in elections and what are the trends in climate legislation, as well as many other data and recommendations that push people to identify the harmful habits they have, and to adjust their daily behavior to the “frequencies” of sustainability. For online content creators, social media posts may be sponsored by a particular company. Thus, personal blogs and social media profiles turn into professional portfolios while environmental protection is commodified, again.

Another popular type of social media content, sometimes also sponsored by third parties, takes online followers “behind the scenes”. This might include visits to particular company’s workshop, waste processing plant, or stores during stock preparation. It could also feature conferences or exhibitions they have attended, as well as glimpses into their personal lives and daily routines, which they integrate into their branding efforts. Most of the respondents also appear in traditional media, as speakers at public or private events, where they take on the role of experts. At the same time, the empirical data show that the educational background of none of the respondents is in the natural sciences, energy or ecology, but in business management and economics, psychology, European studies, graphic design. They self-educate themselves about environmental problems, and more or less from the same sources: reports written by European or supranational institutions – or “any other type of such organizations, worldwide, which actually take the statistics of things” (R3, interview). This also explains the relatively uniform perceptions, messages and views of possible solutions to environmental problems of all respondents and also reminds of what I. Dichev (Dichev 2011) defines as “illegitimate minorities of impostors”, or unrepresentative groups or individuals to whom no one has given a mandate but who are increasingly dominating the public sphere in the globalized world and in our case, they more or less repeat official narratives. R10 says herself that she still sometimes experiences the so-called imposter syndrome, especially when invited abroad (“And I have to repeat to myself: “if they invited you, then

there is a reason [...] I repeat to myself that I am just a communicator on these topics. I am not a scientist”, interview). The importance of social networks is evident here, again, this time in the opposite direction:

“[...] now *I also follow* individual politicians with similar [to hers] type of views, *I follow*, you know, the usual ones – the UN and so on, the World Economic Forum” (R9, interview).

“[...] nowadays it is very easy to get the information, you just have *to start following* the right sources” (R3, interview).

The attitudes towards European institutions from the part of the informants is, in itself, a rather interesting topic. On the one hand, according to the respondents the green transformation is happening slowly, but primarily due to the untimely or ineffective implementation of certain practices at the national level, which they directly relate to the lack of institutional control. It is not surprising, therefore, that they generally approve of European regulations, but also expect the adoption of more. One could say that, over the years, governments around the world usually try to change public attitudes and behavior by introducing various incentives and restrictions but also by raising awareness. This also applies to environmental topics and applies to the approach of supranational institutions such as the EU. The presumption regarding increasing awareness on environmental issues is that, once informed, individuals will unlock their environmental consciousness, and will be able “to transfer environmental messages into everyday lifestyles with ease” (Barr 2008). The digital turn offers the opportunity for these messages to be spread faster and perhaps more widely, but even so, political language often seem to remain misunderstood. What is needed are the so-called “primary influencers” whose specialty is to collect and sift information from various sources and then disseminate it in a synthesized and comprehensible form (Simeonova 2020). Some of informants do collaborate with the EU, as “Climate Pact ambassadors” - an official EU initiative which aims to promote its Climate Pact. There are only a few climate “professionals” among the 24 Bulgarian ambassadors – the majority are indeed entrepreneurs, bloggers, individual enthusiasts, but their ability to create these non-political “third spaces” (Wright 2012) where through everyday conversations people can practically connect politics with their own lives is what counts. Respondents share that being a Pact ambassador means doing what you do anyway as a green lifestyle advocate. But this example is symptomatic of ongoing dynamics between institutions, business and civic sphere, while the “twin” green and digital transition seems to become in itself a scene where the fluid boundaries between the private and the public, and the very way of living of European citizens are being dynamically renegotiated.

Conclusion

Today, it is more than evident that environmental protection occupies a central place in politics, business, and daily life, in the media, and is by no means a

cause exclusive to traditional social movements, or newly-formed activist groups like “Just Stop Oil.” Being “eco-friendly” could be fun, it could be a driver for change, they say. But what kind of change? The analysis of the empirical data leads us to the conclusion that sustainability and sustainable lifestyle, change, green transformation and so on seem like a rather vague concepts, into which anyone can include or exclude certain elements depending on their personal subjective views, preferences, and capabilities. Sustainable lifestyle can appear as an Instagram “reel“, or it can be the organic soap in one’s bathroom– it can be anything. It can be law. What does *this transformation* mean for both people and nature? What are we actually doing, and for whom?

NOTES

1. “Green Political Thought” is a book on the political ideology of “ecologism” written by the political scientist Andrew Dobson.
2. Source: <https://climate-laws.org/>. (Retrieved 09.11.2024).
3. Source: <https://forbesbulgaria.com/2024/06/11/evropejskite-izbori-kakav-tsvyat-sthe-e-novata-sdelka/>. The author of the article, Boyan Rashev, is the co-founder of a leading Bulgarian consulting company for sustainable development. (Retrieved 09.11.2024).
4. Source: <https://shorturl.at/FUvfq>. (Retrieved 09.11.2024).

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