



# *Environmental selves and alternative meanings of work*

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# *Background*



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- » Work shapes our world not only by forming the social-material realities we live in, but also by organising our social world through class structures, income distribution and paid-work-based welfare system.
- » Profound changes in society, such as transformations towards degrowth and post-capitalist societies are bound to happen through profound, albeit gradual, changes in the ways work and employment are organised and understood.
- » “...labour process is in turn built around exploitation and class relation... What we call work is the social embodiment and ritualistic calculus of that exploitation process. One reason that the ideology of work has got away with its recent exponential growth, becoming a ‘way of life’, is that it is still confused with survival and ineluctable necessity.” (Fleming 2015)

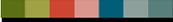
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# Aim



- » Our aim is to uncover meanings and practices establishing and challenging current ways of organizing work and economic structures.
- » By exploring understandings and meanings of work brought up during interviews with environmentally aware people.
- » We draw on theories of *performativity* to explore how environmental selves are performed at work, and how the different ways of forming environmental working selves are able to question the so-called neoliberal subject positions, through which current forms of capitalism are often described as being established and advanced.



# *Methodology 1/2*



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- » In-depth interviews with 20 self-declared environmentally aware persons who volunteered to take part. 17 women and 3 men. Age range: 26-68 years. Majority held university degrees. Worked in various sectors: arts, IT, education, the environmental and social sector, but had work experience in other fields as well. Two of the interviewees were retired.
- » We studied in detail the wording and discursive strategies that we as interviewers and the interviewees used to give meaning to things and actions, as well as to themselves and their motives -> special attention to discursive strategies through which green selves were described, and to the affective accounts of being in the world as environmentally aware.



## *Methodology 2/2*



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- » We were particularly interested in the ways in which these greenness-related norms offered the interviewees alternative interpretative frameworks for challenging dominant cultural discourses given to work in relation to questions of a good and ethical life, and good citizenship.

# Theoretical framework



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- » Combining the literature on environmental selves and subjectivities (Horton 2003) with literature on working, organizational and professional selves (Devos 2004; Hodgson 2005; Rumens & Kerfoot 2009) -> discuss the relationships between subject formation, work and social structures.
- » Foucault: “governing conduct through so-called technologies of the self” -> Butler: performativity, for expanding the discussion on subject formation, agency and change, and continuity of social structures .
- » A) *Organising work – organising economies* (Gorz 1983, 1988; Atkinson 2007; Skeggs 2004; Safri 2014; Frayne 2015; Parker 2006; Paulsen 2015)
- » B) *Individualised work, resistance and environmental critiques* (Fleming 2012, 2013; Contu 2008; Banerjee 2011; Wittneben 2012)
- » C) *Alternative economies and environmental selves* (Gibson-Graham 2008; Thiem 2008)

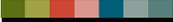
# Findings



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- » We identify four different ways to perform greenness at work, or “working environmental selves”, related to two different ways of “being in this world” as environmentally aware individuals.
- » **Table.** Environmental selves and alternative meanings of work

	<b>Alternative lifestyle</b>	<b>Green consumerism</b>
<b>Work as paid work</b>	Work subordinated to a green lifestyle (part of a lifestyle puzzle)	Work as a job + quality (responsible) free time and consumption
<b>Work as a career/ vocation</b>	Responsible or green career (deeply meaningful – environmental expertise)	Meaningful career + quality consumption



# Findings



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## 1) Embedding work within an alternative lifestyle

### a) Work as part of a lifestyle puzzle:

*“I haven’t considered that very much from my own point of view. Maybe it’s, for me, a kind of piece in a sort of lifestyle puzzle, which helps to get, well, (laughs) money to buy food and other supplies. But also, at this moment, I’m lucky in a way because I can work where I feel I can help, how should I put it, to be useful in some way to somebody somewhere. Yes, I think it’s very good if one can sort of combine that, so that you don’t need to do just anything, like harmful jobs for some multinational company, in order to get money for your family.”*

### b) Or as a responsible career

*“Well, because of my work I’ve been doing an awful lot of environmental impact analyses and environmental programmes...so I more or less constantly make these environmental impact calculations in my head.”*



# Findings



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## 2) Work as an enabler of quality consumption

a) A meaningful career and quality consumption:

- » *“- I’ve been working for the public sector all the time. So...*
- » *- You wouldn’t like to change to the private sector?*
- » *- No, I wouldn’t. It’s such a different world.*
- » *- How come?*
- » *- Well, the values are so different there, the values of the employees. Why the work is done. I think I’d be better off working for a non-profit organisation, be it a government institution, municipality or university, which has values other than just dollars.”*

b) A job provides the means for quality free time and consumer activism

*“I have to shut up and be quiet, so that my own opinions don’t cause conflicts... when we talk about food production, all these alternative agents...When it comes to these issues, you just swallow your opinions and keep your head down”*

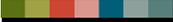


# *Findings*



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- » The performances are based on partly competing and partly overlapping meanings of work, and consist of various tactics for re-organizing work to match one's values (re-organizing for creating and enacting an environmental working self).
- » These performances either question or reinforce dominant meanings and practices of organizing work, negotiating, neglecting and enacting different selves and subject positions structuring current ways of employing and working, and thus the economic structures.
- » We claim that these ways to perform greenness at work not only reveal existing alternative meanings and work practices which could be promoted, but also inform us about potential inherent tensions in the contemporary neo-liberal organisation of work.

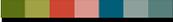


# Conclusions



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- » Work is still a central but an under-researched topic within the socio-ecological transformation literature.
- » Work intertwines in many ways in the construction of an environmental self.
- » Constructing an environmental self requires becoming aware of the various norms, codes and practices related to different discourses of greenness and forming a self-relation to those norms.
- » This adaptation of different set of practices is bound to happen through adopting ones which are discursively easily aligned with an already existing understanding of the self, negotiated in relation to other aspects of identity, may they be class, gender, family background etc.
- » Thus environmentalism “becomes” as a result of constructing a green self , trough enacting practices and adopting certain subject positions, as a performance.

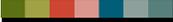


# Conclusions



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- » The green consumer seems to be the dominant subject position available,
- » still we suggest acknowledging all shades of being green as performative to “better economy”, would enable us to see the multitude of discourses through which ecological and social justice are already described as better, may these discourses relate to justice and equality (alternative lifestyle), quality (meaningful careers), or rationality (work as a job). This opens up possibilities to understand through which means and ends of work ecological and social justice are negotiated with.
- » By acknowledging all these ways of performing greenness at work, they reveal not only existing alternative meanings and practices of work which could be promoted, but also inform us about potential built-in tensions in the contemporary neo-liberal organization of work.



# Conclusions



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- » Certain kinds selves/subject positions establish and reinforce a particular social-material reality, which can be undermined and shaken by even slight changes (“small changes” should within this context not be ridiculed) of “doing things differently”, but within the scope of of prevalent practices and discourses, there is very little room for this.



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Thank you!